

So Near And Yet So Far

In September 2000, Andrew Marshall a Scotsman and I set out from Kunming China, travelling to the Wa autonomous region near the border with Burma in search of a fabled lake called Nawng Hkeo on the Burmese side of the border. This lake had not been seen by any foreigners since v.c pitchford, a British surveyor set out in 1937 to find the lake which did not appear on any maps. It was believed by the Wa people, former headhunters, and now the world's biggest producers of opium, to be their birthplace where they struggled as tadpoles to become the wild Wa.

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Andrew contacted me through my publisher in London because he knew, that like him, I was an avid reader of Sir George Scott, a forgotten Victorian writer and photographer who tramped through unexplored areas of Burma compiling the "Gazetteer Of Upper Burma and the Shan states", a five volume series more than a century before. Scott's massive ethnographic study became my bible, the rock of arcane knowledge which I later based my book, "The Vanishing Tribes Of Burma". I held Scott to be a hero and so did Andrew. Andrew planned to do a book retracing Scott's footsteps and he couldn't find anybody to go with him, until he talked to me.

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Our trip lasted more than three gruelling weeks, and became one of the most arduous trips I had ever undertaken. Andrew and I had a tacit agreement that if either one of us were to die out there, it would be impossible for the survivor to carry out the body of the other. Although we were only hours from our goal, and could see it shrouded in the misty distance, we failed. Weeks later Andrew set out again, this time with a missionary named David. Armed with the knowledge of our prior mistakes, Andrew and David reached the fog covered lake which is recounted in Andrew's book, "The Trouser People". Published by Viking, and Imprint of Penguin Books, London 2002.

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Sometimes failure is as important as success. Perhaps in the end it is not the goal that matters, but only the journey. The following is the story of our attempt.

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The flight from Kunming in Yunnan province to Simao is only 30 minutes by air, or 20 hours by road. During the 1920's, Simao or Szw Mao's basin was a thriving trade center with 70,000 people. Then it was struck with the bubonic plague followed by malaria. By the time the People's Liberation Army of China entered in the 1950's, there were only 3,000 desperate people living in rotting houses with a 90% incidence of malaria. From Simao we drove to Jinghong home of the "quiet relish fleshpot" whose name is self explanatory, stayed over night and then drove 7 hours to Lancang. The road was dotted with small brick buildings with old ceramic roof tiles and tea plantations cut concentric rings into the mountains with a thundering brown river below.

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The stone cobbled road from Lancang to Ximeng, head of the Wa autonomous region snaked thru lush green mountains which rose straight up through the fog with jagged sawtooth stones protruding out from the sides, tearing at the clouds just like the old Chinese ink brush paintings. After about 4 hours on those hand laid cobble stones we reached Ximeng, a distinctly hostile town where it was difficult to raise a smile from anybody's lips. Ximeng had hastily built ugly square Chinese cement buildings strewn about the saddlebacks of mountains which rise to 7,800 feet.

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Medicine men prowl the streets in groups with heavy strings of beads around their necks, some wearing animal fur hats of orange and white with long tails like the old raccoon hats of my childhood. The faces here are very dark, and the jawbones are very heavy. One medicine man invited us into his room which he shared with a half dozen others of the same ilk, who had barking deer penises tied and knotted at the open window drying. One of these medicinal quacks rubbed my face with a deer penis. They had a tiger paw with claws and orange and black fur still attached to a foreleg of bone.

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The fog of Ximeng is very thick and the people on the roads move as vague silhouettes. Burma to the west is very close. Small curtained three wheel vehicles which are modified two stroke motorcycles take passengers up and down the steep slopes upon which Ximeng is built. Night life offers some karaoke places with bored girls and horrible singers. Drunken men smash glasses on the tables and floor. I nearly got into a fight twice. Nobody seems friendly. There is also gambling with three oversized dice painted with various animals held up on an incline and released at the tug of a string. Crowds swell around the tables and bets are placed on the tubling dice.

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The fog grew so thick that you can't tell the time, except that it day or night. Then the rains began. I haven't thought of shaving since I got to china and have quite a stubble growing. I've been wearing the same three layers of clothing for days as it is too cold for bathing. Ximeng has many chinese soldiers and people still wearing chairman Mao caps, long forgotten in the larger cities.

