

China Trip 2006

On the dawn of 25th of November 2006, twenty five individuals met at Auckland international airport to embark on a journey together to one of the most culturally rich areas in the world, China. Each one of them had different ideas and expectations of the journey they were about to go on. The long plane journey to Hong Kong was a chance to get to know other members of the group. We waited anxiously to arrive and begin the journey, for some it would be the first time in an Asian continent. Arriving at Hong Kong airport, we boarded a bus to take us to the border between China and Hong Kong. It was there that we encountered huge numbers of people crossing in and out of the border.

It was exciting and very tiring when we got to Foshan in the late evening. We were placed in pairs to allocated hotel rooms, which was repeated in every new hotel as a chance for us to mix and get to know one another. Foshan was an intriguing time of learning for us as we committed to training kung-fu every day for four days ending with a performance to the amusement of the locals and media representatives. The masters of the kung-fu academy were spectacular to watch and they performed daily for the many tourists and locals which came to watch. Kung-fu is a very disciplined and strict art form and our teacher (or master as he was referred to) was very patient teaching us the various moves and reasoning behind them. During the nights of Foshan, we learnt simple conversation and words of Chinese. It was a chance for us to get to know the language and practise some while on our many shopping trips.

Towards the end of our stay in Foshan, we all went out for a truly Chinese experience of karaoke. Even the masters joined in on the fun as we belted out rendition after rendition of classic 80s and popular 90s tunes. Backstreet Boys, one more time! As we left Foshan the real journey began for many as we started to visit the ancestral villages of almost each individual. The villages all to a degree had the same underlying characteristics such as the farm lands of crops, the friendly village folk and the very basic buildings as houses. Depending on the historical background of the village, many would be preserved better than others by the amount of money or resources the family gave back to their village. It was an emotional and special time for the individual who went back to their village and it made us New Zealand Asians appreciate the life we lead thanks to our ancestors who made a brave decision to leave China.

Guangzhou was our next major stop and it was one of the first places for us to experience China art culture. The museum we visited was spectacular and full of rich embroidery-oil paintings as well as wood carvings and ink stone sculptures. The five goat statue was one of the landmarks we visited. Another museum close by was a spectacular five storeys high and housed many artefacts of historical Guangzhou. The city also had many shopping centres each vast and multi levelled and linked to many others. Guangzhou was a chance for us to do some serious retail therapy and the choices were endless. There were never-ending streets full of

trinkets, merchandise and authentic Cantonese cuisine at great prices. Another great experience was catching the metro for the first time on the trip. This would prove handy later on in our other major city stops. The convenience of the metro was amazing, where trains would pull up in five minute slots to transport you to other suburbs in the area. The fare was reasonable also, at a couple Yuan a stage I was beginning to think Auckland might benefit from a service like this. We also visited a local high school whose students greeted us with warmth and friendliness that we didn't mind singing and performing our Kung-fu routine! There was even a game of basketball, NZ against Guangzhou and surprisingly they were very good.

Xintang was the next stop on our itinerary, specifically for more village sights and factories. Jeans were manufactured in this area as shown by the huge rolls of jean fabric and people literally throwing ready-made garments from different levels of building into a truck. Talk about production efficiency! On a sad note, it was heart breaking to see many people employed as cheap labour to produce so many jeans. A realisation set in that the quality of life these people lead was so far from the New Zealand lifestyle. With Xintang as our base, we travelled to the city of Shengzen, a Westernised part of China catering specifically for tourists. The draw-card of this destination was that the plaza we visited sold cheap designer knock-offs of everything from clothing to bags. With no set prices you had to bargain your way down from hundreds of Yuan to a reasonable approximated one hundred Yuan depending on the item. The Minority Village amusement park was another amazing experience that was very enjoyable. We were lucky to see two great shows full of colour and dazzling costumes. Both showed the exquisite beauty of Asian culture and showcase. The acrobatics and dancing were wonderfully choreographed and everyone was overwhelmed by the spectacle.

The beautiful city of Hangzhou had to be my favourite place of all. We were told the night before our departure to brace ourselves for the cold weather ahead. Up till then the weather had been quite similar to back at home but as we headed north to Hangzhou and hopped off the plane, we were welcomed by a refreshing chill. It was very cold! A friendly guide called Bob was our tour guy for the time we stayed. Hangzhou was my favourite because of the picturesque landscapes and breathtaking lakes. It is known in China as a very romantic city and it showed as dozens of couples were seen strolling down the streets. A definite highlight was the Westlake cuisine and a chance to sample some local green tea straight from the plantation.

Before heading to Shanghai we made a stop off to the cute and quaint Watertown of Xitang where Tom Cruise filmed Mission Impossible III. For the first time on the trip, it rained which made the town seem even more beautiful. The Watertown had a button museum, where a man showed us how a button was made as well as a wood carving exhibit and fan display. Heading towards Shanghai was exciting but a long journey and many of the landmarks were visited during our stay. There was the famous The Bund, we shopped on Nanjing Road and we visited the Shanghai History museum which recreated historical Shanghai using wax figures. A definite highlight

for all of us was a visit to the Shanghai tailors. All the girls got Cheongsam made (traditional Chinese dresses) and the guys got suits made to measure.

An overnight train trip later we were on our way to the capital of China, Beijing. If we thought Hangzhou was cold, it got a whole lot worse. With the highest being three degrees and the lowest one degree, we piled on the gloves, scarves and thermo undergarments. Beijing was magnificent and rich in culture and historical buildings. Some of the major places we visited were Tiananmen Square, Mao's Mausoleum and the Temple of Heaven. The historical and cultural values of these landmarks are huge so it felt like a privilege to visit such important places. Summer Palace was beautiful and we had many photo opportunities near the frozen lake. We visited the silk factory learning the ways in which the silk is gathered and used in many different ways. We also paid a visit to the jade factories, learning about the different classes (A, B or C) and viewing the store full of beautiful jewellery and sculptures of jade. The highlight of Beijing had to be climbing the Great Wall of China. It was amazing getting up to the peak and seeing one of the most amazing man-made creations. It was a lot of upward climbing, sweating and panting but it was an experience never to forget.

Hong Kong was great fun for everyone and we utilised our free days by going shopping, eating and partying. There was nothing quite like spending your days getting lost and caught up in the excitement of a big city. It was sad when some of us had to leave to go home for Christmas as we had become quite attached to each other and bonded over the time we had spent on the journey. For most who stayed on, we spent our Christmas there with all the locals heading out and about the city until early morning. As we departed from the Hong Kong airport, I realised the greatness and vastness of Chinese culture. In the five weeks we had visited many places, seen great sights and made awesome friends. It was an unforgettable experience and I wish for anyone who gets the opportunity to go and to make the most of it.