

# Wintercamp Report 2008: A Retrospective

## By Wesley Loy

As far back as I can remember, my Yeh-yeh has always spoken highly of China. He is always quick to tell me how proud he is of his homeland's achievements and progressive strides on the world's stage. Despite the obvious distance between the worlds he loves both in terms of time and physical gap; he remains an ardent supporter of everything it stands for. Until perhaps 6 years ago, I myself had never given my roots and ancestry much thought, recalling that I had not even referred to myself as being Chinese until I was about 10 to 13 years old.

Over the last few years, I had absorbed some of my Yeh-yeh's national pride, taking a keen interest in China's rising profile and proudly declaring my ancestral roots. Despite this, I was a little apprehensive when I was notified that I would be heading to China for a month. To travel to a country I was familiar with only in stories, legends, and praise was not so daunting as much as the thought of meeting with family I never even knew existed (not to mention the first country where my English would fail me).

The time had come to depart Auckland and meet up with the rest of the group. It was unusual to see such a diverse range of personalities and profiles from this small Chinese group. It was interesting to witness how varied the young NZ Chinese spectrum was in terms of behaviour and character, but very comforting to know that we were all mostly new to an overseas Chinese experience, a bond which I think carried us through the trip. I'm glad to say that my dealings with the group were overwhelmingly positive. Everyone got along with one another and stuck together for most activities.

Following the 13-hour plane trip, our first proper taste of China came unsurprisingly from a restaurant in Guangzhou where we had our first dinner. It could be said that my attitude towards trip followed my feelings of the dinner and being there.

### **Stage 1 – Nervously settling in:**

As I sat at the table with no familiar faces, I thought I might wait to see what happened before making my move. Everyone else seemed to settle in and talk to one another so fast, that it seemed to me that everyone else knew each other like good friends. I knew that being my usual reserved self was out of the question for a whole month, so I did my best to engage with both the people and the food being presented to us.

This was much like what happened when we first arrived in Foshan. As our first true stop in the trip, I was a little bewildered by the sights and sounds around me. Though there were many

familiar conventions and conveniences around me, they seemed strange to me at the time due to the language difference and small additions that seemed to me should have been implemented in New Zealand years ago. After checking into the hotel, a little exploration of the surrounding area was in order. Our small tour of the shops and alleys, while not anything I've encountered prior, seemed much like what I had expected of them: bright, loud, and selling brands that seemed to be thinly veiled copies of well known Western brands.

### *Foshan – The First Glimpse:*

I actually really enjoyed my time in Foshan. As well as doing a little training in the martial arts (as well as showcasing my own extremely limited talent for making them up) it was my first real glimpse of authentic China. The Huang-Fei Hung Ancestral temple was the perfect backdrop for our days of training, and the mild urban areas around our hotel were both comfortable and exciting; a blend of the urban life I was accustomed to with the kind of culture that you could never find authentically outside of China. Although I did not do as much exploring as I wish I had, the little I did see was very impressive, if not a little dusty and occasionally pungent.

Our sifus were good sports and exceedingly patient. Although I never had anything more than a casual interest in learning a proper style, our time at the temple has given me a bit of insight as to what really goes on and how many of the poses and stances work, refreshing my views on games and movies on the genre.

### **Stage 2 – Lots of Soup:**

The first readily identifiable meal at our first dinner was the soup. Although it seemed to be nothing more than ordinary house soup like you would find in the restaurants back home, it was something I could get into readily. To show that I wasn't afraid of jumping into things, I drank a lot of soup and stifled my worry.

From karaoke and stage performances in Foshan, to Freedom City in Taishan, I started to take part in activities I would probably not have done so publicly back home. It was also at this time that we started visiting some of our member's ancestral villages. The first of these were quaint and very rustic, essentially embodying the idea of a village in my vernacular. I was familiar with farming life and small towns, but I had long thought that these kinds of villages obsolete, and was actually pleasantly surprised to be able to walk around them. Even though the atmosphere seemed timeless for the most part, I was still amused by the random appearance of blatantly modern touches, from the energy-saving light fixtures to the high-tech electric scooters which noiselessly passed by. I could tell that the inhabitants and relatives as well as each of my

peers were equally interested in seeing each other for the first time, bridging the gaps between cultures and countries. As a bystander, I was still struck by the importance of these meetings, realising that in spite of the distance and the fact that almost no one knew of their ancestors beforehand, it was the idea of family that was important. As long as you had identifiable roots, you would be accepted by your family as though you had known each other for life.