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For days now I have had pink eye, conjunctivitis and a large sty growing on my eyelid. Although I use eyedrops, in the mornings my eyes can't be opened without removing a thick layer of crust. Smoke from the woodfire below our bedroom drifts up through my window as I look out over ancient tiled roofs covered in thick green moss. The toilet stinks and the seat which is disattached , must be put over the bowl when needed. This hotel, the Ximengxianwashan hotel has a directory of services, but inside all of the pages are blank.

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Andrew and I hope to find the ancient lake from which the Wa people believe they crawled out of as the first people on earth, formed as tadpoles. The lake is on top of an 8,000 foot mountain which may originate from an underground spring. The lake, Nawng Hkeo is across the border in Burma and there should be a large river flowing down the side. From Ximeng we will go northwest to Shin Chang where according to our maps, one from the U.S defence department, with large swaths of land marked, "relief data incomplete" and another world war 2 map from 1943 on silk, there seems to be a trail into Burma.

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Up and down the trails are spiderwebs glistening with the morning dew. In the market of Ximeng we bought blankets to warm ourselves on the slopes. Young Wa soldiers, kids really in green fatigues have the rising sun of the Uwsa, the united Wa state army stiched on their shoulders. Dogs prowl the streets faithfully waiting to be eaten by their masters. We have learned how to say I don't eat dog in chinese. The Wa are dirt poor and having a key worn around the neck is a treasure because it means you have something to lock up.

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I woke up and something had apparently bit me under my ear as it swelled up but there was no pain and the lymph seems to be normal. By noon it seemed to be alright. The bus to Shin Chang was completely full of people and huge bags of produce. We paid two people to get off the bus so that we had seats. Until the minute we left, we were struggling

to learn chinese phrases. On the bus we began to practice some Wa language with the Wa people copied from sir George Scott's journals from the turn of the century. Surprisingly most of the words were still understandable. Andrew has an uncanny grasp of language.

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We passed through mountains of perfectly formed conical conifers like Christmas trees on winding switchbacks until the road abruptly ended at a massive landslide, cutting a gorge more than 300 feet across, washing the road away completely. Stones were laid into the mud traversing the cravass and everyone on the bus as well as all the vegetable and Lancang beer was carried across to the other side. Another bus was waiting, and after another hour we arrived at Shin Chang where the entire length of paved road was 100 feet long and ended at a beer shop. "niplai" is the Wa word for "cheers".

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The mountains rise dramatically shredding the clouds, and a waterfall in the distance must be well over 100 feet. Temperatures rise and fall more than 20 degrees f in minutes, baking hot then the fog rolls in like bales of thick cotton turning everything into mere shadows. To the west we can see Burma, and to the north is the village which we will hike to tomorrow if we can get the two hardy Wa guides we have asked for. That village is dai gu la or kola on some maps, a Wa village. I am sure that there have been very few foreigners in these hills for many years. In fact this area of Yunnan was only officially opened last year. This is china with the kids in the red scarves of the young pioneers. In these seemingly endless hills and mountains there are only four or five lights to the north and a few more to the west. We are at the edge of civilization. Chinese tentacles reach through the whole of china, we hope it will be different in Burma.

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We woke up in Shin Chang at the Wa headman's cement house. My sty was like a potato blocking the vision in my camara lens eye, but it was ripe and I popped it, mopped up the puss and slatheredÂ the eyelid in antibiotic. We got two strong Wa porters and headed out for the march. The rice fields were framed in ferns and the trail was a combination of slippery mud, buffalo shit, and warm water, and ideal combination for the dozens of varieties of butterfly. Some were spotted green velvet with torquoise so bright it made my eyes water. Others vermilion with serated wings lined with black, white and pink.

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A few hours walk from Shin Chang we reached a chinese border post where the authorities in green uniforms and red epulets dotted with brass stars said we could not go on. Across the trail was a bamboo baracade painted yellow and black. It was the ideal vantage point over a huge expanse of valley up the slope to dai gu la. After looking at our passports, and ascertaining that we had not crossed into china from Burma, the big boss said that we could continue for one day. I said that it was not enough so he offered us two. I asked him for three, and before answering said many times that we must not go into Mien Tien, chinese for Burma. We lied and said that we wouldn't.

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After about an hour and a half more we reached Dai Gu La village and rested. The mountains are unrelenting rising straight up, crisscrossed with streams. A few more hours walk brought us to Yung Gwang, the end of the trail. Apparently the guards at that check point had notified the police here in Yung Gwang and they met us at the entrance of the village. Telephone and electric lines extend everywhere in china to the furthest outpost, unlike Burma for whom communications in outlying areas is nonexistent.

