



Relatives of former foreign residents of Guling post letters in the village's old mailbox.

Unforgettable Guling

By staff reporter **GONG HAN**

IN February 2012, on a visit to the U.S., then Vice President Xi Jinping recounted an old story of friendship between China and America: An American man called Milton Gardner grew up in Guling (Kuliang in Fuzhou dialect), China. He had fond memories of his childhood there and often wished he could return. Sadly, Gardner died before he could fulfill his dream, but in 1992, his wife, Elizabeth, made a long-awaited trip to the village. She, too, soon fell in love with Guling and China.

Finding “Kuliang”

On August 22, 1992, Elizabeth arrived in China from San Francisco at the invitation of Xi Jinping, who was working in the Fuzhou government, Fujian Prov-

ince. Twelve kilometers east of Fuzhou following the winding roads that scale the mountainside is Guling with rolling hills that extend for miles.

Fuzhou is known to be a “furnace” in

the summer months owing to the surrounding mountains. But Guling is an exception. With an average altitude of 800 meters, Guling is cooler than urban Fuzhou by seven to eight degrees because of its proximity to the Minjiang Estuary. A fresh breeze, Japanese cedars and rolling mist are its main characteristics. Especially in the spring, the entire region is shrouded in ethereal white mist.

Her visit in 1992 was not Elizabeth's first time in China. In 1986, as Gardner's health deteriorated, he would murmur, “Kuliang, Kuliang” repeatedly. Elizabeth knew he was trying to tell her about his childhood home in China and so set about finding “Guling,” making five trips in search of the mysterious place. She went to one Guling in Jiangxi Province and another Guilin in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, but neither turned up the result she was after.

One day in 1990, Elizabeth was sorting out Gardner's book collection and found 11 Chinese stamps. An international student, Zhong Han, from China helped her decipher the characters and

to Elizabeth's delight, several stamps bore the postmark, "Foochow Kuliang." Elizabeth wept with joy – she had finally found "Guling" for her husband.

In 1992, then Party Secretary of Fuzhou City Xi Jinping read about Elizabeth's quest in the paper. Touched, he decided to invite Elizabeth to visit Guling. Thus, a long severed bond between an elderly American and a Chinese village was rebuilt.

Zhu Wen was one of the staff that greeted Elizabeth when she arrived in Guling. He recalls that she was tall, passionate, humorous and full of enthusiasm.

Standing in front of a huge cedar, Elizabeth recalled excitedly the tales Gardner used to tell about racing his little Chinese friends up the tree. It was always such a joy to Gardner if he won the tree-climbing game.

Listening to Elizabeth's recollections, Qiao Mei, a journalist from *Fuzhou Daily*, broke off a branch from the tree and handed it to Elizabeth. "Maybe you can feel his joy in this branch," she suggested. Elizabeth held the branch up to her nose and inhaled deeply. She carried the branch wherever she went that afternoon.

Elizabeth's visit was out of the ordinary for the deputy director of the Fuzhou Foreign Affairs Office, Chu Yanli, who would normally receive foreign government officials. Chu also remembers clearly how on the day Elizabeth arrived, she sat in a cane chair on the veranda for some time, under the setting sun.

"I suppose Elizabeth was talking to her husband in her heart. She had finally made it to the place Gardner had so often talked about. The scene was quite moving."

The next morning, Elizabeth told her companions that she had had the sweetest night's sleep during her stay in China.

Rebuilding Bridges

As part of the homage to her husband, Elizabeth wanted to reconnect with

President Xi Jinping decided to invite Elizabeth to Guling. Thus, a long severed bond was rebuilt.



On September 26, 2012, Gary and Lee Gardner arrived in Guling. Zhou Xinjian

Gardner's Chinese childhood friends and asked local officials to help her find them.

When nine 90-year-old friends of Gardner were introduced to her, Elizabeth hugged them. She was absorbed in the memories of Gardner recalled by the elders.

According to historical archives, after 1840, Fuzhou opened up to foreign merchants as a trading port. Many missionaries, diplomatic officers and tradesmen from the West came there.