### *Taishan – Town of Twilight:*

Although we didn't spend very long in Taishan, I still think I managed to get quite a lot of exploration done in the nights we were there. It was the first time I got to see the giant neon signs up close, perhaps for the first time in my adult life. Although on a smaller scale than what I was looking for, it was still very exciting to see the night light up with so much vibrancy and action. Freedom City essentially encapsulated my interest in lights and moving patterns, though it also compounded them with my loathing of extremely loud noises and walls of people barring access to my friends. Still, as my first time going out to a nightclub for actual dancing and clubbing, it was a fresh and interesting activity to engage in. I could tell that the rest of the group had instantly marked it down as one of their favourite places, literally unable to stop talking about it for the rest of the trip.

### *Xintang – Jeans Capital and Industrial Central:*

I could tell from the outskirts of town that Xintang was an industrial complex; the surrounds constantly bathed in thin smog that made everything seem grey even on the brightest days. At night, although lit up like Foshan and Taishan, Xintang always had a sense of foreboding that I could never quite shake off. Our time and explorations here were light compared to our activities in the other towns and cities, though the rough edges of town did deter us from excess exploration.

### **Stage 3 – Uncertainty and Doubt:**

It was about this time that I realised that no one else was drinking any soup; leading me to think that perhaps I was being a bit rash. In my efforts to blend in, perhaps I was actually pushing people away. I started to sit back a little bit, not quite sure what it was I was trying to achieve.

Upon returning to Guangzhou, I was faced with a number of questions. How would I react upon meeting family I had never known existed and visiting a home that I have never set foot in? Almost everyone else had visited their villages this time, and I was going to have to meet my relatives without the group to mingle with. I was actually surprised when I was brought out to a

suburban home that, while not modern, was not like most of the villages we had visited in the past weeks either. True to form, my Yeh-yeh's house was full of discarded items and implements that looked like they had been taken from the side of the road. The others too, looked like they were almost untouched from the time people actually lived in them, almost like they were preserved for future generations to visit. My relatives, though friendly, were still seemed worlds away from me. I was reduced to nodding and smiling nervously when I really wanted to talk.

The big revelation came however, when I met with one of my relative's daughter's baby, whose calm and peaceful expression washed away the shy awkwardness that I usually exhibit naturally. As the one I could communicate best with, I tried to entertain her with gestures, pictures, and red paper. Though I was not successful, I did inject myself with a new sense of purpose and resolve. The night's events also contributed to my understanding of just what it meant to be in China and a part of the group.

#### *Guangzhou – The Big One:*

Guangzhou seemed like a veritable all-in-one city, with commerce, industry and residential all rolled into the one area. I very much enjoyed my time in the city, taking in the sights, sounds and people. It was very walker friendly as well, reminding me why I like the subway system so much. Everything seemed very close and I was never very far away from something interesting to see or something to do.

When we went to the GZ Technical College, I was impressed by the array of cultures that had assembled there to learn and study in China, with many foreign students' grasp of the language putting our skills to shame. We engaged in a serious game of basketball (with much admiration for our team, putting up a fair fight when most of us hadn't played a game of basketball in a long time, let alone practised together) and watched a display of fairy tales and musical chairs, which I thought captured the spirit of the students.

#### **Stage 4 – Finally fitting in:**

After my misgivings about the food and being on the trip in general, I realised that pretty much everyone was in the same boat, and that I probably wasn't the only one who was feeling a little anxious. I decided it was best just to let things run as they were, and hence had a much better time engaging with the food and the people who I would come to know and grow close to over the month.

