Flowing through history: The mighty Yangtze River

The Yangtze River is China's golden waterway; the section from Shanghai to Chongqing is its economic lifeline. China's history and the Yangtze are intertwined.

Before 1949 modern shipping on the Yangtze was almost 100 percent monopolized by foreign-owned companies. British steamships controlled more than half of the river's modern transportation and French and Japanese companies each had a 20 percent share.

Wuhan, the transportation hub in the middle of the Yangtze, was called "Oriental Chicago." River boats were the only means of transportation and Wuhan was the only transshipment port for all commodities shipped from China's southwest provinces to Shanghai.

Britain, France, Japan and Germany each had a foreign concession area in Wuhan. Although America did not have such a concession, it did have a monopoly in the kerosene markets along the river. Standard Oil did business in almost every town and city on the banks of the river. Big U.S. oil storage containers still stand in towns along the Yangtze.

The size of the boats permitted to make the 200-mile trip from Yichang to Chongqing was capped at 500 tons. In the winter, when the water was shallow, the cap was reduced to 200-300 tons. Passage through dangerous shoals during winter's low water periods required both engine and human labor power. The people who pulled the boats upstream were usually local farmers called "trackers."

The trackers, about 50 in number, each with a bamboo loop slung over his shoulders and attached to the towline, crawled forward inch by inch, till the boat passed into smooth waters. It took about five to ten minutes to pass a shoal. The trackers often were so poor that they wore no clothes, causing many passengers to keep their daughters below deck. Passengers, who in the 1920s were mostly foreigners, would usually tip the trackers generously.

When the boat entered the gorges, it met with swift currents, whirlpools, eddies and hidden rocks. This made navigation upstream extremely difficult and dangerous. Accidents were common in this section of the river and many people lost their lives.

In the past, ships could sail only in the daytime and would have to anchor at night. To go through the gorges, all ships needed a special pilot, a "ling jiang," to guide the ship safely. The pilot was usually someone who had grown up along the river and understood the river's perils.

In 1931, Wuhan was devastated by a major flood. People were forced to exit their homes through windows and many lives were lost. There was a shortage of food in the aftermath.

In 1938, Japan invaded central China. Chen Ji, who authored this article and whose parents live in Shenyang, in the northeast part of China, said his mother's family fled from Wuhan to Chongqing to escape the Japanese. "It took about two months to move the entire family, due to the long travel time and a shortage of ship tickets."

Wuhan University was also fleeing the Japanese. They rented a boat to transport its library books, some of which were extremely rare. While en route, their boat was bombed by the Japanese; it sank and the books were lost forever.

The Yangtze's dangerous conditions were a natural buffer in wartime. During World War II, Japanese gunboats could reach only as far as Shan Douping, the site of the current Three Gorges Dam. This
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prevented the invaders from occupying Chongqing, China's war capital, and changing the course of China's history.

At the end of WW II, Chen Ji's family returned to Wuhan from Chongqing. "My mother's cousin's wife and her son could not wait for a steel boat to take them back to Wuhan, so they decided to book passage on a wooden boat. They never made it. The boat capsized and they drowned," said Chen Ji, an instructor in finance at CU Denver and the major facilitator of the Forum's trip to China.

After 1949, the Chinese communist government blew up all the dangerous rocks and shoals, clearing out the Yangtze River for today's easy and safe cruising, day and night. Improvements have ended a period of 1,000 years when "traveling to Sichuan was more difficult than climbing to the sky."

Today, with construction of the massive Three Gorges Dam, Chinese planners are hoping to chart a better course for the Yangtze and correct historical problems. When finished, around 2009, the dam will eliminate costly and destructive flooding in central China, generate electricity to support continued economic development, and make navigation on the upper Yangtze safer and more efficient.