



Jiayukou Village on Great Rock River

大石河边的贾峪口村

By A.H.

Translation by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li

Below is the fourth in a series of oral histories about Beijing water, as told to A.H. by 52-year-old Yue Jingxian, a surveying engineer with the Beijing Research Institute of Surveying and Design. Yue Jingxian was sent to Fangshan County for re-education in the early 1970s.

YUE JINGXIAN (MALE, 52 YEARS OLD)

In the early chilly part of the spring of 1971, after I finished ninth grade, I was sent with nine school friends to *Jiayukou* Village, which was on Great Rock River (*Da shi he*) in *Fangshan* County. Our group of “educated youth” went there to live for three years and be “re-educated.”

Great Rock River was one of the main rivers in the *Fangshan* region. *Jiayukou* Village, where I lived, was about 40 kilometres from the source of the river in *Tangshang* Village. From there, the river flowed through many places: *Xiayunling* Township; the villages of *Changcao* and *Fuzizhuang*; the towns of *Tuoli*, *Chengguan*, and *Doudian*; and the *Liulihe* region. Great Rock then flowed into *Hebei* province near *Lucun* Village before joining the *Baigou* River and then the *Daqing* and *Hai* Rivers, before finally entering the *Bohai* Sea.

Back then, Great Rock River was in flow all year round and ran the length of the whole commune, which was more than 10 kilometres.

Even during the dry season in spring, the river continued to flow and there were only a very few, very short stretches where there wasn't much of a flow. In places where the water was shallow, it was so crystal clear that you could see the rocky river bed. Where it was deep, the water was emerald green. Small fish and shrimp were everywhere and schools of larger fish filled the deeper parts of river bends.

Large and small pools, too many to count, formed all along the river. We had to pass by them every day on our way to and from work. Some were around five metres deep, some only about two or three metres deep, but they were the size of a couple of basketball courts, so we could easily dive into them from the high rocks around the edge. It was like this even at the beginning of spring, and in winter the pools were covered with a thick layer of ice.

Great Rock flowed east all the way to the *Shanchuan* Reservoir. Along its course, were a few stretches of underground river (the longest of which was near the Red Coal Factory), but it burst to the surface again at Black Dragon

Lake (*Heilong Tan*). The locals said that it didn't matter how early in the year it was, the level of water in Black Dragon Lake never dropped, and in summer when the volume of water surged, the lake and the river joined to form one huge body of water. When talking about the seemingly bottomless Black Dragon Lake, the locals spoke in mysterious reverential tones, as if alluding to a divine spirit.

The river of today isn't like it was thirty years ago. In those days it was full of water in the summer rainy season. After a period of heavy rain, torrents of water would come flooding down the mountains and the roar of flowing water never stopped, day or night, as the river thundered past carrying soil and mud and pieces of rock and stone. Our house was only about three metres away from the river, which made it difficult to sleep easy, lying on the *kang* at night. The production brigade had a well that was a few metres deep where we normally got our water, but during the rainy season it would be inundated. After the water receded, the villagers stirred the water in the well and when they next came to draw water after a few days it would be clear again.

Great Rock River ran down a steep slope through our village and the current was fast. Being lazybones we were really happy about this, because when we crossed the river on our way to work we could throw our dirty clothes into the water and weigh them down with rocks. The fast-moving water washed the clothes for us and then when we had finished work for the day, we'd retrieve them and just let them dry out. We washed everything like this, clothes, sheets and quilt covers. We had to be especially careful crossing the river in summer when the water was high. The locals all knew that if the water was past your knees it was definitely not a good idea to cross. If you lost your footing for an instant, you'd be knocked over immediately by the force of the water and once you were in the water it was very difficult to get up again. Two young girls were swept away in 1975, and it was common for pigs and cows to be swept

downstream. But the level of water could fall just as fast, and drop in just a couple of days.

By all accounts, Great Rock River of long ago sounded even more turbulent than it was during the years we were there, according to older people's descriptions. How high did the river rise? It normally flowed in the river bed, but during the rainy season, it would sometimes actually go over the tops of the hills! Every year at the beginning of spring, all the able-bodied people in Great Rock River Village used to dam the river up in one place to catch fish. The natural water course was blocked and another opening was netted so that as the fish swam down with the current, they'd flow into the net. When the dammed area was reopened, and the water ran back in its normal path, the pool would be full of fish.

The people in the village who were over 50 talked about the '40s and '50s when they were young. In those days, they said, the hills on both sides of the river were covered in trees and luxuriant vegetation, and the chaste-trees¹ growing near the village were as tall as a man. There were more than 100 families in the village then, around 600 people, but it was quite easy to find enough wood to build a home. Rafters could be found on the slopes all around the village; for crossbeams you had to go further into the mountains and for support beams and girders you had to go even further in, where there were plenty of trees with trunks over a metre in diameter.

But by the time I was there, the vegetation was already sparse. Only grass and chaste-tree canes grew on the mountainside, and they were only up to your waist. The soil on the hillside terraces was only about 30 centimetres deep. If you stood in the village and looked at the hills and mountains on all sides, you could see hardly any trees. I remember that in those years we lived on the northern rise, and behind it there was a huge

1 *The chaste-tree canes are used to weave baskets.*



slope of about 100 *mu* (1 *mu* = 1/15 hectares) that the locals called “Rabbit South Slope.” It was so bare that the only thing left standing on it was a tea tree belonging to the production brigade. All you could see on the slope were dark brown rocks, even in summertime. The trees had been removed for firewood, to cook with and keep warm. In 1971, my companions and I walked about 10 kilometres, chopping and cutting down all the large and small trees as we went, just like we were shaving a head, stocking up enough firewood to last us for a couple of years. Every household had an area where they could pile firewood, and with 100 families in the village, it meant that five or six hundred people were all chopping down trees, so year by year the area that was clear-felled got bigger and bigger. To get decent firewood, you had to go deeper and deeper into the mountains.