In the summer of 1886, a preacher and doctor named S.F. Woodin stumbled upon the resort village of Guling on his way to visit a patient. Word soon spread.

In the following decades, embassy personnel from Britain, France, the U.S., Japan, and Russia established more than 350 resort villas in Guling. They also established a series of public services including sports facilities, a church, a post office, a public well, an international charity agency and swimming pools. They would spend the whole summer with their family members in Guling.

Betty is the daughter of Harold N. Brewster, who, in the 1940s, was the last foreign director of Foochow Christian Union Hospital (now Fujian Medical University Union Hospital). She recalls one summer she and her friends spent a whole day cleaning out the swimming pool so they could spend the next day there. But when they went back the next morning, they found a buffalo wallowing in their sparkling clean pool. They were so angry that they burst into tears.

Gardner's father Anderson Gardner was a senior clergyman. He lived in Fuzhou City for 14 years and raised a large family there. When the family returned to America in 1910, Gardner was 10 years old.

Gardner went on to become a professor of physics at the University of California. Since retiring in 1978 he had longed to one day visit China again. However, at that time formal diplomatic relations had not been established between China and U.S., so he could not realize his dream. In a sad twist of fate, when China-U.S. relations eventually improved, Gardner was suffering from paralysis.

Evoking the memory of her husband, Elizabeth recalled the finer details of Gardner's daily routine: He would eat a bowl of porridge every day, a Chinese habit maintained since childhood. As he got older, he would sit outside, remembering his home in Guling and the wild strawberries growing in his garden.

The Story Continues

Although Elizabeth has now passed away, connections between Guling and its foreign friends remain strong.

On September 26, 2012, Gardner's

nephews – Gary and Lee Gardner – arrived in Guling along with many other foreign visitors whose senior family members had also lived there.

The Gardners' grandfather and father were both born in Foochow Christian Union Hospital. In 1987, the brothers came to Guling on a mission to trace their roots. They carried with them a glass jar, which they filled with earth from Guling's White Tower (*Baita*) as a souvenir to take back to America. "This time, I don't regard myself as a foreigner," Gary said during his trip in 2012.

The other foreigners on the pilgrimage to Guling included Gordon Trimble, a descendant of Lydia Trimble, founder of The Woman's College of South China, and Sallie Parks, a descendant of Thomas Rennie, who built the first Western-style villa in Guling. Already in her 70s when she came to China in 2012, Sallie took many pictures around the villa her ancestor built to show her husband, who had also lived in Guling for three years and was a keen calligrapher.

Guling has witnessed great changes over the past century. Nowadays, there is a comprehensive transport network and the locals are more prosperous. In the summer, urbanites rent family hotels from local villagers for a holiday or weekend breaks to escape the city heat.

The original stone steps that Guling's first settlers would have used back in the 19th century have been preserved integrally. Local elder Liang Kuidong told

China Today that the steps, which were the only route downhill until 1958, were 1,000 years old.

Life in Guling is leisurely and slow. Reeds grow on the top of walls along old streets. Trellises of sprawling chayote provide cooling shade for residents. Local elders sit outside their houses and chat with their neighbors, relaxed and peaceful.

On *China Today's* visit, there was an unattended vegetable stall set up under a big tree with an "honesty box." A local villager introduced a vegetable to us named *hai*. This vegetable had been brought over and cultivated by Western settlers 100 years ago. It is thought its name, *hai*, originated from the English greeting "hi."

Most of the elders who met with Elizabeth in 1992 are dead now, including Guo Maolu, who had been able to talk in English with her. So we interviewed his son Guo Gonghong. Before parting, he asked his wife to pick two fresh snake melons as a gift to our journalists. He also invited us to his house again next May when loquats are in season.

Maybe simple but pure friendly gestures like this are the reason Gardner found it so hard to forget his childhood in Guling. As Elizabeth told Xi Jinping in the interview in 1992, "The beauty of Guling and the enthusiasm of the Chinese people help me to better understand the sentimentality Gardner felt for China." ■