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P. O. BOX 1536 • NEW YORK 17, N. Y.

# far east

*Reporter*

## WE BUILD THE MING TOMBS DAM

By Israel Epstein

*How the great dam was built in  
China by volunteer labor—and human  
body and spirit enriched in the process*

10¢

Reprinted from *New World Review*, January, 1959

# We Build The Ming Tombs Dam

by ISRAEL EPSTEIN

**I**T WAS my good fortune last May to take part for two weeks in the building of the Ming Tombs (Shih-sanling) dam and reservoir near Peking, said at that time to be the biggest single job of volunteer labor ever done in the world. The entire project, which included a hydroelectric station, subsidiary highways and landscaping, was triumphantly opened in the presence of 150,000 people—only a fraction of those who had worked on it—on July 1.

That was only five months after the first earth was broken. By then a total of 7 million man-days of heavy physical labor had been put in, 2.5 million by the cooperative farmers of Peking's outlying Changping district (population 270,000), where the dam is located, 2 million by soldiers and officers of the People's Liberation Army and the Chinese People's Volunteers newly evacuated from Korea, 2.5 million by government workers, teachers, students, members of the professions and ordinary residents of Peking. Some were on the project from start to finish; but the majority worked from

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Published by *FAR EAST REPORTER* • PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

ten days to a complete fortnight.

Often I thought of Western commentators who raise cries of "forced" or "unpaid" labor with regard to China's great constructions. Forced? Peking was buzzing with people fighting to go to the Ming Tombs; the waiting list was many times greater than the number who actually got there. As for the work being unpaid, it is true this labor cost the state budget not a penny. But all concerned continued to get wages from their regular employment, so one can also say it was whole organizations that volunteered, staff members who did not go shouldering the office work of those who did.

All in all, it was a gigantic and successful laboratory experiment in China's general line of socialist construction to build more, faster, better and more cheaply by stimulating the socialist morality, vigor and conscientiousness of the whole people, a striking embodiment of the achievements of the Chinese Communist Party in socialist education, of an idea gripping the masses to become a material force.

Instead of 20 million yuan, as at first estimated, the project took only 4 million yuan from the state budget. Instead of waiting for the Third Five Year Plan (1962-67) where the original financial priorities would

have put it, the reservoir already stands. Within a few weeks of its completion, it saved a big area from flood and through irrigation helped to produce high crop yields on 20,000 hectares (1 hectare=2.47 acres) of once perennially arid land. It is beginning to supply electric power to the locality, and from 1959 will provide the city with 1,000,000 kg. of fish annually. The new lake in the path of the desert winds from the west is ameliorating Peking's excessively dry climate. Hostels and sanatoria are growing along its banks, as well as boating clubs and other recreational facilities for the capital's workers.

No less striking are the political, spiritual results. The peasants, only two years after organization into socialist collectives, worked voluntarily and enthusiastically on a project benefiting not only their own co-ops but the whole area. This is the kind of thing that, all over the country, laid the basis of the communes.

Soldiers played their role as a socialist army, builders as well as defenders of socialism.

Intellectuals who left their desks to take up pick, shovel and earth-carrying basket gained a new respect for the gruelling physical labor of the Chinese people which most of them had never done before and thought "simple." Most educated Chinese are still of bourgeois or landlord origin, and this job gave them a new understanding of the fact that labor creates our world. Whatever their original status, everybody worked together on the same jobs, lived under the same conditions, ate the same rough food, competed in output and helped each other.

This is a brief general picture of

what happened during the first five months of 1958 in the area of Shih-sanling, where conscripted peasants once built 13 luxurious mausolea for successive emperors, where the local folk could never eat their fill from their dry, hilly fields, and where the free labor of a reborn people has brought into being, in a moment of time, a boon to the living much more magnificent than all the tombs of the dead potentates, created over hundreds of years. By the end of the year, tangible rewards were evident—here and in all other parts of the country where similar mass efforts had produced water for the fields and harvests without precedent—rewards in the shape of food not only available to all, but free as air itself in many thousands of new communes in the countryside.

