

Winter Camp and China Trip 2008 Report

by Lynette Leong

When I left New Zealand for China on this trip I was unsure what I would find. I had come to China with the intention of learning more about my culture, but didn't know where to start. I tried to prepare myself for the culture shock of an entirely new country, but what was more startling than the newness of the environment of Guangdong was all that was familiar. In the body language and the speech of the people I saw glimpses of my parents; in the comfort of jook and hot ching pue leung soup was a taste of my mother's cooking; in the playful athleticism of the lion dance we watched in Foshan I was brought back to a childhood visit to the Auckland Oriental Markets on Chinese New Year.

Things I had wanted to learn about Chinese culture, but had previously seemed unapproachable and too difficult in New Zealand, were very patiently opened up to me. Sifu led us through the grace and power of kung fu (although, it will take much more practice to exhibit grace in my movements!). Our visits to such sights as Magnificent China and Minority Village cultural parks, the Chen Ancestral Hall, and Zhong Yuan Library Exhibition Gallery gave me a taste of the rich cultural history of China. In particular, learning Guangdong's place in Chinese history and how the area changed with successive dynasties and colonization by foreign entities helped make what was previously a remote history into a relatable past. I particularly enjoyed the Chinese painting and calligraphy at Guangzhou Technical School as well as meeting the local students and other overseas Chinese students from Guatemala and Australia.

Though I didn't visit my own ancestral village because I didn't have enough information, going to the ancestral homes of my fellow China trip members was an eye opening experience. The contrast between suburban Auckland to the city of Foshan to the ancestral villages, like those we visited in Kaipeng and Taishan, was incredible. As well as seeing the ancestral homes and meeting relatives in the villages, we caught glimpses of everyday life – people tending fields of crops with water buffalos, builders piecing together the finishing touches of tiles on a modern house next to the pre-war grey brick houses of our great-grandfathers, chickens and dogs running underfoot and settling on the doorsteps of houses. Our time in Guangdong was the longest we spent in a province or city in this trip, yet it passed quickly for me and I only wish we had more time in the area.

Next we visited Hangzhou, the most beautiful of all the places in the tour. We spent our first morning by the West Lake, taking in the mist veiled scenery. It was the perfect activity after the busyness of the Wintercamp and visiting the ancestral villages. Later, we rented bicycles to ride (or learn how to ride in my case) around the lake. Second to spending time by the lake, my favourite part of our visit to Hangzhou was tasting tea at the Dragon Well Tea Village. All around the area are green ridged hills, striped with tea bushes. Learning about the processes of producing tea and the rituals involved in drinking it gave me a new appreciation of green tea.

Out of Hangzhou we made a brief stop at Wuzhen water town, having lunch and riding a Chinese style gondola through the canals of the town, before continuing on Shanghai. Our visit to the Pearl TV Tower and the Shanghai History Museum was a fabulous introduction to the city and my favourite sight of our stay in Shanghai. Western style buildings we had seen on our bus ride through Shanghai and thought an anomaly amongst the modern skyscrapers and older traditional Chinese architecture was explained when we learned about the history of colonial rule in Shanghai. Another highlight was the Huang Po River night cruise, which gave us a feel for the city at night – brightly lit and beautiful, still buzzing with activity. Throughout our trip there was much shopping to be had. Our visits to the Pearl Factory, Silk Factory and the Tailor's Market were not only educational but hazardous to the pocket.

In contrast to the open energy of Shanghai, Beijing was much more traditional and conservative. The constant, if unobtrusive, presence of police and military in the major sights like Tiananmen Square was a reminder of the political unrest of China's past and of Beijing's position as the centre of power in China. Of all the must see sights that characterize Beijing that we visited – Mao's Mausoleum, the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace – the most memorable was our visit to the Great Wall at Juyong Pass. The climb was tiring and the steps were steep and uneven in parts, but the view and atmosphere of the Wall and the mountains beyond were magnificent. My other favourite was our evening walk through the Sacred Way on our visit to the Ming tombs. Guarded by stone statues of humans and animals, both mortal and mythical, the path was beautiful and very peaceful.

After the busy pace of touring and moving from city to city, it was lovely to have free time in Hong Kong. It was a good chance for me to catch up with my family living there and relax. In between a trip to Macau, the Science Museum, and some public libraries, I managed to squeeze in some last minute shopping in places like the Temple Street Markets and Mongkok.

Coming home after so long away was a bittersweet experience – I looked forward to seeing my family again and being at home, but half wanted to stay on to see and learn more about Hong Kong and China. It was a wonderful trip and I got to know some great people along the way. More than anything, I'm very grateful to Janet Joe for organizing the trip and looking after us all. She went above and beyond in making sure we made the best out of our time in China – from acting as translator/bargainer/ancestral home detective/food identifier, to trying to teach me to ride a bike, to dealing with dodgy tailors, to much more than can be detailed here. So thank you, Janet, and thank you also to the NZCA for providing such a fantastic experience in the Winter Camp and China tour. It was a trip to remember.