

My Intrepid Journey – China in 33 Days

By Melissa Wong

I participated in the NZCA 2006 Winter-camp. Ok, I admit it; I'm a banana – yellow on the outside and white on the inside. I'm a second generation Chinese New Zealander – who speaks halting Cantonese and Mandarin.

In the beginning of 2006, Great Uncle Donald Sew Hoy approached me and encouraged me to go on this five week China tour, with other young adults. So I completed the paper work. Months passed by, however, in September, I became anxious. Soon I would step out of my “comfort-zone” into a foreign culture, ...and live with twenty-three other “strangers”... I emailed Kai Luey, and enquired about my co-travellers. Subsequently, the Auckland group had three get-togethers before departure.

While root seeking, I was able to visit my extended family, and briefly experienced “real village life”. I was mesmerised by the local poultry farms, water buffalos, rice paddies, the village culture and quaint buildings. Going back to my roots was a very HUMBLING experience. I visited three of my ancestral villages – the Wong, Joe, and Sew Hoy villages. It was amazing to see where my grandparents grew up. I discovered my Gong Gong came from a very RICH village...but he was from the “dungiest” part of the town! I met my Mum’s cousin, who currently lives in Gong-Gong’s house, and he let me look inside.

I visited everyone’s ancestral villages too, some houses were over one hundred years old, in original condition, and still had family members occupying them! While some refurbished ancestral houses have telephones and electricity, others were empty, and were in varying states of dilapidation. The owners had shifted out long ago to neighbouring cities, or emigrated to New Zealand, Australia, Canada or USA.

Visiting rural villages helped me gain an appreciation of culture and history of China. I feel blessed to be living in a first world, urban city, with flushing toilets, quality dental healthcare, and 24/7 hour access to entertainment – namely TV and internet.

Whilst visiting villages, I began to understand why my older relatives love to recycle. Decades ago, the villagers lived in isolation and poverty. Many years of civil wars further depleted village resources. This shaped Chinese culture and the psychological thinking of the elderly. I feel a bit uncomfortable about the unflattering comments I have made about my YehYeh as a “master recycler” of cardboard boxes and plastic containers.

All the sightseeing evoked my patriotic feelings. We visited many fabulous imperial sites in Beijing – the Forbidden Palace, Summer Palace, the Sacred Way, and the Great Wall. I thoroughly enjoyed listening and learning about the complex history of China. Walking through ancient sites, ranging from several hundred to thousands of years old, and admiring the unique architecture and intricate craftwork, made me feel proud of my heritage.

Visiting South China, was special. It was quite awesome to be visiting Guangzhou city, where everything is tailor made for “shorties”. Being 1.49m, I was able to hold

onto bus and train rails, and carry out conversations with over the counter shop assistants - without standing on tiptoes!

Our group connected very well and everyone established deep friendships. I met a whole bunch of buddies who are exceptionally special. It's not everyday I have new friends who are:

1. Willing to help me carry my 20kg suitcase
2. Protect me from "dodgy locals"
3. Translate for me and, engage in battle - bargaining for "rock-bottom" prices with local store holders
4. Chaperone me at night to internet bars, to email my family back home
5. Be so accommodating, and let me invade their bedrooms all night for group movie sessions...and eat their supply of snacks!

I felt so far away from the familiarity of NZ, however I felt very safe and cared for. I did not get homesick once. With my newfound buddies, we travelled the length of China, from Guangzhou to Beijing. It was an unstoppable party for five whole weeks. It was so much fun. I've made new friends to keep for a lifetime.

I'd like to thank NZCA for providing me the opportunity to go to China. A Big Thanks to Janet Joe for her contribution - our ever patient tour guide, who put up with our playful antics, and taught us the complex history and mysteries of China.

The NZCA winter-camp helped me appreciate and understand the Chinese culture. Now I understand why my older relatives behave they way they do. One of my most defining moments of the trip was visiting all my ancestral villages.

It was a physically exhausting, but emotionally rewarding adventure. I returned to New Zealand, in a severe sleep deprived state. I recommend all young New Zealand Chinese adults to go on this unique tour.

NZCA winter-camp, unfolded to be an experience of my life; it was an opportunity to form life-long friendships. It led me on a path of self-discovery, emotional and cultural growth.

Thanks to my China Tripper buddies for making my experience so memorable.

Are you still not sure if you want to go? Let go of your inhibitions. Jump in for a mesmerizing adventure of your lifetime. "Carpe Diem" – Seize the Day!

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