## **Our First Lesson**

I would like to describe just what happened to the small group of builders I was permitted to join, composed of people from publishing houses under China's Ministry of Culture. Some were senior Ministry cadres, some writers and editors; some were office personnel; some were drivers, messengers and cleaners. All reported at the muster-point like army recruits for rank-and-file service. Shouldering packs and bedding, they piled together into open trucks and sang together as they rode the 35 miles to the work site.

An hour later we stopped at a small walnut grove at the foot of the stony hills that mark the end of the North China plain. Here stood the cluster of tents lent by the army which were to quarter our unit, its 356 members a drop in the sea of 100,000 workers on the project at

that moment (and remember the 100,000 were themselves a drop in the ocean of 100 million peasants and others digging water conservancy works in China at the time). At its entrance was a small wooden archway with the inscription: "Frontline of Labor: Schoolroom of Politics."

Piling out of our truck we were met by a rush of bronzed, laughing men and women who, finding friends and colleagues in our ranks, slapped them on the back and pumped their hands. A moment later, at the sound of a whistle, we lined up on one side of the road, they on the other. The camp leader, Party secretary of one section of the Ministry, a young man in work-soiled dungarees, gave a short, vigorous talk. "We are here," he said, "to send off the old soldiers and welcome the new. The work is hard, but essential for the people. You old soldiers have shown that your revolutionary will is stronger than earth and rock; you did not let fatigue, wind or rain stop you; you have each moved an average of 3 cubic meters per man-day. We are sure you, the new recruits, will fight as hard. Old soldiers, hand over your banner!"

The best of the retiring workers marched up with a tattered red flag bearing the device of the Ministry of Culture. Having been borne to the work-site and set up there every day by all the seven groups that preceded us, it was as ripped by the mountain winds as the old battle standards one sees in war museums are shredded by shot and shell. The commander of our new battalion, previously elected by its company leaders who were in turn elected by the squad leaders, received it solemnly. Then he wheeled around

and we marched after him to our tents, while the returnees piled their gear into the trucks that had brought us and drove off.

That evening, after eating the rough buns of unleavened maize flour that made our entire supper and were to be our staple food for two weeks, we sat down on the ground (we were not to see a chair for the next two weeks) to hear the camp chief again. This time he acquainted us with the over-all situation which was pressing. With two-thirds of the time allotted already gone, the dam was still only a quarter of its final height of 29 meters—though with the foundations and thick base built, somewhat more than that proportion of the work was done. Not to finish before the summer rains, meant that all the labor already put in would be wasted. The peasants, who had relied on our help to make sure this year's late crop should fear neither drought nor flood, would be sadly disillusioned.

**"The Work," He Warned,  
"Is Hard"**

The work, he warned us, was hard. Every intellectual had seen peasants use a carrying-pole, but few had tried it. The first day, our shoulders would ache badly. The second day they would swell. But on the third, provided we persisted, they would harden—and we would be lifting loads we never thought we could attempt. Certainly, it meant gritting our teeth. But how could we talk or write of sharing the outlook of the working people, as he was sure we all thought we did, if we shirked what every village boy and girl had to learn and then

do till old age? This did not mean idealizing such heavy toil. On the contrary, our work would make us all more active in thinking of new ways to lift the ancient burden off the backs of the people. Even now, on this project, we were trying to get rid of the carrying pole and change to the easier rubber-tired tip-cart, besides using what machinery could be found. But for the moment we still had to rely mainly on the old ways, with which China's working folk had moved, and were still moving, mountains.

Safety was of supreme importance. Under this head, the camp chief gave us comprehensive warnings as to how to handle tools and ropes, and dig sand from a vertical face. People should work as hard as they could, but not beyond their real strength or if ill. A team with a good production record and a poor accident or illness record would be considered backward, not foremost, and its leader a bungler, not a hero.

