

# The Hydroelectric Station

by Alai

**W**hat cool guys they were! These guys on the survey team were even cooler than the guys on the work team.

The guys on the work team were cool too, but only in their eyes. Every part of their face would smile, but they still had this self-satisfied look in their eyes. They came to Jicun, the village we were from, wearing backpacks like soldiers. After holding a meeting, they were assigned to live with poor and lower-middle class peasant households. They said, “Chairman Mao instructed us to eat, live, and labor with you, and to build a New Socialist Village with you.”

The guys on the survey team were different. They arrived in Jicun with a team of mules loaded with weird and wonderful things: canvas tents, folding cots, tables and chairs, and of course various kinds of gauges and scopes for land surveying. They appeared, took one look at our village, quite a big village Jicun was, and drove their mules around it like they hadn’t seen a thing. They looked like they’d seen the world. Like every other survey team that had ever visited, they hiked upstream and made their camp a bit beyond the mill in the grassy clearing by the woods. Most of them wore spectacles, but looks can be deceiving, and they could do all kinds of work, like cutting down small trees and binding them into frames for their tents, or digging a hole in the ground and, before you knew it, having a fire going to cook the meal, or even chopping logs of birch into posts to make a pretty fence around the camp. The guys on the work team didn’t know how to do such things. The men in the village

did, but the guys on the survey team knew how to do other things too, and they had things the villagers had never seen before. They felled a stout cedar tree and used the thick trunk to put up a sturdy platform for their strange contraptions. The thing with a tail that dangled when the wind was light and whirled nonstop in the breeze was a weathervane. It showed how hard and from where the wind was blowing. They also put some beautiful glass tubes inside a crate. Every day some guy would climb up and record in a hefty book how much rainwater or dew was in the tubes, and they would stick a long, notched iron ruler into the water and note the level to see how much had accumulated or evaporated.

Then they would go climbing over hill and over dale. They would clang rocks with hammers and look at the distant mountains or the nearby river through different scopes. If the weather was good, they would set up tables, spread out sheets of paper, and start using the numbers in their book to draw graphs. The lines of the graphs went up and down uncertainly, sometimes zigzagging all over the place.

They kept themselves busy, having no time to so much as cast a glance in the direction of the village, even though it was practically next door. Occasionally their cook would come up to buy some vegetables or milk.

Maybe because those guys seemed a bit too proud of themselves, maybe because they behaved as though Jicun didn’t even exist, the grownups in our village mostly avoided going to the survey camp. But me and the other kids were too curious to stop ourselves from

sneaking over and having a look. To us, everything in the camp under that spinning weathervane was new and exciting. Those cool guys let us gather outside the fence and peek in. Then, one day at the village primary school, our teacher announced that the survey team had invited all of us to visit, and would even hold a Science Day for us. On the day of the announcement, everyone kept mumbling about the Science Day or the Science Activity Day, but by the following day, those words were rolling off our tongues. But if you'd seen us – oh my god – a bunch of kids with filthy faces, scruffy clothes, and messy hair covered in bits of dirt and grass, you would never have suspected that science could have anything to do with us!

But we went anyway. The teacher made us line up in twos, with the student in front holding a red flag. He kept blowing on his whistle to lead us on our march.

One! One! One two one!

One! One! One two one!

At first, we marched in unison. Our steady steps raised dirt on the winding village road. We rounded the hill and passed the mill, but when we saw those colored pennants fluttering over the survey camp, our hearts started racing and our march quickly became a chaotic mess.

It wasn't as if the surveyors usually kept the gate closed, but now they opened it all the way to greet a group of kids as anxious and excited as a pack of little mountain critters. That day, we watched them draw, code, and file rock samples, and we learned to use dif-

ferent kinds of gauges to read the levels in the rain collection tubes. There were people ready to explain things at every stop along the way, but just being able to feel things with my own hands made my heart race, and I didn't hear a word of what they were saying. For the final activity, they arranged those folding tables in a row and had us sit down. There were peanuts and candies on the tables. Aside from a few gluttons, we weren't brave enough to remove the pretty cellophane wrappings right there and let those colored candy eggs dissolve in our mouths. But our hands were fast enough to grab them, flicking out like the tongues of serpents and throwing back the loose sleeves of our Tibetan robes to seize the prey and jerked it back. We hid the candies, like some secret joy, deep in our robes. Those fellows just smiled.

Seeing their easy smiles, we were finally able to relax. But by this time the Science Activity Day was already coming to an end.

We lined up and marched to the sound of the teacher's whistle – one two, one two – away from the survey camp. As we were walking by the mill, suddenly someone burst into tears. What was it? Didn't get any candy? "No," the child said, "I didn't understand any of the science they were telling us about." This struck a chord, and quite a few other kids started crying too. I was about to cry, but then I felt the candies I had hidden up my sleeve. I ate one. Suddenly I no longer felt like crying. It is still so sweet to think back to that memory!