With the first two weeks behind us, I felt like I had been in the country for many more and gotten to know the group very well. Although there were times where I had a slight yearning for home, these were quickly forgotten with the quickly unfolding events around us.

### *Hangzhou – Tourist Town:*

My brother's girlfriend hails from Hangzhou and told me all the things she loved about her hometown. Upon arrival, I was very impressed by how serene and picturesque the city was, confirming all that I had been told. From the beautiful West Lake to the almost manicured city plazas, I was quite astounded by the sights both traditional and new. I actually had a very hard time understanding why anyone would want to leave the city, although it occurred to me over time that Hangzhou was a real tourist hotspot, and perhaps not for everyone.

The most interesting part of our stay in the city was our bicycle ride around the lake. Although I hadn't been biking in nearly six years, I picked it up again very quickly and was well on my way around the lake. I almost didn't have time for the exciting views due to the thrill and exhilaration of cycling in another country (which I assume is a lot more fun than driving).

### *Shanghai – Sights and Sounds:*

The biggest of China's cities, Shanghai did not disappoint me as a metropolitan mega-centre. More geared toward modern attractions and sights, I was drawn to the architecture and lights of the city, wishing that there were similar back home. Although there was a stronger emphasis on modern and near-future attractions, the museum and aquarium were the kinds of attractions that I like back home and could enjoy at a comfortable pace.

Although I was constantly warned against walking around on my own, I actually found walks around the city quite pleasant, especially at night. Despite many big city reputations for crime, I felt very safe just walking around and would enjoy spending more time roaming the streets, taking in the lights.

### *Beijing – The Pinnacle:*

Of all the cities we visited on the trip, Beijing stands out as my favourite (and only just). From ancient wonders like The Great Wall to masterpieces of modern engineering like the 2008 Olympic village, Beijing captured my love of the historical and ultra-modern, with attractions that appealed to both of my fancies. Also, the temperature was an incredibly comfortable -4 degrees that made me wish Auckland was that temperature all year round. I could only suspect that back home, everyone was sweltering in a typical New Zealand Summer.

Our lodgings were convenient and comfortable, almost like a full attraction all of its own. Besides the attractions, it was also the chance to try my hand at some real bartering at three big markets. Unfortunately, my skills leave much to be desired.

### *Hong Kong – End of the Road:*

It was with sadness that we arrived in Hong Kong, realising that our trip and time together would soon come to an end. With this in mind, it was up to us to make the most of our last few days. Hong Kong as it turned out, was exactly the place to do so. With parks, stores, Macau, and more we had trouble finding out just what to do in the few days we had. However, we each found a timetable that suited us and had lots of fun doing it. Although the temperatures reached unbearable levels (for me), I was glad that I got to go see the sights that my parents never have for the last ten years they've been going.

And our trip came to a close after a full month abroad. We arrived back in Auckland, with sad goodbyes to friends and relieved hellos to family. Each of us went our separate ways, some back to Wellington. It was my departing wish that we would all see each other again to reminisce and relive some of the excitement that we enjoyed during our time in China. The wistful yearning for the days of the trip remain with me a month onward, but I am very glad for having participated in this once—in-a-lifetime experience; for meeting the people I did and the places I went.

I would like to extend a big thank-you to our guides and translators, Cindy, Jessie and Sunny, our tour guides, Bob and Sammie, our martial arts sifus, representatives from each of the cities who came to greet us, the people from all of the villages, and especially to Janet, who made everything on the trip possible. I'd also like to thank all the people on the trip for being a great group to hang out with.

As of writing this report, I feel worldlier and far more receptive to things I wouldn't have dreamed of doing before. It has extended to some of my behaviours back home, with some of my introvert traits breaking away. It makes me glad to understand where my ancestors came from, and it is that knowledge which has helped me to understand myself and where I come from.

China itself is a grand place, steeped in tradition and history all while embracing modern conveniences and technologies for its benefit. I am proud of all the achievements it has made over the years and prouder than ever to state that I am a Chinese New Zealander.

Thank-you very much for this excellent opportunity.

Regards,  
Wesley Loy.