

Winter Camp 2006

Steven Wong

Before going to China I was admittedly, not the most Chinese of New Zealand Chinese. At least, I didn't think so. This trip however was a huge eye opener and helped me understand myself better. Apologies for the disorganized nature of this report but it has been written in a "train-of-thought" style!

Before going on the trip the other china trippers met up and got to know each other a little. Being the only one from the South Island meant I didn't have this opportunity. Therefore it was with a few nerves that I packed my bags to jet up and meet the others in Auckland. As it turns out the group of kids going to China were in fact some of the best to be found and were one of the key reasons why the trip was so enjoyable.

China itself was very different from expected. I found it amazing that one could drive for hours and hours (between Hong Kong and Foshan) and yet never seem to leave what looked like city. Foshan was a bustling, chaotic city with insanely dangerous traffic and incredible amounts of air pollution. For a New Zealander, this city can be very harrowing! Having survived the gazillions of cars, motorbikes, bicycles and pedestrians we then set about becoming kung fu and mandarin masters. Kung fu was thoroughly enjoyable and very challenging. It tested our mental and physical resolve with grueling training sessions in blistering heat – however it also gave us the opportunity to watch our real masters put on impressive shows of incredible athleticism while we caught our breath and provided a fantastic group bonding exercise. This was a truly amazing experience and one that I am grateful to have had the opportunity to enjoy. Mandarin lessons in comparison were a bit of a battle. Because the phonemes do not come naturally to many of us, it was difficult from the word go. The number of phrases that were thrown at us was overwhelming and definitely put many of us off. Nevertheless a couple useful words were planted in the back of our minds, to be pulled out triumphantly later on in the trip! Overall Foshan was a fantastic experience, if not a bit of an adjustment period. A good time to get used to a foreign language, interesting cuisine and the general bustle created by the population of NZ crammed into a city.

The next major part of the trip involved visiting ancestral villages. I hadn't really made the effort to fully work out where my ancestral villages were because I knew they were too far away to be visited on this trip. This was unfortunate and after visiting all the other villages I really wanted to have the opportunity to see mine. This will have to wait another day... It was truly humbling to see the modest nature of the villages and to think that my family just two generations earlier had lived in similar conditions. And to consider where I am now! The village visits have inspired me to find out more about where my grandparents came from. This was further hammered home when my grandfather passed away shortly after I returned home. It was then that I managed to get the complete details regarding his home in China and I am determined to go back and visit my ancestral homes one day.

The rest of the trip was a mixture of sightseeing and shopping. This gave me an opportunity to ponder China and the nature of its development. I believe that China is a

beautiful place with amazing cities. However the nature of the way it is being developed is destroying a lot of its character and the environment, which is a huge shame. It is a pity the country administrators are not more long sighted when considering the direction that the country is moving in, instead choosing to focus on maximum output for minimum input. The Chinese people themselves were remarkable – their work ethic is incredible and their ability to toil away at tasks that most people in a Western society would not tolerate is admirable. Overall the incredible beauty of the land mixed with magnificence of structures such as the Great Wall, the Ming Tombs, the Temple of Heaven and so on was truly inspirational. One can only hope that the Chinese learn to care for their environment as much as they now protect their culture – before they lose it or mar it permanently.

Finally I would like to reserve a quick paragraph in honour of my fellow China Trippers. The 23 others started off as strangers in my life but quickly became like family. It is possibly one of the biggest upsides of this trip, being able to meet a large group of people not so different from myself in a setting where one cannot help but become friends. As I mentioned at the start, previously I had not really had much to do with other Chinese, but this trip has allowed me to realize the parts of my life that make me Chinese and to form friendships with other New Zealand Chinese. The boys and girls who shared in my China Trip experiences were probably the key reason why the trip was such a success and I would recommend it to anyone, without any doubt in my mind.

So thank you fellow China Trippers, thank you Janet (I can't imagine how the Wintercamp could possibly function without her and I think her work is often underrated by the people who get to enjoy the fruits of her labour while on the trip), thank you Kai Luey and the NZCA.. And thank you China!