Discipline was absolutely essential. A production army of 100,000 was not an office room. If this vast force, working three shifts a day, was not to fall into confusion all units had to assemble, start and finish work in a thoroughly organized way.

Way of life was important too. We would live and eat as ordinary Chinese earth workers still did. We had brought our own grain and cooks, and should not drain local reserves. If we bought additional food or in any way tried to carry on our city standards, we would make a poor impression on the people.

Finally, he dwelt on the wider political side. We were engaged in a demonstration of the superior poten-

tialities of socialism, showing what could be done by the people's voluntary, organized labor. Without the socialist revolution in the ownership of the means of production and on the ideological and political fronts, this would have been impossible. Moreover our work had international significance too. It was being watched throughout the world, and especially in Asia where, in many countries, the conditions were those we were tackling; not enough capital, not enough water, but huge manpower and land and resources awaiting its enriching hand. Failure, over which foes would gloat, would dim the confidence and consciousness of poor and oppressed peoples abroad, not awaken it. The deadline was the high water season, not two months away. To finish on schedule would be a real revolutionary feat of the spirit by Peking's people, on behalf of their city, the country and the general cause.

**Our Job—To Quarry Sand  
and Stones**

Such were the simple instructions. The next morning we began our work.

The jobs on the dam were many and varied. Ours was to quarry sand and small stones out of an old riverbed and convey them with pole and baskets, or by barrow pushed by one worker and pulled by another, up an inclined 200-meter path to a tip-platform from which it would be chuted down to waiting rail trucks.

The first eight-hour day of this, on office-flabbied muscles in the glaring heat of the sun, was a real test. The digging face, at times composed of comfortably soft sand, would suddenly change to a cement-

like conglomerate of stones, a stubborn and maddening enemy. To keep carrying one had to feel that the endlessly repeated uphill walk on grinding knee-caps, was as crucial as an uphill charge on which victory or defeat depend, except that one **does not** make a charge a hundred or more times a day. For our intellectuals, this was much harder, not only in physical but in mental habit, than bravery in battle. They could not regard themselves as individual performers; the rhythm of the huge **mass job** determined their actions and their pace. None were athletes; the only way they could complete **their quotas** was by active thinking, as well as bodily effort, to figure ways of getting more done with less effort.

To have illusions about one's own ability did no good here, where not words were involved but measurable earth and stone. To fall into dreams or despondency did no good either, by the same relentless measure. The quotas were reckoned not individually but by the whole squad—so one had to generate ideas not only for one's self but for the collective.

We came off the job that first night dead tired, sore all over, thinking sweetly of our bunks. But the company leader told us there was more to do; one of Peking's best drama troupes had come that day to perform for us after the shift. Sitting cross-legged on the ground, inwardly cursing all the theatrical arts, especially that of the stage electrician who took an endless time setting the outdoor lights, we suddenly found ourselves not only applauding the performance, a merry satire on bureaucracy, but forgetting our fatigue—till the moment came

for us to unfold our congealed limbs and attempt to rise shakily.

#### ***But Sweet Potatoes Can't Wait***

Waddling stiffly to the work site the second day we had another hard eight hours, but again the longed-for bunks were not for us. No sooner had we finished than assembly was sounded, and there was our camp leader, with things to say. For 120 days there had been no rain. The cooperative farmers in the next village had sweet potato shoots in a seedbed, ready to transplant on a few waiting hectares of land. But with the ground so dry, each transplanting hole had to be watered manually. This the co-op had no manpower to do. Luckily we were there, 350 spare pairs of hands that could make the difference between several hundred tons of sweet potatoes—or nothing. Could we refuse to help? Of course not, we answered. Someone asked about utensils. "No problems, luckily," said the camp leader. "We all have wash basins."

