

General Joseph W. Stilwell and China
1920-1921
By Philip Chin

Stilwell's first task in Beijing (then known as Peking) in September of 1920 was to find housing for himself and his family. He needed to be near the Legation Quarter where the language school he was learning at was located as well as the American legation he was assigned to. In 1920, the Legation Quarter in Beijing were like an oasis amidst the storm of chaos that had overtaken China. It was heavily patrolled by troops from all the nations with representatives in China, the buildings were more modern, and it was close to what was still recognized as the national and cultural capital, no matter how tenuous that claim was by now in those troubled times. This added up to the fact that real estate was very much in demand and expensive where Stilwell wanted to locate himself. Stilwell ranted in his diary on September 21st, "Only 1 possibility – 200 a month bejesus!" On September 22nd, he wrote that he'd tried to visit more houses but couldn't get in, "All impossible," then after repeating four letter epithets several times, he continued, "No progress whatever – a hopeless proposition."

On September 23rd he wrote, "Found a house at Tsai Tsung Pu Hutung (\$180 = two families) brand new – conveniences." Nailing down a deal for that house though proved to be problematic. The next day he wrote that the agent hadn't shown up. He wrote again on September 27th, "Looked up owner – not at house – could not find his house. Closed deal with him over the phone from Drysdale's office." But apparently this deal fell through because he wrote again on September 29th, "Looked up another house... 3:00 P.M. met chink owner & went over lease."

He finally settled on a renting a house at No.3 Pei Tsung Pu Hutung near the east wall just outside the foreign diplomatic area. Stilwell's salary in 1920 as a US Army major with twenty years in service wasn't much. A laconic entry from February 1921 said, "Payday. Got 214." He decided to share the house and the cost of it with his fellow language student and army officer from UC Berkeley, Lloyd Horsfall. Every officer was expected to hire five or six Chinese servants so sharing servants and expenses with the Horsfall family was probably expedient. The cost of the servants didn't include the various sundry expenses that the family were expected to pay for them. A 1921 diary entry said this, "Ch'ên back from hospital – (2 weeks stay), total bill \$5.75 inc. the operation." The Stilwell family hired seven servants, a number that changed occasionally as servants got into disputes with each other and left, were fired, or left for a different job. That they needed so many servants was undisputable. Their large family of three children already had another one on the way. They would eventually have five children in all.

Just two months before Stilwell had arrived in China, a coalition of northern warlords had

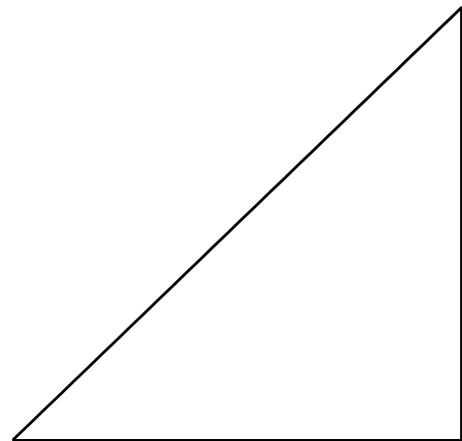
chased out what had been recognized as Yuan Shikai's successors as the national government then fallen to fighting against one another again. Regional warlords ran their own independent territories across China. Some had been appointed as imperial governors in the closing days of the Qing Dynasty and had held on. Others had been appointed by the successor Republic of China and Yuan Shikai. Others had simply seized power because they controlled the most or the better troops in the area. It was hard to know who was actually in charge in many places. Adding to this chaos was that each of the foreign powers competing over control of Chinese territory had their own favorite warlord, a favoritism which could change with no notice as circumstances changed.

Stilwell and Horsfall attended lessons at the North China Language School, originally founded in 1910 to teach Chinese to missionaries, but later expanded to teach the language to businessmen, diplomats, and other foreigners that wanted to learn. The intensive first-year course included listening, speaking, and drill in Chinese for five hours a day for six months, followed by another six months of reading, translating, and conversing. By the end of the year students were expected to have learned 700 characters. By the third or fourth year of instruction the student was expected to have learned 3,000 characters and be fully conversant in Chinese. Just as Stilwell had feared though, Dr. William B. Pettus, founder and director of the school, complained that he and Horsfalls had learned horribly accented Mandarin during their year at UC Berkeley that Chinese might have difficulty understanding.

