How to Cross a River

By: Engr. Chin Mee Poon F.I.E.M., P.Eng.

Yes, that's me.

What was I doing? I was crossing the river!

No, I am not joking. I was really crossing the river.

I had travelled with my wife and a group of friends from Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan in south-western China, to Fugong, a town beside the Nu River in the north-western part of Yunnan close to the Myanmar border. The journey by bus with sleeping berths had taken us more than 17 hours. Fugong is within a unique region of China where three major rivers run parallel to each other in a southerly direction. The three rivers cut through the Henduan Mountain before continuing their journey. Jinsha Jiang makes a sharp turn and runs east, becoming the mighty Chang Jiang or Yangzi River. Lancang Jiang in the middle continues its journey into Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam as the Mekong River. Nu Jiang on the west, runs into Myanmar as Salween River. The region where the three rivers run parallel to each other is so unique in its physical features and ecosystems that UNESCO decided to admit it as a world heritage site of natural beauty in 2003.

The Nu River gorge, in which Fugong is situated, is a region of exceptional beauty. The people living on the steep mountainsides, planting crops on terraces that they have carved over generations, are the Nu people. They are one of the 55 minority races in China. To bring their produce to town, they have to cross the river, and their only means of doing so is by sliding from one bank of the river to the other on a steel wire-rope. The wire-rope has been strung between the river banks with one end substantially higher than the other so that one can slide from the high end to the low end easily with the help of gravity. For the return journey, there is another wire-rope nearby strung in the opposite way. It may sound simple, but the actual act of sliding across the river requires certain amount of courage and skill on the part of the person doing it.

We had made a special arrangement to experience such a means of crossing a river. Each of us was to cross the river in tandem with an experienced guide. Even then, when I was sliding fast towards the far end, the sound of the metal hook rubbing against the wire-rope, the wind rushing over my ears, and the water gushing and pounding against the boulders in the river below me, all combined to pump adrenaline through my body. Believe me, it's an exhilarating experience!

Crossing a river by means of a steel wire-rope is by no means unique to China. In Nepal, northern India and other mountainous regions, where the small population does not justify a bridge, and crossing by boat is not an option because of extremely swift flow, presence of many boulders in the river, or the river valley being simply too deep, wire-ropes may be the only practical option. There are some variations to this method of transport though. Instead of dangling oneself on the wire-rope by means of a hook, one may sit in a bucket. Sometimes the two ends of a wire-rope may be level. In that case one will have to pull oneself up to the other end after gravity has brought oneself to the middle, quite a tiring thing to do, especially if one is carrying a lot of things. The advantage of a level rope is that it can be used for two-way traffic. ■

Engr. Chin Mee Poon holding on to dear life