

## “Ghost City – Culture of Afterlife” Text & Photos by Bruce Hamilton, AIA



Aerial Photo of Fengdu Ghost City

which have departed this world. Our tour group was moved by the ancient craftsmanship and the unique styles of architecture. According to our local tour guide, the city has been in existence for approximately 2,000 years and gained its reputation as a Ghost City during the Eastern Han Dynasty. Most of the popular landmarks in the City of Ghosts have names that reference the afterlife: “Last Glance at Home Tower”, Naihe Bridge (also known as The Bridge of Troubled Water) and the “Ghost Torturing Pass.” There are numerous statues and other artistic depictions of ghosts and devils throughout Ghost City. These terrifying works represent what happens to those who haven’t lived good lives.

According to Chinese beliefs, the dead must pass three tests before passing to the next life. The journey to the next life begins at The Bridge of Troubled Water (Naihe



Partial View of Naihe Bridge & Liaoyang Hall

There are many historical locations and sacred grounds that are dedicated to the afterlife scattered throughout the world. The afterlife played an important role in Ancient Egyptian, Greece and Roman religions. There are festivals celebrating sacred grounds such as the Christian All Soul’s Day, Dia de los Muertos in Mexico, Gai Jatra in Nepal and various other cultures that have diverse concepts of the afterlife. But the main essence is always the same.

China is a colossal country with a variety of landscapes and customs. High on the mountain in Fengdu County, lies the mystical “Ghost City” which is dedicated to the souls



Partial View of Entrance to Ghost City

(Naihe Bridge), located in front of Liaoyang Hall, which was the first stop for our tour group upon entering Fengdu Ghost City. Built during the Ming Dynasty, the bridge connects the Netherworld with the real world. The bridge is composed of three identical stone arches. There are different protocols for crossing the bridge depending on your gender, age and marital status. According to our local tour guide, it was used as a touchstone which links history and reality, scrutinizes kindness, crime and pronounces survival and death.

Ghost-Torturing Pass is the second test before entry into the Netherworld. This is the place where the dead report to King Yama for judgement. In front of this statue there are eighteen sculptures depicting ferocious demons.

The third test is done at the entrance to Emperor Palace where the dead must stand on one foot on a certain stone for three minutes. The Emperor Palace is located on top of Mingshan Mountain and was the most attractive temple for our tour group. As we journeyed through the inside gates there is a majestic stately statue (King of the Netherworld) in the center of the hall. There are statues of judges located on each side below the



Interior Statues in Liaogany Hall

King of the Netherworld. According to legend, whether you're a relative of the royal family or someone outside of the royal family, you must be tried in the Netherworld in Fengdu Ghost City after death. Having toured this mysterious City, it seems to play a big role in reminding and educating people in the real secular world to be honest and upright.



The Emperor Hall Entrance

At the end of our journey, our tour group concluded that Fengdu Ghost City makes for a fascinating culture study, even for tourists not well versed in Chinese folklore. It focusses on the

afterlife and combines the beliefs of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The silence in the complex of shrines, monasteries, temples and the landscape are startling. The appeal had the real potential for viewing something unexpected and out of the ordinary, the thrill of surprise and we were more often than not given incredible doses of both. We were certainly attracted by its charm. Its beauty is perpetual.



Sculpture Panel at Emperor Hall