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There are Wa houses with thached roofs which extend high up and all the way down, nearly touching the ground. You

have to stoop low to get inside. Andrew was met at the doorway by a very bored cow. There are a few old Wa women with silver hoops in their ears, wearing hand loomed red striped skirts, and the lacquered black leggings holding up strips of cloth to protect their legs from leeches and sharp elephant grass. Their skin is like creased dark hardwood.

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There is only one trail into Yung Gwang made probably by the retreating K.M.T nationalist army who escaped into Burma at the end of their war in 1949. There is no place to hide. The guards told our porters whom we had already paid for the day the exorbitant price of 130 yuan each, or \$15, not to take us as they had agreed to Burma and the mountain with the sacred lake which we can see in the distance. The porters left frightened. Here we are miles from the last bit of civilization where the trail ends, left with our heavy packs, my camera bag, and no fucking porters.

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To the north is Burma. To the west is Burma. In the distance we can hear mortar fire at what we don't know. The police that ordered our porters out of here had better get us new porters to get out of this place because there is no way I can hump my crap down this mountain. We are disappointed but not yet defeated.

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We were given a small room like a jail cell with opened doors. There is no way to disappear, no way to head west into the mountains of Burma. Above the door is a huge spider and there is a beetle flying around the room that sounds like a b-52. Andrew and i are together and the room is lit with our candles. We eat trail mix, instant noodles and are about half way through the mouldy french salami which is as big as a canoe, weighs a ton, and has been a joke from the very beginning. It is wrapped in a plastic bag from every hotel we have stayed in and is a history of our trip thus far. Still it stinks. I think that I'll never eat salami again, I'm sick of the shit.

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At the open window are a half dozen curious Wa childrens faces, dark with huge liquid eyes. We passed out balloons and the kids were fascinated. Two old Wa geezers came in and just sat down on our beds talking. An ancient crone with a long silver pipe poked her head in the door. They speak incessantly even though we don't understand a word.

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I woke up crusted in brick red mud nearly to my knees. The march yesterday nearly killed me and today we have to do it all over again in reverse. There was a Wa woman walking down the hill carrying two huge ceramic water jugs. She was topless and Andrew looked and said, "That woman has an incredible pair of jugs". We laughed ourselves silly.

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Early the next morning, two porters showed up to carry our gear. We definitely can't trust them as they were certainly sent by the cops to carry our stuff out of here. The mountain, our sacred mountain is there in the distance of maybe only ten miles, but it could be the moon. I went back inside to get my camera just to get a shot as the fog cleared, but when I walked back outside it was enveloped again. So elusive.

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From Yung Gwang we reached Dai Gu la in about two hours and had a few welcome warm beers. From Dai Gu la the sun broke out and hardened the mud. That's the good part. The bad part is that it is so damn hot that we are both getting sunburned. I am caked in mud. Between Dai Gu la and the police check point is a silver mine with a cave entrance in the

hillside near a river. Silver tailings lay in piles and I picked up a few. There was also galena and marcasite which are often found with silver. The hike up hill to the police check point was really hard, my knees ache and my leg muscles are so sore. My heart is pounding in my ears and the small of my back gets stiff when ever I sit down.

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After another few hours, we again reached Shin Chang. The porters were paid the outrageous sum of 160 yuan or \$19 each, but we found cold beer, noodles and hard boiled eggs. Now that we are back in Shin Chang we are out of the police jurisdiction. We had to ditch the porters because they are a liability. In spite of the fact that they are Wa, we are in china and they can not be trusted. We know that there are no check points between here and Ximeng.

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We got a hotel in Shin Chang for two dollars a night, double occupancy. I'm reminded of that old song, "All I need is a two dollar room, and a two dollar broom". I could use that broom now as whole patches of plaster ceiling are falling on the floor right over my bed.

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According to our maps, there is a bridge several hours from here over a river. Since we will have no porters and are intent on reaching some Wa villages and the lake at the top of the mountain, if even a bit from the south, Andrew and I have again pared down our baggage to absolute essentials since we will be carrying everything ourselves and are going it alone. Only one set of cloths, those on our backs, cameras, short wave radio, batteries, trail mix and our much despised salami. It was a debate over how many rolls of toilet paper. We leave all non essentials at the small restaurant across the road. The people there are friendly and honest. I took a modest bath over there and was surprised that my feet were still pink. From that bridge over the river we estimate Burma to be no more than one hours walk, and the first Wa village to be maybe three hours of forced march. Nobody will be looking for us and even if there were, there are many places to go between Shin Chang and Ximeng.