So off we set for the muddy pond where the water was, filled our basins and, holding them stiff-armed before us, Indian-filed a half-kilometer or so to the fields, where we poured the precious liquid out hole by hole along the furrows while the bright-eyed, brisk village children scampered behind, popping in the shoots. Never had we known water was so heavy. But never had we realized how precious it was, nor that he who brings it brings life. On face after face, fatigue, irritation at getting a new job when tired, queasiness at the coffee-colored water in the face basins, gave way to a quite different set of feelings. We became fiercely determined to get those

seedlings re-set, not to let down those peasants and the waiting schoolchildren. "I felt tenderly towards those little green shoots as though they were my own babies being tucked in to sleep," one man told me. Many inquired anxiously of the peasants. "Do you think the potatoes will mature?" and shook their heads sadly when told that only about half would do so without rain. "If only that reservoir was already built and full," one said, "this land would already be irrigated."

The third day we worked side by side with the People's Liberation Army. All ranks were working on the same jobs, from colonels to privates with even a general here and there, cheerful, indefatigable and handy, never seeming to notice our comparative clumsiness but constantly praising the desk-workers for doing so well at unaccustomed labor, and saying they "wanted to learn from our spirit." Our intellectuals were tremendously moved. The older ones recalled the armies of the Kuomintang and the warlords, the small elite corps of overfed bullies for special police duties and the vast majority of gaunt, dull-eyed, unfortunates for whom the future held in store neither life, nor death in battle, but death simply from starvation while their officers pocketed their ration-money. That army had been a machine for turning strong peasant lads into skin-and-bone corpses in a few months. In the anti-Japanese war, and the subsequent civil war, it had done this to millions—and the people had hated and feared it. What a difference now! Making our first really close contact with them, we found these strong, keen young men both informed and

insatiably curious on everything in China and the world. We enjoyed the work break concerts and skits in which they demonstrated bright talent and intelligence. We began to understand, as never before, the meaning of Mao Tse-tung's call that literature and art should serve the workers, peasants and soldiers. For whom to create if not for those young bearers of the future?

Fourth day: As our camp leader had predicted, we were gradually getting into training, actually beginning to have moments of pleasure in the swing of the work and to think of increasing our capacity. Evening activities continued. It was the time of the countrywide basic elections, and preparatory to casting our votes on the camp site, we had a report and discussion on socialist and capitalist electoral systems—made more interesting by the fact that there were among us people with firsthand experience of a dozen foreign lands. That same day we saw an outdoor exhibit of contemporary photographs and sketches of the heroic Long March of the Chinese Red Army in 1934-35, prepared by staff-members of the Revolutionary Museum, also working at the reservoir. These vivid reminders, at a time when we ourselves were encamped and stretched to the limit, made an especially deep impact. Everyone realized, having his own fatigue turn into strength, through a sense of aim, that the whole revolution had been made by incredibly difficult and courageous effort, powered by a conviction that outlawed the word "impossible."

After dark in the light of a pressure-lamp, despite the many affairs of that day, our own group put on

a series of amateur performances, and worked on some self-composed poems and skits. It seemed our energy was endless!

The fifth day: This was something special. As we toiled in the sun, the cyclist postmen who brought the newspapers came into sight shouting the news, the launching of the third Soviet sputnik. Here indeed was a panorama of the growth of the new world. We were still piling sand and rock by manual labor. On the dam itself, powerful machines were tamping it down. The country as a whole was building modern industry, an earnest of which we had in the Chinese made jet-planes that often roared on test flights overhead. The Soviet people, by their labor, were conquering extra-terrestrial space. Nor did we feel our own earth-bound achievements negligible. The public address system announced that the Communist Party's call for the project, to put 30,000 cubic meters a day into the dam, instead of the some 15,000 per day of the week before, had been beaten—we were up to 34,000 (a few days later the daily average was 50,000.)

#### **Help Others— Learn From Others**

By the sixth day individual output had gone up from a cubic meter a day to almost three, our organization was far better, and we entered on an inter-company competition for the challenge red banner, awarded each shift to the foremost unit in quantity and quality. The first, made after measurement and discussion in the leading committee, went to the Fourth Company. One of its members raised a cheer: "The

Red Banner, May it always be ours!" Within a few hours several critical *ta tze pao* (wall newspapers) were posted. What was our objective, they asked, to run a race for glory or help the job forward? Then followed a written self-criticism by the shouter himself. Thereafter, after each award in which the banner passed from one unit to another, the slogans were: "Help others with our achievements," and "Learn from what other comrades have done." Once the banner went to a company that had fallen short of its quota, but spent hours helping a neighbor unit out of difficulties.

