

# *Caving in China*

March 6 to 28, 2015

By *David Socky*

This was a trip I'd been looking forward to for years – caving in China – and it finally happened in March. I was part of the March 2015 expedition set up through the Hong Meigui Cave Exploration Society by Erin Lynch (who lives in China) and operated out of the TongZi Centre for Karst and Cave Exploration. Our group numbered seven, and consisted of four from Virginia, USA – myself, Andrea Futrell, Philip Schuchardt, Sara Fleetwood, and Joe Myre (from Arkansas), Becka Lawson (from England), and Erin Lynch (from China). Our goal was to locate, survey, and document caves in the Jielong Township (just north of Tongzi), Wulong County, which is in the Chongqing Municipality of China.

On Friday, March 6 (after a heavy snow-storm in DC) we flew out of Dulles Airport to Tokyo, Japan, then to Shanghai, China. We arrived about 9:30pm on Saturday and had been up for nearly 28 hours. Time for jet lag! The next day we took a Chinese internal flight from Shanghai to Chongqing where we took a 1.5 hour subway ride to the bus station. From there, we took a bus to Wulong where we got rooms for the night. Early on Monday, we hired a 14 passenger van and drove the 3 hours to Tongzi where

we spent the rest of the day and evening packing gear for the drive to Jielong.

Jielong is a small farming town with a population of 200 to 300 people and is a half hour or so drive north of Tongzi. But it is a growing community and had a number of new buildings, including a hotel! Instead of living in a farmer's attic, we actually had beds, with hot water showers, plus a large room for our gear and a smaller room with a portable heater where we did data entry, cartography, documentation, and photo work. Even though there was no heat, this place was the lap of luxury compared to previous expeditions.

After an early lunch on Tuesday, March 10, we split up into two groups. Becka and I went west through the tunnel and then north up doline #3 looking for caves, while the rest explored the 'plateau' to the south of Jielong. We did a big loop around the ridge between doline 2 and 3, eventually coming back into Jielong from the north, but we did find a number of caves. The best was Feng Dong (Wind Cave), which had a large entrance with a steep slope heading down into the cave. There was the sound of water coming up from the darkness. Becka and I both resisted the urge to scoop, leaving the cave for survey trips to come.

We ended up surveying Feng Dong on seven separate days, with anywhere from one to three teams in the cave on any given day. We surveyed around 4.2 kilometers of cave, with a



View north in doline 3 looking toward Feng Dong.

Photo by Dave Socky

good portion being virgin. This was because portions of the cave were reached with technical rope work. A bolted traverse led to an upper level section and an eight meter drop after the traverse led to the downstream portion of the cave. Then there was a 5 meter aid climb near the entrance which gave us access to the upstream portion of the cave. We also found two other entrances - from the inside.

But our expedition was more than just Feng Dong. There were three survey trips into Pen Gong Wan Dong in the Gaiping doline, which was a saltpeter



Becka in entrance passage of Feng Dong. Photo by Philip Schuchardt



Saltpeter vat in Pen Gong Wan Dong with Erin Lynch. Photo by Dave Socky

cave of unknown length. The survey trip on our last day by Erin and Andrea never reached an end. The cave just kept going in a very wide steeply dipping passage. This cave was very warm and dry and had been thoroughly worked by the Chinese digging for saltpeter.

There were three surveys over two days into Gai Dong, a very large cave that had been mostly explored in 2013, but still had some good leads. The main one was a pit that was thought to bypass the current vertical route which involved lots of very scary loose rock. On the first day Philip, Joe, and Sara went in were Philip rigged the pit and then started the survey. The next trip Joe and I surveyed a large upper passage which we got into via a 10 meter traverse that Philip rigged. We spent the day surveying nice 5 meter wide by 6 meter high borehole with some exceptional formations, but the passage ended in fill after several hundred meter. Philip and Sara continued the survey at the bottom of the pit, but it became too gnarly, convoluted, and narrow to continue.

On Wednesday, March 18, Andrea, Becka, and I went looking for caves south of Jielong in the valley “no one has checked yet”, while Philip, Joe, and Sara worked on the aid climb in Feng Dong. We found two caves up this valley, both the help of locals who took us to the entrances. The help of locals to find these caves was really required, since they would have been pretty much impossible to find just by ‘bush whacking’. The first cave, Tian Ming Dong (Sky Cave) was part way up a karst mountain, up a very steep hillside. The old man who took us there made ready use of a machete to hack his way to the entrance. But once



Entrance to Da Dong Hei.  
Photo by Dave Socky



Entrance passage to Gai Dong.  
Photo by Philip Schuchardt

we got there, we were presented with a large entrance, 10 meters wide by 3 meters high, with a steeply sloping passage which led into a large room. We surveyed this large cave until we were stopped by a 30 meter pit in one end of a very large and echoing room. It looked big below. We planned on coming back with ropes and vertical gear.

We still had a few hours left so we continued up valley, running into another local who showed us the entrance to another cave, Xiao Dong (Nitrate Cave). As you might have guessed, this cave had been heavily mined for saltpeter. We only had time to set 7 stations before it was time to head back.

On Saturday, March 21, Becka, Joe, and I went up a side valley at the northern end of doline 3 and found a number of caves, two of which we surveyed. The first, Da Dong Hei, was a cave with a large passage which essentially went through the top of the karst tower. The entrance and passage was quite large, but the cave itself was short, about 150 meters after it emerged from the other side of the karst tower. The other cave was named Lao Long Dong, which stands for Old Dragon Cave. According to the locals, this was supposed to be a large cave, but it turned out to be a fairly

small mazy cave with lots of breakdown. It took us only a few hours to survey. By the time we finished, it was time to get down to our meeting spot.

On our final day of caving, Becka and I surveyed over 400 meters, in 40 stations, in a new saltpeter cave called Jing Dong Men, down in the valley floor at the start of the Gaiping doline. Again, this was a heavily mined cave with a number of interesting artifacts including many rock walls, saltpeter vats, and tally marks. One spot required going through a tight 11 inch crawl – which the Chinese miners had been through. The cave did open back up after that, and we stopped our survey at a point where the cave got even bigger with multiple leads and a good draft of air. Since this was our last day, this cave will have to wait until another expedition.

The rest of our time in China was spent drafting working maps, sorting photos, and writing trip reports, and of course, travel back to Shanghai. We did spend one day visiting some of the sights in Shanghai.

Our whole trip encompassed 24 days, at which we spent 13 days of caving every day. Between the seven of us, we mapped over 7 km of new cave, and we didn’t even get into every cave we found. China is really a caver’s paradise with caves all over, just waiting to be found. It was truly a trip to remember.



A part of Shanghai along the 'Bund'.  
Photo by Dave Socky