Stilwell adapted and seemed to relish being in China. He spent much time visiting markets around Beijing buying Chinese furniture, brass, jade, and other curios to decorate his new house with a view to later furnishing the retirement home he was planning to build back in Carmel, California. On November 18th he wrote about visiting, "A wonderful market – best lot of brass & stuff yet. Afterward to Chinese restaurant & ate shrimp, chicken, duck's feet, old eggs, cabbage soup with lastic bands, duck & bean sprout pancake rolls etc. etc." That Stilwell had apparently no trouble eating duck's feet and preserved eggs, an acquired taste that many Westerners still gag on and complain about today, showed that he had an open mind and stomach. He'd already filled out a War Department questionnaire less than a month after arriving in China. Under preference of service he'd marked no to all other assignments including West Point. His only preference was "Military Attaché, China."

Like many language students he acquired a Chinese name based upon his last name. Shih Ti-wei could be read auspiciously. *Shih* could be read as "history." *Ti-wei* could be read as "lead in the right direction."

In April 1921, six months into his service in China, Stilwell, who'd just turned 38 the month before, was called away from his language lessons. There had been a terrible famine in Shansi (now called Shanxi) Province in 1920. The International Relief Committee of the Red Cross and Christian missionaries had led such a successful fundraising effort for famine relief in the

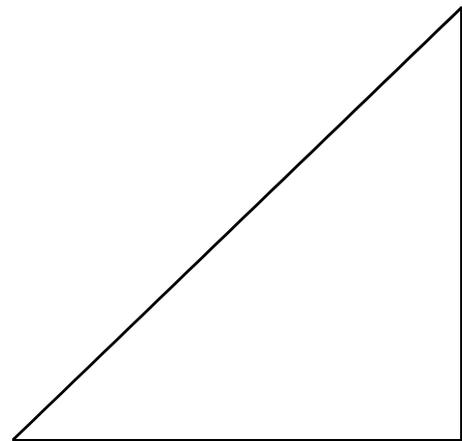


United States that they now had enough extra money to build a road to facilitate future famine relief operations in the province. In the absence of organized and honest governments in China there were very few functioning roads in China suitable for long distance travel. What few railroads existing in China at that time were only connected to the important cities, mainly along the coast. The Red Cross and missionaries wanted an American military officer to act as “Senior Assistant Engineer” for the project. Stilwell hadn’t taken any engineering courses since his West Point Academy days at the turn of the century, but when he was selected for the assignment, was eager for it. He soon enough was graced with the title of “Chief Engineer.”

Shanxi is rocky and mountainous territory with a plateau of rich agricultural fields that had been carved out of the land through centuries of toil. By the 1920s it was a bankrupt and starving state, among the poorest in China. Its only saving grace was that it was ruled by Yen Hsi-shan (pinyin *Yán Xíshān*), a Qing Dynasty military officer from Shanxi, educated in Japan, who’d allied with Sun Yat-sen’s revolutionaries before 1911, then opposed Yuan Shikai until switching to become an ally in 1912. Yuan had appointed him as Military Governor of Shanxi. With Yuan’s death in 1916, Yen had utilized his connections with his successors to be officially appointed as Civil Governor of Shanxi, thus uniting both the military and civil offices, and absolute power over the province. Yen had the virtue of recognizing that he could make more money by building up the province rather than squeezing every ounce of tax out of it until it died, a truism that many Chinese warlords and many members of the Nationalist Party (KMT) didn’t recognize.

While in Japan, Yen developed the belief that China had to modernize to survive. He was also concerned with instilling moral values into the Chinese people to make them more honest and hardworking. He’d even written a book distilling these lessons that all the millions of people in the province were supposed to learn. He was much more willing than other Chinese warlords to be open to Westerners and was thus seen by many of them as China’s future national leader. Outsiders had graced him with the title of, “Model Governor.” Unfortunately for him, the backward conditions in Shanxi Province made it impossible for him to ever develop the power base needed to expand his territory. After a futile attempt to beat a rival neighboring warlord in 1919, Yen had decided to pursue a policy of armed neutrality in China’s troubles and stay within Shanxi until conditions changed. Because of Yen’s influence and the self-interest of local officials and landowners in having the road built, the usual objections to building through old graves or moving more fresh graves because of tradition were overcome relatively easily.

Stilwell’s diary is filled with drawings from the four months he spent working on the road project with 6,000 Chinese laborers. The road stretched from the Yellow River into Shanxi over a distance of 82 miles. Many of his drawings were diagrams of the route at particular points with details of villages and houses marked out along with measurements. Details of a stone bridge are drawn. Among them though are some illustrations that Stilwell included without explanation. One was a detailed examination of an ox-drawn flour mill entitled, “Wu Ch’eng



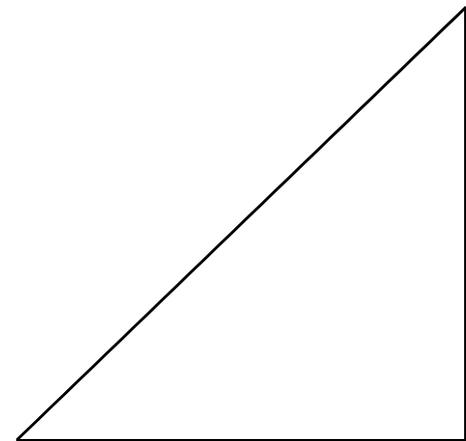
Flour Mill.” Another detailed drawing of a different flour mill appears later on.