Now, each evening, there were group discussions on the work of the day, how to improve it on the morrow, what sort of showing had been made by individuals. The last three were devoted to the election of "advanced workers." The criteria were: effectiveness of work, care of implements, discipline, effectiveness as propagandists, initiative and inventiveness.

These standards, when talked over, proved far from simple. Working effectiveness, for instance, did not mean physical capacity but steadiness and application. We, like other groups, had had our show-off "athletes" boasting from the first how much they could lift and carry, discouraging instead of encouraging the physically weaker by their exhibitions. One, a very powerful young man, had piled his wheelbarrow so high that he broke several vehicles. Finally he strained his back and, given a lighter job, considered it far below him, treated it with scowling inattention, and proved worse at it than the frail wisps of girls who had to use their whole strength

doing it but did it well. So it was conscientiousness and willingness to do what one could and was needed that counted in the election.

Another thing needing clarification was what made "an active propagandist." This, the group decided from its experience, did not mean working mainly with the tongue, however beautiful the phrases—but such behavior, on the job at all times, as would raise the spirit and warm the hearts of others and stimulate them too to their best efforts. After the company awards had been made, the outstanding winners were recommended for battalion awards.

Finally, each worker was asked to assess his own showing during the two weeks—again for consideration by the group. Many, modest about what they had done, found that others saw them in a much better light. But some, who said they had done well, or "all they could," were challenged, not in vague ways but very concretely. Just as labor was measured by cubic meters of earth, so character could be measured by the extent of effort, and particularly of cooperation, expressed in things as simple as the tightness or slackness of a rope. A barrow of earth going uphill to the tipping point, had to be pushed from behind and pulled from in front. If the man between the shafts did not push his weight, the puller's burden was inordinately increased. If the person in front did not pull his or her weight, the pusher soon became exhausted. Only when both put in full strength did the barrow go up smoothly, without strain on either. Similarly, if the diggers did not fill enough baskets, or the leaders did

not empty them quickly enough into the barrows, the whole process was retarded. All these were not matters of doubt but of fact—and anyone who tried either to present a picture of himself that diverged from actual performance or to run down or flatter others, found it got him nowhere. The truth emerged clearly, people came to know themselves and their co-workers without illusions, without the consideration of "face" so dear to intellectuals in the past, with clarity as to what each had to do to become a socialist human being.

None, or virtually none, had been used to such frankness combined with mutual respect—since it takes mutual respect both to submit to criticism and to tell the truth to another's face. Many who had sat side by side in offices for years said they felt a new closeness to each other and people of different ranks, far from each other in their ordinary jobs, became firm friends. All this raised morale tremendously. So did visits to the main dam itself, when each could see the quick progress of the vast enterprise of which all were part. In those last days, when shock work was called for, company after company volunteered to raise its quotas and cut rest periods to get the dam up ahead of time. With the target for finishing the earth work set for only five days after we were due to leave, we asked to stay to the end, because we felt that new replacements, not yet hardened or able to organize themselves, might slow things up. The camp leader gave up a night's sleep to rush to Peking after this, to get the consent of the various offices to which the workers belonged. When he came

back with word that the next batch was ready to come and insisted on doing so, even those who had complained most of fatigue earlier on, who had most carefully "counted the days" to the end, shared the common disappointment.