It wasn't that trees wouldn't grow around the village. There were plenty of trees around people's houses; like prickly ash, persimmons and walnuts. It was only on the hills and mountainsides that there were none – people would just go and chop down any trees that didn't belong to someone in particular. And on top of using that wood to meet our daily cooking and heating needs, we also burned trees to make charcoal. It wasn't only our iron and steel ladles and shovels that we contributed to the “steelmaking frenzy;” trees were chopped down far and wide. Small homemade blast furnaces were built on the sandbanks next to the river, but in the end no one came to collect the steel that we made. It just lay there, useless, and we couldn't do anything but leave it, dumped on the sandbanks.

Then there was a famine. To try and get crops to grow in the barren soil we used plant ash as fertilizer. The large trees were already gone so we set fire to all the remaining trees as well as the bushes. The vegetation-covered mountains were bare with one torching. The ash lay on the ground, but nothing grew under it. The tea bush on Rabbit South Slope just managed to survive because it was surrounded by rocks.

In spring of 1973 I went with the commune's peasant workers to *Niukouyu* Village, west of the county town, to build the dam then under construction and dig the canal (that in the end flowed into lower reaches of the Great Rock River plain). After working there for a month, there wasn't one girl or young man whose black glossy hair hadn't thinned out and become yellow and weak. Much later we found out that the water table in that area had been seriously polluted; the level of a certain kind of phenol was frighteningly above what was considered safe. The students from the city started hanging round a geological prospecting team in the area and in that way got clean water from the county town to drink. The situation began to improve then. The *Niukouyu* Dam has now become the wastewater treatment plant for the East is Red Oil Refinery.

In 1996, a few friends and I went for a nostalgia trip to visit our old home-stay families. We found out from the villagers that the people in the three villages of *Shanchuan*, *Shibanfang* and *Jiayukou* all had to move to places on the plains like *Fangshan* and *Liangxiang* villages so that the Twin River Dam could be built. No one had been sorry to leave that dried-up ravine. They looked forward to being in a different environment and being better off.

I looked everywhere for the Great Rock River that I had once been so familiar with. Only 20 years had gone by, but what was once a river no longer existed. Apart from a little water it carried in summer, it was totally dry the rest of the time. The bends in the river where we had once swam, washed our clothes and caught fish and shrimp were nowhere to be seen. The mountains, house walls, house roofs, roads and valley floors were all covered with a dark grey dust. The friends we had had fun with died young, one after the other. There wasn't a trace of the stream that once babbled or the quiet, deep green river bends; there wasn't even a piece of moss. Looking around, there were only bare rocks in the channel and the place was even poorer than it had been when we were there.



The villagers said that before we were there in the 1970s, there had been even more water, that is to say, that the river had always been there, flowing ever downwards, throughout the last 100 years, when no trees had been cut down. I happened to see its disappearance in the last 20 years. Of course it could have been a natural occurrence, for example if less rain had fallen, or because of global warming. Or because of coal mining. The villagers all know that “Water is as high as the mountains are.”² The water courses in the mountains were all created naturally, but that changed once the coal mining cut into the mountains, interrupting the mountain streams, so the amount of water flow became less and less. And no matter how patiently you replanted on the mountains, it was pointless. Just the same as interrupting a person’s circulation, once it’s done, that’s it.

I never wanted or dared go back again. I especially didn’t want to drive into the village. Build a dam? If there was no water, what was the point of building a dam wall? What about the move that the villagers had all been looking forward to? I had never felt as shocked as I was to see a living river disappear in the short space of 20 years. And with it the little village of *Jiayukou* where we spent the brightest years of our youth!

AUTHOR’S COMMENTARY

Although Great Rock River, which is southwest of Beijing, is only 110 kilometres long, it has a significant role in Beijing’s history. The river flows through the remains of the early human settlement at *Zhoukoudian* and must have been a part of their evolution. This was where 10,000 years of Beijing’s history began. Yet in the space of 20 years, Great Rock River disappeared. It is not alone; there are many rivers in the mountains around Beijing that share the same

² This means that it was easy to find water in those mountains in the old days because the mountains were environmentally intact and healthy. That soon ended with the coal mining.

fate. In order to survive, and in the contemporary way of thinking, this means in order to prosper, water is required, so wells are sunk, dam walls built, rivers dammed, and canals are dug. Roads are also necessary, so the mountains are opened up and trees felled. Then coal is needed, so mines are opened and exploited. City dwellers want building materials so mountains are blown up for rock, rivers are dredged for sand, resulting in the silting up of lakes and wetlands – rivers which nurtured human life can only respond to this kind of treatment by becoming extinct.

The disappearance of Great Rock River has affected its aquifer; the water table has dropped significantly. Sometimes there is water in the wells and sometimes there isn’t. More than half the people in riverside villages have difficulty providing drinking water for themselves and their stock. In 14 villages where there are 3,000 households or more, like *Xiayunling*, *Da’anshan*, *Shijiaying*, and *Nanjiao*, a normal life is already impossible. And when the rainy season comes, heavy rain causes floods. Relieving the drinking water crisis for groups of people in Lake *Qinglong* town has become an important item on the local government’s agenda.

MY HOME AND WATER: A PEOPLE’S ACCOUNT

Beijing, once famous for its sweet spring water and clear-flowing rivers is now infamous for its polluted canals and dried up riverbeds. *My Home and Water: A People’s Account* provides a rare uncensored glimpse of life and water in the ancient capital of Beijing and surrounding areas – as told by longtime residents.

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