

with some change of clothes on his back and clutching a wooden meal box with some rice, preserved ham and fried beans in one hand. That was all they had for the long trek.

Shortly after they set out, they ran into a couple of mountain porters and made the long trek together. Mountain porters made a living by carrying supplies and native products on their backs across the treacherous terrain. There is a popular saying – “Traveling across Sichuan is more difficult than ascending to the skies.” These porters, carrying fifty to one hundred kilograms of goods on their back on a long trek with full exposure to the weather, suffered unimaginable hardship.

One night, they lodged at a small inn on the mountain. They sat in a circle and soaked their feet in hot water in a wooden bucket. The water turned filthy and blackish in no time. A porter told the young Yangchu that soaking feet in hot water could relax the sinews and stimulate blood circulation, and that without doing so, the feet would swell the next day due to overexertion. The porter noticed a couple of blisters on the sole of Yangchu’s feet and immediately borrowed a needle to pierce them, saying that if they were not pierced, it would be impossible for him to walk the following day. It was time for dinner. Yangchu saw each porter have a bowl of “*Mao Er Tou*”¹ and a bowl of salty rice soup and enjoy themselves very

¹ “Mao Er Tou” is a colloquial expression in Sichuan’s rural areas, meaning a bowl of rice filled to the brim.

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much. The beds in the inn were something that Yangchu had never seen before. A bed was just a wooden panel placed on two stools. A thin layer of straw was spread on the panel, topped by a bamboo mattress. Several tenants shared a bed, and each room had more than ten tenants. Before going to bed, the porters took off their clothes and dipped a shred of cloth in salted water, and then used the cloth to rub off the blood marks on their shoulders. The purple-black blood marks looked horrible, but the porters were joking happily with each other while rubbing off the blood marks. It was Yangchu's first encounter with the working class and his first experience with their hardship and tenacity. During summer and winter breaks in the subsequent years, Yangchu always joined the porters on his treks between school and home. The porters enjoyed singing a folk song – "Nothing is longer than the road, nothing is shorter than the year, nothing is softer than the rice, and nothing is tighter than money." The song increased Yangchu's understanding of and sympathy for the working class. After he was converted to Christianity, this sympathy was elevated to a sense of responsibility, compelling him to ease the suffering of his fellow countrymen by preaching the spirits of Jesus. His experiences on the treks would play a role in his choice of a life path.

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Priest William H. Aldis

After five days of hard trekking, the Yan brothers finally arrived at the Tian Dao Academy in Langzhong. At night, they knocked on the door of the school, and were received by the principal William H. Aldis², who was also a priest. Mr. Aldis showed them to the student dormitory and arranged for Yangchu to share a room with another student. His brother lodged at a nearby inn.

Although exhausted from the long trek, Yangchu had trouble falling asleep. He twisted and turned in bed, thinking that when his brother was gone the next day, he would be alone in a town far from home. Everything here was new to him. Could he cope? If not, what should he do? He thought about all these and burst into tears. Priest Aldis heard his weeping and hurriedly came over for a check. He consoled Yangchu, who promptly calmed down.

Early the next morning, Priest Aldis sent somebody for Yangchu's brother. He asked Yangchu's brother to take Yangchu home and send him here again in two years. Hearing this, Yangchu became very anxious, blurting out: "Mr. Aldis and brother, my parents sent me here to study. I've suffered a lot of hardship on the way here. If I go back now, how can I face my parents? Please just let me stay for another night and see how I perform." Priest Aldis agreed. On the night of the same day, although he missed his

² William H. Aldis was a British missionary of the China Island Mission. He was originally a surveyor who later quit his job for priesthood. In 1898, he arrived in Langzhong, where he set up the Tian Dao Academy, a Western-style institution.