All through our fortnight on the job, the Communist outlook on labor was stressed. People talked of how army and cadres had produced their own food and clothes to beat the Kuomintang blockade in Yen-an. There was a great lift of enthusiasm on the day 64-year-old Chairman Mao Tse-tung, 70-year-old Vice-Chairman Chu Teh, with Liu Shao-chi, Chou En-lai and other leaders came to the Ming Tombs by common public bus, rolled up their sleeves, and went to work. What better proof could there be than these men, mostly intellectuals in origin, that Chinese intellectuals could indeed become one with the working people, that the fires of toil and hardship would not break and dull but on the contrary steel and sharpen them, if their spirit was patriotic and revolutionary?

#### **The Past's "Five Bad Airs"**

During that half-month there was no room at all for what the Chinese call the "five bad airs" inherited from the old, exploiting society. 1. Bureaucracy—who could be a bureaucrat with no rank taken into account, digging the earth or pushing it uphill under the clear eyes of comrades? 2. Extravagance—this was excluded by the fact that we lived chiefly on corn buns, with the whole fortnight's food for each person costing about \$2 in U.S. money. 3. Apathy, the senile, passive "twilight air"—this could move no earth,

and everyone could see how achievable and crucial was the "morning air" of optimism, comradeship, ease of mind, good talk and rousing songs, the stirring of the future that the Chinese Party calls for and tries to cultivate everywhere. 4. Conceit—this could survive a little longer than the others but not through the whole two weeks of heavy labor as part of a vast collective and frank criticism and self-criticism. 5. Delicacy and self-pampering—this just didn't go with sitting on the ground and such enterprises as watering the crops with our face basins. Everyone saw, in the course of them, not only the great results of working together but that he had exaggerated his own limitations. Take the simple question of physical capacity, of the fears of many that the unaccustomed labor would make them ill with fatigue. In fact, of the 356 of us, of all sorts, ages and conditions, not one missed a day on the dam from illness or injury; our health and safety record was 100 per cent, better than if we had stayed at our desks. Some, in fact, were cured of their ailments, at least temporarily; the insomniacs slept like logs without their pills, the neurasthenics relaxed, lost their twitches and irritations.

Of course, the brief spell of labor could not wipe out the "five bad airs" forever. But certainly it exposed and shook them, and helped everyone to see how they looked from the standpoint of China's working people—and the entire emphasis in the whole rectification movement, of which regular physical labor for all cadres has been part, is on "seeing things from the angle of vision of the 600 million." The

earth is in morning, our whole experience cried. China and mankind are at the beginning of their true history. . . .

Soon, too soon, our last day came. We turned out, bronzed, lean and clear-brained, to meet our replacements who looked as pale and soft to us as we must have done to our predecessors. Again both contingents lined up. Again the camp leader made his speech on what the "old soldiers" had done, on what the "new soldiers" could do. We handed over the Ministry banner, more tattered and battlestained now, to the new recruits and, swinging our bedrolls on to the trucks, started for home. We sang all the way.

In Peking, we joined the hundreds of thousands, easily spotted in street and office for their lean brownness and high spirits, who wore, clearer than any badge, what was called the "Shihsanling look."

#### **Man Rebuilds Himself and His Home, the Earth**

Postscript: Soon after participating in this work, I left China for Europe where I spent four months. Returning in October, I found the "Shihsanling look" on all Peking faces. Everyone in the city was putting in time on the land and on the

myriad small furnaces that are speeding China's "big leap" in steel. The people, building socialism en masse, were doing so all the faster, and with youthful vigor, because in spirit and attitude they were already beginning to be attuned to the next goal, communist society.

To make socialism work to its full potential, the Chinese believe, one needs not only a socialist economic and political system but socialist people—bringing elements of the future, at all times, into the present.

Molded by the Communist Party, man the all-sided—worker, farmer, student, artist and soldier if need be at the same time—is coming into being here. He is building what Thomas More, William Morris, Marx and Engels foresaw as the coming human condition. But this is no distant utopia. Their initiative liberated from all narrowness, the people are creating a civilization which, in our own lifetime, will produce new, untold wealth, based on the latest achievements of science and industry, for common enjoyment. Here man is simultaneously rebuilding himself and his home, the earth, the two interacting in a creative explosion on a scale hitherto unseen.

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