

It all began at 7am Sunday the 23rd of November when we met at the airport for a 12 hour flight at 9am, which marked the beginning of our exciting month away from home to further explore our cultural backgrounds in China and Hong Kong. When we finally arrived in Hong Kong it was a big rush running through the airport to get to our next flight for Guangzhou - it was a large airport to run through!

My very first impression of China was on the plane flying in from Hong Kong when I was surprised to see so much greenery. I found it to be such a nicely set out and picturesque city in the way that all the buildings and surroundings were arranged. On the subsequent bus ride from Guangzhou, we were in awe at how different China really was to New Zealand. We saw a large cage with lots of pigs packed in together so they were practically on top of each other, a double decker bus with people sleeping on beds arranged all nicely on the top deck and general differences in the traffic, which was a lot more congested with a much greater use of the horn. After being in China, I understand why the Chinese have been stereotyped in New Zealand as bad drivers, when really that's just what they're used to and a New Zealander would not survive in Chinese traffic. I would have to say that the biggest surprise for me personally was at dinner in Foshan when I went to the restroom to see only squat toilets, requiring much more balance than the standard western toilet. Alas, it was a challenge to be mastered over the next month. From this first meal in China and throughout our trip, we began to learn that people here really do not like to waste any part of animals. We'd been fed a wide variety of dishes that we would not usually see back in our homeland, New Zealand, my favourite shocker being pigeon heads.

Our first three days that were in Foshan consisted mainly of Kung Fu training and Mandarin classes at night. The Kung Fu classes started off as really fun, especially seeing the 'professionals' perform for us, but as there were more and more practices it became more difficult and tiring when the number of stances and routines progressively increased. Despite the hard work, it was all worth it when we gave our successful performances at the temple to a real audience. The mandarin classes at night were helpful and fun, particularly useful to aid in our shopping that I found to be quite difficult when you can't speak their language. From this first place we had visited, I had already begun my shopping, to the disbelief of others in our group, but now looking back I'm glad I did. There were a decent number of shops in Foshan with fixed and reasonable prices that didn't require so much bargaining. One of the

highlights of Foshan was its nightlife, where a large number of us went to a club just around the corner from our hotel and had an amazing time there on bouncing dance floors.

For the next three days we went around to different villages. I was one of the first lucky people to have the privilege of seeing my relatives and be taken to my ancestral village where my mother had spent her childhood. My uncle met me in Taishan on Thursday the 27th of November where we all had lunch together at the government house. Later on I met my Great Uncle and his wife and we all went to my mother's village in the town Yaxi. I hadn't really thought much about how it would be to visit my mother's village before actually arriving there so the thoughts and feelings I was experiencing were truly overwhelming. I never really realized just how much I could've actually gotten out of this trip. When we first arrived and headed towards our house, lots of people who were outside recognized my uncle from when he grew up there and I felt like I was being constantly introduced to people who knew my mother too. I was being told stories of who these people were and shown areas where my mother and uncle had played around together with them as children. It was almost an eerie feeling thinking that I'd still be living there as well if my mother had never moved to New Zealand. It was breathtaking being shown where my mother had slept in this small room and all through the rest of the house where she'd grown up. It was fairly dusty as no one was living there but the place was still intact. I did the traditional prayer with incense sticks and they set off some fireworks for me outside the house. The fireworks were different to western fireworks, there were very loud and spread pretty red petal looking like debris everywhere. I felt so welcomed by my family who were incredibly warm and generous.

Just before leaving the village, my great uncle insisted I ride on his motorized bike with him through the vast fields. I hopped on reluctantly without a helmet, but at the end of it did not regret it one bit. He told me stories of how hard my mother's life was 'back in the day' having to work all day growing all these different crops in huge fields and how she'd have to travel this great distance to get to work and across long muddy tracks – not smooth concrete as we were travelling over now. I gained a new respect for my mother from this trip but felt somewhat ignorant because of how little I'd really considered and appreciated how she'd grown up in a place like that. It made me feel really lucky to have had such an easy life.

