

NZCA Winter Camp 2008

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The first time I set foot on China soil I was five years old and on a family holiday. I don't remember much of that trip being so young so when I heard about this winter camp I knew it was an opportunity not to be missed. I was not let down and, if anything, it was more than I could have imagined – the sights we saw, the authentic meals we ate, all the shopping and the amazing group of people that I got to experience this all with was just incredible.

The first time all thirty of us 'China-trippers' got together was on an early November morning at Auckland International Airport. We had the first of many group photos taken at the departure area and, after a series of hugs and goodbyes, it was time to leave New Zealand and board our eleven hour flight. The plane ride was a good time to get to know the fellow trippers. For those that were awake, introductions were swapped, several rounds of scum was played and the Cathay Pacific snack basket was raided every so often. We landed at Hong Kong International Airport but before we had a chance to register this fact we were quickly whisked away to board our connecting flight to Guangzhou.

Guangzhou was the first and last stop during the first two weeks of the camp – in fact it was a camp within a camp as this part of our journey involved visiting our ancestral villages, or as our t-shirts and caps read, 'root-seeking'. However, before we embarked on this, we spent 3 days in Foshan learning Kung fu at the famous Huang Fei Hong memorial hall. Our patient kung fu masters taught us a routine that we practiced and practiced until we got it to a level to perform to a crowd. It was a rewarding experience to pick up a new skill and perfect it in such a short amount of time.

Foshan was also the city that introduced us to the crazy traffic of China. If I had to mention one thing that I wasn't prepared for on this trip, it would probably have to be this. I knew that there were over a billion people living in this country but I never thought that I would have to cross over six lanes of traffic on a main road to get to the kung fu academy! And even though there were pedestrian crossings, they seemed to be just treated as a decoration on the road as no cars stopped to let you cross, that is, if you were brave enough to cross. There were lots of times where we were close to being hit by a bus and running across the road didn't help as it just seemed to make the oncoming traffic speed up!

After surviving the roads, our root-seeking part of the camp began with a visit to Kaipeng where we saw our first abandoned village house. It was remarkable to see this crumbling home, still with the pottery and furnishings sitting as they were several decades ago. It was nothing like what I was expecting and the following day was a complete contrast when our group visited my mother's village in Taishan. The village home was no longer standing but had been replaced a year earlier with a two storey modern house. In this village there were new houses spread amongst traditional houses making me think that if I came back in a few years this village may be totally different once again.

Zhongshan was a memorable city as I got to visit my father's ancestral village. The last time I visited I was five so memories of this village had been shaped by the home videos and photos taken at the time. It was therefore quite an emotional experience to walk through the house and discover rooms that I had previously no recollection of. It had had a repaint and although the majority of the furniture had been stolen by thieves, many of the original intricate window shutters and portraits of my great grandparents were still in good condition.

Once all the village visits were complete the second part of the camp, involving more tourist orientated sights, began. Hangzhou and Beijing were two cities that took up the majority of my camera memory. In Hangzhou we spent a morning bike riding around the famous West Lake, taking in all the beautiful scenes as well as ringing our bells to indicate our presence. This was followed by a leisurely boat ride on the lake with commentary by our tour guide, Bob. A couple of cities later we hit Beijing, a city that made me wish I had done some background research on as its immense history cannot possibly be explained in the short time that we were there. The grandeur of the Forbidden City was incredible – it is hard to believe that so long ago they had the resources to build such extravagant buildings.

While our eyes had a feast of scenes, our taste buds were subject to an array of flavours. I knew before going on this camp that I wasn't going to be seeing the 'normal' dishes found in NZ Chinese restaurants but I was still excited to try new delicacies. And boy, was there a lot of food available! At each city we were able to sample local specialties: from chickens blood, goldfish and pigs trotters in Guangdong to dumplings in Hangzhou, taro icecream in Shanghai and of course, the famous Peking duck in Beijing. Restaurants aside, there were also a variety of on-the-go foods available at the small street stalls. Stalls may not be the right word as many of these skewered meats were being sold from the back of a bicycle! Then there were the more recognizable western fast food joints but with a Chinese twist – for example taro, peach or pineapple pies were on the menus at McDonalds and I'm happy to say that I tried them all.

After dinner with the group, we were often free to explore the cities. It was during these times that I found my fellow shopping buddies of the trip. Armed with the two most important phrases of 'duo shao qian?' and 'tai gui le!' we attempted to lower the original price to a third. Many a times we received looks of utter disgust from the sales assistants but with our perfected walking away technique we often got a good deal. Over the four weeks I accumulated five pairs of shoes, a dozen pairs of earrings, many fake branded tops and a collection of souvenirs. I also ended up with lots of little knick-knacks that I will probably never use but serve as a good reminder of the fun times at the markets. If it wasn't for the luggage restrictions I probably would've ended up with more!

Once the shopping was done, there was the nightlife to explore. Many of us will look back fondly on Freedom City, the nightclub in Taishan with the dice game, test tube shots and of course the bouncing dance floor! Mix Club in Shanghai was also a highlight as it was probably the biggest club I have ever been in – I must've walked through a dozen separate dance areas, all catering to different types of music and all packed with people. Apart from the clubs, the arcades in China were also worth a visit. Bumper cars brought out our younger selves while addictions were also created for several games of chance. I think lots of us won enough tokens to each redeem a prize.

Soon the month was up and we found ourselves at the airport once more. Four weeks of China seemed like a very long time before I left New Zealand but now it seems incomprehensible the number of places we visited and how fast we 'trippers' became a family in those four weeks. This NZCA winter camp is definitely a once in a lifetime opportunity. It was superbly organized and had a great tour leader. Janet was always on hand to offer tips on the best places to eat, worthy markets to visit and also had a wealth of knowledge on the places we visited. I would not hesitate to recommend fellow Chinese New Zealanders to take part in this camp – they will not regret it!