From then on, the gates of the camp would always

open wide for us whenever we appeared.

In the evening of the day we visited the camp, every kid who went on the field trip shared candy with his family. We also brought a message home: the survey team would design a Hydroelectric Station with a Waterpower Generator for the village.

Water! Power! Generator!

The waterpower generator would light electric lamps in every home.

Heavens! That was in the 1970s. That was the last survey team to come to our village. The first teams came driving teams of mules. Later, the highway came through, and two survey teams arrived driving their own army green trucks. The trucks stopped and lined up by the tents, becoming part of the camp. In the early morning after we brought the news about the waterpower generator, goods from all the households in the village were heaped outside the fence around the camp: piles of cabbages, radishes, potatoes, cured meat and fresh milk, even bunches of wildflowers and bundles of chopped wood. In those days, the relationship between the village and the logging camp was very strained. The villagers were so unhappy that the axes and saws of the loggers were quickly swallowing the forest that little things would often get blown out of proportion. The disputes were really over trees, but to this day, people still talk of ethnic conflict between Han and Tibetan people. Disputes over trees can be resolved, but an “ethnic problem” sounds deep-rooted, almost ingrained. But most of the fellows on the work

team were Han! And there were Han people in the village before the work team even came. The caretaker Pockmarks Yang was Han. And the guys on the survey team who were willing to hold a Science Activity Day for the village kids were also Han. And now those same guys were even going to design a hydroelectric station for us!

What beautiful memories the survey team left behind for our village!

One day, they shouldered their instruments and trekked upstream for a few hundred yards, white wide-brim hats hanging down their backs. They drove several stakes into the ground by the river and wrote letters and numbers on all the stakes with red paint. That was to be the location of the water intake. There, they set up a tripod and mounted a magical scientific looking lens to locate the colored pennants and the long, extendable poles their teammates were setting up beside rocks or over the sparse treetops. Then they started driving stakes into the ground in a row, one after another. Having done that, they returned to the camp to do some more drafting. Meanwhile, the whole village had been mobilized to go along the stakes and pull up the weeds and hack the shrubs and the thickets of bamboo to make a pathway through the wilderness. The route went level for a while, then turned and ran steeply down to the low-lying area by the camp. Everyone understood that this was the route the water channel would follow. The village mill drew water from the river to turn the heavy millstone in the same

way. Most of the surveyors were boxing the samples they'd gathered, neatly loading them onto the trucks, and dismantling the instruments they used to measure the wind and the water. Only a couple of them were still drawing plans on big sheets of paper. Bending at the waist, those guys leaned over the tables with pencils behind their ears, holding compasses and rulers of different shapes and sizes.

That day, the village grownups forgot to maintain their reserve in front of these haughty fellows and went over to the camp. But the guys on the survey team still did not seem inclined to get friendly with the villagers. They were busy with their own things. At noon, the last tent was dismantled, the canvas sheets were folded and bound with sturdy ropes, and everything was loaded onto the trucks. The trucks rumbled to life just as the hydroelectric station was coming into being on the two remaining tables. One of the tables was then folded up.

Several village bigwigs gathered around the last remaining table and listened as the only draftsman left pointed out the sluice gate at the intake, the reservoir at the end of the water channel, the hydraulic turbine well, the shed above the well, and the generator inside the shed.

The survey team left the village a hydroelectric station drawn on a piece of paper.

The trucks drove off, leaving the villagers standing in the empty camp looking at the plans for the station, unsure whether they were happy or sad.

Seeing how efficiently the team had tidied up the

camp, the villagers could only sigh in admiration and say, "Damn, those guys sure have the right to be so proud of themselves."

Other than that, they couldn't tell what they felt.

Three more years passed, and a hydroelectric station really got built in our Jicun. And it was built, yes indeed, according to the set of plans the survey team had left behind. The shed for the generator went up right on the original camp. Water churned into foam by the spinning blades of the turbine spilled out onto the low-lying area to the side. One day at dusk, the generator operator opened the sluice gate at the river and trotted back to the shed. By this time, the turbine was spinning, the belt drive of the generator whirring, the needles on the voltmeter and ammeter trembled, then slowly rose. When the needles went high enough, the operator lifted the switch, and the village started to shine in the twilight hour.

The survey team was never to return to Jicun.

Seeing that neatly dressed, mild-mannered, yet haughty fellows had designed that power station, the villagers unconsciously assumed that only someone neatly dressed, mild-mannered, yet haughty could operate it. So when the operator, who wore robes that were neither very dirty nor exceptionally clean, lifted the switch with hands that had never written a single word and lit up the night sky over the whole village, we all felt as if we were dreaming.

It was the brightest night in Jicun's history.