AROUND THE GLOBE

On the Road to Nanjing

Julio Cañon Barriga *– The University of Arizona/Universidad de Antioquia, Colombia*

"We are pragmatic people," Dr. Ge JiuFeng told me during a visit to a small hydropower station located in Guangzhou province, China, one of the activities in the water science summer camp held in June 2006 in Nanjing, China. JiuFeng was the coordinator of this month-long event, which hosted 20 foreign engineers invited by the Nanjing Hydraulic Research Institute (NHRI) to learn about the developments and research done at this multipurpose national hydraulic research complex and to experience life in China.

The institute, under the joint jurisdiction of the ministries of Water Resources, Communication, and State Power, undertakes theoretical and applied research in water conservation, water resources management, hydroelectric power, waterway transportation projects, and small hydropower technology. NHRI also provides safety monitoring and inspection services for the more than 85,000 dams currently operating in the nation for hydropower generation, flood control, and irrigation.

NHRI has been particularly engaged in the design and study of China's leading water resources management projects: the Three Gorges multipurpose dam, which will provide up to 18 megawatts of electricity to the entire nation as well as flood control and navigation facilities on the Yangtze River; and the south-to-north water transfer project, a three-stage transfer system that will convey up to one-third of the Yangtze waters (approximately 40 billion cubic meters per year) upstream to the exhausted Yellow River Basin.

The pragmatism of which Jiu Feng was proud of is especially evident in the engineering enterprises undertaken by China in the last two decades. In this period, China has considerably improved its infrastructure to meet the requirements of modern competitive markets, perhaps at an environmental cost that is still unknown and worrisome.

With 70 percent of its population living in rural areas under conditions that may be considered decent but are nevertheless precarious, and huge new housing developments occurring in populated cities where seven to ten million inhabitants is considered just average, China is a nation of contrasts. You can perceive this by simply taking a ride along one of its modern highways. For miles across the nation, the landscape shifts repeatedly among western-style cities surrounded by huge apartment complexes, smoke-spewing factories, and traditional rice paddies labored by people in conditions similar to those of a thousand years ago. A detailed map of the brand new highways well resembles the challenging reality of China: you can go anywhere, but you must be sure about where you go, because you will hardly find a U-turn along the way!

I told JiuFeng about concerns heard in the United States regarding the increasing economic power of China and India and their rising political influence. "We are far from that point of influence, maybe one or two generations, and still have many things to improve, learn about, and experience. We welcome the USA but also are strengthening ties with Europe. You cannot trust your interests as a nation in a few hands," was his answer, reinforced by a confident smile.

Chinese people may be pragmatic, but they also appear to be united and diligent. The quick and seemingly peaceful relocation of 1.2 million people recently caused by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam project, for instance, would be unthinkable in any other country. Despite the immediate ecological and social impacts, the project is intended to benefit the entire country in the long run: the switch from coal power to hydropower is expected to reduce the use of coal and wood from the forest, preserve landscapes, and reduce air pollution.

A lasting memory of my time with new friends and colleagues at NHRI will remain with me as a reminder that dialogue and common understanding between nations is the best way to make this world a better place to live, for us and future generations.

Contact Julio Cañon Barriga at jecanonb@email.arizona.edu; visit www.nhri.cn/english.