

**By Lawrence Hightower**

After visiting the Golden Hall (Jindian or Jinding), we descended from Tianzhu Peak (elevation 1612m) to an observation deck. There we found food and souvenir stalls, small concrete tables and stools. There were excellent views of the surrounding peaks above us and the grounds of the Taoist temples and shrines with their gods, incense, kneeling cushions for prayer and offering boxes. Tianzhu is the highest peak of Mount Wudang, also known as Wu Tang Shan, a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1994. We took more photos and briefly relaxed at a table. Soon we gathered our gear and I led the way as we started moving towards the stone steps that went down to the lower plaza. Sitting on the stone wall next to the descending steps was a slightly built, sinewy older porter, relaxing with a cigarette. He wore an off-white dress shirt loose at the waist and brown cotton pants. He almost blended into the granite background and I might have missed him entirely had it not been for one bit of color, a bright red length of packaging twine used as binding for the woven sandals that he wore. I looked more carefully. His salt and pepper hair was neatly trimmed in the style of a military crew cut. His skin was tanned a rich brown and his weathered face was lined, especially at the corners of his eyes, which were bright and clear. He could have been in his fifties, maybe older.

The red bindings drew my attention. I knew that porters sometimes wore woven sandals in the mountains. I had seen a photo taken in 1908 of a porter wearing simple straw sandals while carrying more than a hundred pounds of brick tea up a mountain path. I had also seen a more recent photograph of a porter carrying Kaolin clay down stone steps on Gaoling Hill in Jingdezhen, also known as Pottery City. That porter wore the rough, protective rope sandals used by farmers for hundreds if not thousands of years, especially in the south of China. The porter sitting before me was the only one we had seen on the mountain paths that day and he was wearing woven sandals. They shared some features of the peasant sandals but were much more refined. The visible woven material consisted of a tan-colored vegetable fiber, possibly dried cattail leaves or corn husks sometimes called maize skins in China. I could see a simple over and under pattern, known as a balanced plain weave or basket weave, along the sides and higher in the back to protect the heel. Along the sides, the weaving included loops characteristic of tie-on sandals like the peasant sandals. Through these loops was threaded a single strand of bright red twine. It was a thin, strong string that might have been the binding of a package that he had carried up the mountain. The twine was pulled tight, bringing the woven side tabs snugly around the porter's foot while leaving the top of the foot exposed. I could not see the soles of the sandals clearly nor how they were tied to his ankles. The skin of his feet was pale so it is likely that he wore socks or other shoes in cooler weather. On this day, the air temperature was very comfortable. He had relatively long, narrow feet with long toes. His feet and his nails were very clean and well cared for. He obviously took good care of his feet, which are crucial to his work. The toe weave of his sandals was unusual. A woven cylinder of the same grass and basket weave protected the big toe whereas his other toes were bare. The sandals fit him so well that I thought they may have been custom-made for him.

I don't recall exactly when I noticed the load he had carried up the path. He had put it down across from his seat next to the break in the wall at the top of the steps that was both an entrance and an exit for the plaza. Attached to the shoulder pole were two heavy cloth sacks leaning with the pole against the rock wall. They could have contained cement powder or some other heavy material. Presumably he had put them down just after reaching the plaza and he was resting before continuing higher along the paved steps leading to the upper temple buildings. I recall that my observations of the porter took only a minute or two, after which I turned and walked several steps back into the plaza area. My hand automatically reached for my camera. Suddenly, several thoughts raced through my mind. "Is that all there is to this? Will I take this picture and will this be the end of my search for a modern day porter wearing vegetable fiber sandals?" I was surprised by my own thought, because my inclination had been to photo-document the porter for my woven shoe project. Then I remembered my experience on a path in the Huangshan (Yellow Mountain). I was making a video recording of a porter climbing towards me with a heavy load. He was not at all happy to be photographed and he let me know it. I thought: If I take my camera out now and point it at the porter, he may react negatively and then I will lose an opportunity to interact with him. I also realized that I wanted to absorb all the details of this moment directly into my brain, not first to my camera's memory card. I had read and thought about these porters long before this trip and I wanted these stored thoughts to connect immediately with the new information I was gathering about this living porter.