Stilwell had a decidedly mixed bag of people to work with on the project. “He had twelve foreign assistants including a Standard Oil civil engineer, a Swedish mining engineer, two Norwegian missionaries, and an Anglo-Indian reserve officer.” He expressed his dislike for several of them in his diary. He also had an ever-changing plethora of Chinese contractors, farm laborers, work gangs, local and provincial officials, and sometimes gawkers, both Chinese and foreign, that came to the project. Not all of the people, Western or Chinese, were reliable or honest. His diary entry of May 1st bemoaned the fact that the labor gangs hadn’t shown up for work, “No gangs appeared. The mu shihs had told them not to work on Sundays! Surveyor’s face all gone from having bitched up the job.” The surveyor marker flags that they used kept getting stolen and they had to have the police put a seal mark on them in the hopes the people would leave them alone. Obstreperous donkeys and pack animals kept Stilwell up at night with their noise and he was also plagued with fleas and bedbugs, which he noted several times in his diary entries. Everyday saw him moving from one location to the other as he supervised construction and engineering.

Nevertheless, Stilwell enjoyed himself. He wrote that the overseers would often be found sleeping under a tree with guards looking out for Stilwell’s approach. Stilwell would roar at the overseer and the overseer in turn would roar at the work gangs, often farmers working for a bit of extra pay. The workers “rather enjoy the play; they know it is all for effect and if favored with a wink from the foreigner from behind the overseer’s back will break into broad grins.” He continued that when “the Chief Engineer meets man after man who can see through a joke, even when it is on himself and laugh as heartily as the bystanders, his heart warms to the whole race.” Slowly at first, then more quickly as the workers became more practiced and skilled, the road, drainage ditches and culverts to keep the roadway drained, and bridges were built.

Stilwell was so enchanted by the Shanxi countryside that he brought the whole family out during his summer leave. Stilwell drove “Liz,” as he called their truck, over the road and over nearly non-existent tracks in July 1921. The Ford Model T, in both car and truck form, was popularly known as the “Tin Lizzie.” The stripped down old truck with wooden planks for seats contained, Joseph Stilwell driving, his wife, Winifred “Win,” three small children, and a Chinese amah, all holding on for their lives. In a specially installed basket was their newest edition, Allison, just born in February earlier that year. Chinese peasants came rushing from all over to see the truck pass by, the first motor-propelled vehicle many of them had seen in their lives. At stops, awestruck Chinese gathered around to watch Win breastfeed Allison, stupefied to see that foreigner mothers did it the same way as Chinese mothers did. The Chinese gladly helped haul the truck out of ditches and over obstructions and refused the coppers that Stilwell handed out in return. They were greatly entertained just by the sight that the Stilwell family presented.

The family stayed in an old flourmill rented for the season for about US\$40 in the valley of Yu



Tao Ho, a summer resort much favored by Western missionaries back then. It is about sixty miles from Taku (the modern city of Tianjian.) After settling his family, Stilwell went back to work on the road project and came back to the resort in July. On July 30th he handed off the completed road. The kids by then were covered with insect bites, some infected. His 9-year old son, Joe Jr., lost a toenail from infection. Still, it had been an enjoyable summer.

Stilwell took reporters on a drive on the road in November 1921. It must have been a proud moment for him. Eleven years later, in 1932, a reporter friend sent him an article from the *North China Daily News*. Due to the lack of money, maintenance, and interest, Stilwell's road, he was informed, "has practically ceased to exist."

This seemingly minor interlude in Stilwell's life proved to be of great significance. It was the first time that he worked with ordinary Chinese from the peasant and working classes. He learned to speak in their language, which wasn't the same as the academic and educated Mandarin that he was learning in Beijing. He learned how to cajole and organize them, skills that would stand in good stead for him when he had to train precisely such Chinese men as soldiers during World War II. At first, the works gangs had done lousy work, but as time passed, they became more and more skilled. This led to Stilwell's conviction that properly led and motivated Chinese could be organized and achieve their objectives, a view that many white and Chinese officers failed to share. This belief, and the affection and concern that he would show for the well-being of the ordinary Chinese soldiers serving under him, is part of the reason why Stilwell is still remembered today in China with such reverence.

Barbara Tuchman, *Stilwell and the American Experience in China, 1911-45*, The Macmillan Company, New York, 1971, ASIN B0006WI3CO

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