Panzhihua, a City Rising on a Barren Land

Print

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A pearl along the Jinsha River.

Panzhihua was a barren land 35 years ago.

THE city of Panzhihua (kapok flower) was China's first special resource-development zone. Panzhihua is also known as Steel City. The Ertan Hydropower Station there is the largest hydropower station built in China in the 20th century. Panzhihua is in southwest China, at the junction of the Jinsha and Yalong rivers. As China continues its push to develop the western regions of the country, China Pictorial has selected Panzhihua as the first city to be covered in a series of reports on west China.

The First Phase of Development

No map of China older than 35 years will show Panzhihua. The area began to develop only forty years ago, when a vein of precious minerals was found in a large valley between Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces, nestled among the hills between the Qinghai-Tibet and Yunnan-Guizhou plateaus. The vein had a great density with a potential value of US$6,000 billion according to the exchange rate in the 1990s. The minerals included vanadium-titanium magnetite. The area had no name at that time, and there were only seven households and a tall kapok tree, known as "panzhihua" in Chinese. "Let's call the place Panzhihua," said Chairman Mao Zedong with a smile.

In the spring of 1965, the first generation of Chinese leaders decided to push the modern productive forces from the eastern coastal areas to China's west to transform the industrial structure there. Ten thousand construction workers were dispatched from every corner of the country to the barren land of Panzhihua. Without any railroads or urban facilities, these workers used their hands and shoulders and relied on highways to build the Panzhihua Iron and Steel Complex (the present Panzhihua Iron and Steel Company) on a 2.5-square-kilometer slope known as Nongnongping. The enterprise produced 2.5 million tons of steel a year and was regarded by experts as a wonder in world metallurgy because of its unique smelting technique.

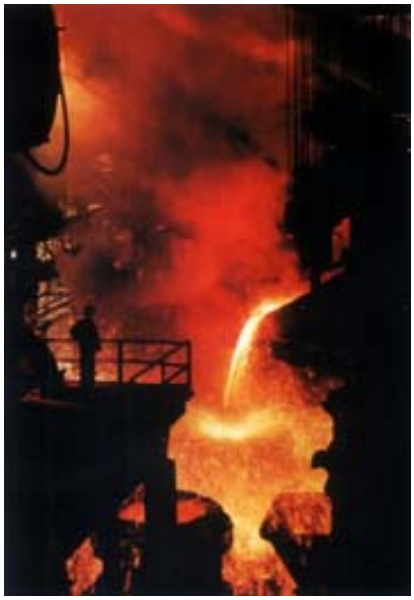
The 1,100-kilometer Chengdu-Kunming Railroad, which passes through the geographically complicated canyon in Panzhihua is considered one of the three wonders of humanity's conquest of nature in the 20th century, and a miniature ivory carving of a section of the railroad stands at the headquarters of the United Nations.

The Second Phase of Development

In the mid-1980s, in the tide of China's reform and opening-up, the people of Panzhihua launched their second stage of development. As a state-owned enterprise, the Panzhihua Iron and Steel Company borrowed US$210 million from the World Bank for its own second phase of development and built a production line for steel sheets, heavy rails, and vanadium products. Because of Panzhihua Iron and Steel, China has changed from a vanadium importer to an exporter. Then, to utilize the water resource at the Yalong River, the largest tributary of the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, US$930 million was borrowed to construct a 240-meter-high multiple-dome Dam and the Ertan Hydropower Station. The Ertan Hydropower Station ranks third in the world among hydropower stations because of its installed capacity of 3.3 million kilowatts and its average power generating capacity of 17 billion kwh a year.

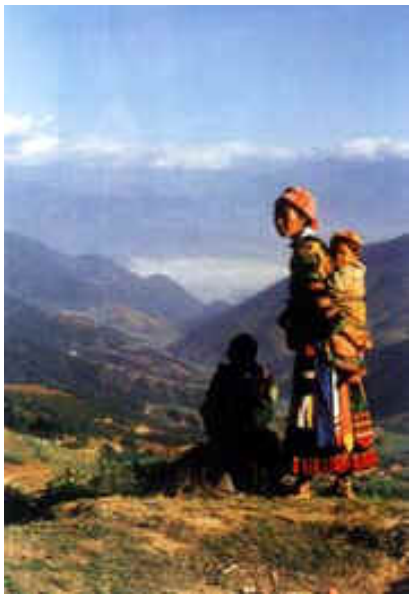
Panzhihua has abundant vanadium-titanium magnetite.
by Hong Jie

The Ertan Hydropower Station. by Song Zhiping



Extracting vanadium. by Hong Jie

World-famous Panzhihua iron



The ethnic minorities in west China contribute greatly to the local economy
by Qu Yingxiang

Along with the industrial development, Panzhihua's agriculture has also seen rapid growth. The area is in the subtropical zone and is not attacked by typhoons. The plentiful sunshine and rain give Panzhihua a reputation as a natural greenhouse, and Panzhihua was China's first agricultural pilot area. The area has been designated as a subtropical fruit production base and has become a center for growing vegetables to be sent to the north.
Panzhihua has now developed into a medium-sized mountain city with subtropical landscapes along the Jinsha River and has become the center of transport, commerce, and finance for southwestern Sichuan and northwestern Yunnan provinces because of its modern technology, including digital transmission, computer-controlled telephone exchanges, satellite communications, and wireless mobile communications.
A marked gap still exists between Panzhihua and China's eastern cities, but with the push for developing the western regions of China, the people of Panzhihua have seized the opportunity and worked out development plans.

Panzhihua will speed up the construction of its airport and will make the Chengdu-Kunming Expressway a major project of Sichuan and of the country as a whole. Panzhihua will readjust, optimize, and upgrade its industrial structure to become a worldwide vanadium-magnetite producer. Furthermore, the city will stimulate the chemical industry by making use of the Ertan Hydropower Station.
Along with its industrial growth, Panzhihua will establish a high-yield, high-efficiency agriculture and will expand its tertiary industries including tourism, e-business, and information service. Panzhihua has 2,400 square kilometers of natural forests, but owing to the unique climate, the afforestation season in the area runs only from June through August. The people of Panzhihua will turn 260 square kilometers of cultivated land into forests in the near future and will make a green forest from what is now wasteland.
Panzhihua, a city developing on a barren land, is a model for China's development. Facing the great tide of development in west China, it will embark on another march with a pioneering and progressive spirit.

Rural scenery in Panzhihua. by Xiao Zejin