I noticed that my comrades, Tangchun Wu, Xiaoping Miao and our driver, had stopped behind me to chat or to examine something. I walked over to Wu and said "The porter is wearing woven sandals. Ask where he got them." Wu went to the porter and spoke a few words in Chinese. The porter grinned and giggled in that Chinese way that can mean I am amused, but it can also mean I am embarrassed. He looked down at his sandals and flexed his toes. I suspect that he was surprised and perhaps a bit self-conscious about the interest in his footwear shown by these strangers. Wu asked me if I wanted a pair of these sandals. He knew about my collection. Of course I said yes. The porter wouldn't answer Wu's questions. He turned to go through the exit and started down the steps. X-P and I had a closer look at the bags that the porter had carried. He was impressed both by their weight and by the porter's hard work. X-P was in a hurry and he ushered me towards the steps exclaiming "Let's go, let's go!" About three-quarters of the way down the flight of steps, I stopped at a small platform and looked back at the steps that the porter had mounted. They were steep and uneven. I took out my camera and waited for a few minutes wondering if the porter might actually be going down the mountain and if I might have a chance to photograph him coming down with his load. But he did not appear on the landing above and I soon joined my colleagues below. Almost certainly, the porter was headed further up the mountain. I still had a lingering desire to photo-document him.

On our return trip in the cable car, I noticed through the foliage canopy below us the conical straw hats of two porters toiling up the mountain with their burdens attached to shoulder poles. At home after the trip, I found an image on the Internet showing the

walking path below the cable cars. It was a steep, paved cement stairway. One tourist described the ascent as four hours of sweaty work. I also noticed that the cars coming up the mountain were not carrying people but rather cargo, boxes of souvenirs, vegetables, fruits, Chinese white liquor and other items for sale on the mountain. As our car approached the cable station, we saw many boxes stacked next to the line of empty cable cars and men were loading them into the cars. At this time of day, about 3:30 in the afternoon, most people were heading down the mountain. A small truck was parked next to the platform and several men were unloading it. This was the porters' competition. I wondered how it was decided which goods would go by each route and wondered if the porters' days were numbered here.

We met our local transportation at the exit to the station, two members of Wu's personal network or *guanxi* in a van. Apparently this was the reason for our rush down the mountain! We stopped briefly at one of the small stalls in the shopping area just down the street and Wu asked the shopkeeper if she had woven sandals. She disappeared into the back of the shop and returned with a pair of simple peasant sandals, the same kind that Wu's friends in Huangshi had sent him, and which Wu had mailed to me. Wu immediately said "These are not the porter's sandals. These are too simple and rough. The porter's sandals were much finer."

In the car on the way back to Wuhan, I had time to reflect on our trip to the Wudangshan, particularly our encounter with the porter. I reminded my comrades about him. X-P suggested that the porter's sandals could have been home-made and therefore, they would not be commercially available, "not popular" as he put it. I told Wu about the photo I had seen of a porter in Jingdezhen wearing woven sandals. Wu thought that similar footwear would be used at both Wudangshan and Jingdezhen, since they were both "imperial" as he said. That is, they shared the same culture and there would have been interactions between them over the centuries. Wudangshan was the site of the summer palace of Emperor Yongle in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), and the kilns of the Pottery City began producing imperial ceramic pottery during the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

During my China trip in 2007, I saw many porters on the stone step trails of the Huangshan (Yellow Mountain), but none of them wore woven sandals. Their shoes were simple flat soled canvas tennis shoes worn without socks. These shoes were Chinese army green, a clue to their origin. Wu commented during that trip that the flat, thin soles were good for walking on the cement steps. The porters could feel the ground and maintain their balance better. I think that the same can be said of the vegetable fiber sandals. In addition, it is easy to weave them to fit a porter's foot, perfectly customized to his liking. The property of woven sandals to conform to both the stone path and the porters' feet would provide them excellent footing for a balanced walk up and down the steep paths, balance and sure-footedness being essential for this work. The porters would need to replace them frequently and it is difficult to believe that they could last more than a few trips up and down the mountain. This led me to wonder if our porter carried loads primarily between the upper cable car station and the shops and restaurants higher up the

mountain. Perhaps he had found his niche in this cable car world. This could explain the good condition of his straw sandals.

The porter has come to represent in my memory a bit of Taoist philosophy: As I walked along another stone trail the next day, I passed four Chinese characters painted large and red on the mountainside. In order they were the characters for Peacefulness, Health, Harmony, leading finally to Shou, the Taoist path to Longevity. The character Shou is painted in bright red when it is displayed on signs and banners in China.

Some final thoughts about our Wudang porter emerged after I returned to Storrs. As the porter relaxed with his cigarette on the landing, he seemed content. He had a distinctive demeanor. This was made even more remarkable because his daily work seemed so hard. The Chinese would say that he “eats bitter”. And yet, his heavy burdens did not seem to burden his spirit. The porter had a peaceful demeanor. His clothes were clean and neat. He took care with his appearance, and perhaps his choice of the bright red bindings that first attracted me to him was not by chance.

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