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Woke up at 6 a.m in pitch darkness with the intent of sliding away without being noticed by anyone. By 6:30 we could see the fog creeping across the mountains toward us from the southwest. By 7 a.m when it became rather light, the rain began. We had no choice but to wait for a break in the weather and at 9 a.m began to walk down the stone cobbled road to a trail where we could head west to Burma. We decided that if we were questioned, we would say we were collecting butterflies. After about forty minutes there was a trail which led down the ravine to the river. We crossed over the bamboo fence into a farmers field. The rains began again in earnest and we walked over mud terraces framing the rice fields. It was as slippery as hell and I fell many times. At the bottom of the cultivation we paused for a rest and I noticed that in one of my falls I had lost my glasses. Christ, now what? Without my glasses I can't focus properly. My photos might be soft, not sharp. The highlights in the eyes of my subjects may be out of focus. God, what a nightmare. I cursed myself for thinking that just strapping them onto my belt was enough to hold them when I should have zipped them securely into my camera bag.

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Andrew dropped his backpack and volunteered to go back up the hill and see if he could find them. I didn't argue. After twenty minutes or so, I began to walk up myself searching the foliage, the bamboo groves, the pines, the rice fields and the prickly thistles. I heard Andrew call out my name. Somehow he had found them. A needle in a haystack would have been easier than finding those glasses.

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We walked down again to the edge of the rice fields and jumped over a small stream. The trail became slippery mud and

I kept trying to brace myself with my left leg, sliding down the hillside. I would hold onto old bamboo which would crack and thick bunches of weeds which would rip loose from the saturated red earth and I would slide down the mountain on my ass like down a slide attached to my leather camera bag which was becoming swollen by the rain and covered in mud. After two hours of this i was exhausted, completely exhausted. Finally we reached the gravel banks of the river. The rain increased and we were muddy and thoroughly drenched. The river was raging brown, tearing at it's banks, and we walked to the edge to try and find another path up and cross to the other side. There was no bridge. On the other side of the river was a triangle shaped mountain plunging into the river like a wedge, which was Burma, separating the two crashing rivers which joined at this confluence where we stood trying to find a place to cross. At the joining of these two rivers it was impossible to gauge the depth, though we could clearly see the strength. It would be suicide to make an attempt to cross although we considered it, and still the rain grew stronger. Squatting under the weight of our packs in a fern covered hollow in the hillside, we knew we could not cross. There was nothing to do but to turn back. Shit, to turn back.

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I didn't feel that I had the strength to go back up that fucking mudslide of a mountain, but there was no choice. We had to return. I was completely exhausted, but there was no other option, we had to go back. We looked across the thundering river, a distance I could toss a stone over, separating us from Burma, and our sacred lake. Andrew and I began to hike back up that mountain. My lungs were bursting, my heart pounding in my guts as I crawled on all fours grasping at plants to hold onto like an animal. My hands were pierced by thorns and stinging nettles. My face was covered in a gauze of spider webs sticking to my stubble of a beard like a spiny cactus with spiders scrambling across my face. Some bug flew down my throat and as I gagged and spit, I hit a crack in the earth where a startled purple worm jumped out.

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Still we had to slog up the mountain. Although I felt as if I had no more strength we had to continue up through the pounding rains again crossing that stream balancing on the narrow rice levies, back through the bamboo and the pines, over the fence to the cobbled road to Shin Chang. My muscles ached as they have never ached. I was so wet that where I stepped became even more wet than before I had stepped there. My green Mao cap dripped like a sponge. The mud I had been caked with had washed away and I was so cold and hungry and still the rain pounded. The last one hundred feet, I was ready to drop. When we got back to the solace of our two dollar room, the neighbours were slaughtering a screaming chicken and draining his blood into a tea cup. The skin on my hands and feet were so wrinkled, like when you stay in a bath too long, and the color a shade of deathly purple, such that if a tag were attached to my big toe, nobody would question that I was dead.

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^ We had tried, had given it our best, so near and yet so far, that sacred Wa lake of Nawng Hkeo dark and hidden remained in our imagination.

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