I spent the rest of the day with my uncle when he took me around town to some shops

and also to a few friends' places where I saw a live chicken and duck being skinned for the first time. My uncle took me to dinner with some friends and family and it was at this time where I started to realize that each different area had its own specialty food. I had very similar dishes for lunch and dinner that day; goldfish and white turnip and also dinner was when I tried starfruit for the first time, which I found to be very tasty.

Visiting everyone else's village wasn't quite the same as visiting mine, but it was nice to see everyone go through the whole digging up the family history like I had. It was really interesting to see how different separate villages could be in their set out and size so much. There were some such as Eva's that had been completely renovated and occupied and some completely abandoned and run down so you had to even climb over the walls to get in like Nigel's.

After visiting villages for a few days, we went to the Magnificent China and Minority Village Cultural Park. Some of us went on a ride around the whole massive park and saw all their miniature versions of the main attractions in China. It was a great day seeing all these wonderful sights, going on a flying fox across water and also seeing two shows at night, one indoors and one outdoors before and after dinner respectively. The shows would have had to have been the best part of my day with their impressive acrobatic talents, perfectly synchronized acts, cannons and fireworks and general outstanding ability to present a show so well.

On the 6th of December towards the end of the wintercamp part of our trip in Guangdong, we had a day out at the Guangzhou Technical College. During the day we were taught the art of calligraphy and Chinese painting, which proved to be a lot more difficult than it looks, but still a lot of fun. After lunch we challenged the local students to games of basketball and soccer, which proved to be competitive, but in a friendly and enjoyable manner. In the evening after dinner we were surprised to go into such a nicely decorated hall with colourful lights everywhere. The students we met were so welcoming and friendly and eager to practice their English with us. While talking to the Chinese locals, I found a lot of them were saying how lucky we were to be able to travel abroad and that they have dreams of just even just travelling outside their hometown but being unable to because their parents will not allow them and also for financial reasons. During the evening they put on an entertaining and funny show for us and we did our performances of the Haka and a Maori song.

After two weeks time, it was time to leave Guangdong. We assembled outside early in the morning and loaded onto the bus, saddened with the realization that nearly half of our trip had passed and we were leaving people like Jessie and Cindy who had befriended and helped us so much in the time spent in China so far. The flight from Guangzhou to Hangzhou was a relatively short one, but nevertheless, most of us slept during the plane ride, winding down after an intense two weeks of village visiting.

Hangzhou was an amazingly beautiful place and our new tour guide, Bob told us many stories and history during bus rides around the city. We took a bike ride around Westlake one morning, a long distance but very rewarding at the end, despite not knowing where to go or even which direction where the road went or which side we were meant to ride on. Bob took us on a cruise after our tiring bike ride through Westlake which was nice and relaxing and helped us really appreciate the lovely lake. In Hangzhou we also visited temples, all with similar set outs and a giant Buddha, and went to visit the Dragon Well tea village where we tried various top quality herbal teas and saw how they were hand prepared.

Our next big city to visit was Shanghai, but first we stopped over at Xitang watertown. The watertown was a large scenic place where we saw quite a number of people there doing various things. There were young people scattered around the making beautiful sketches of the place and looked so deep in concentration, persistent shoe cleaners targeting us as we were a big group so quite a number of us got our shoes cleaned for 2 yuan. There were all different kinds of meats outside that we saw as we walked through the town just being preserved and dried out in the sun which we were then served in a dish for lunch, and despite seeing flies all around the meat earlier it was tasty and those who did consume it did not get sick anyway.

On the first day of arriving in Shanghai, we were left to explore ourselves and I went with a group to walk around the shops and we went to a big department store. It was incredibly large but I discovered that I preferred market shopping because not only do you have the fun of bargaining, but things were generally cheaper there too. We went up the great tower but unfortunately because of the weather and smog the view wasn't as great as we'd hoped, but we still took lots of photos of the scenery from that height that turned out ok. We were taken to a silk factory where we saw the silk worms and the entire lengthy process of how a silk product was manufactured. It takes so many silk worms to make just a single thread then subsequently numerous threads to a thin sheet and we were given the opportunity to pull each of these sheets over each other

to make incredibly soft quilt inners. This visit to the factory gave me a new appreciation of how much work and how many silk worms are actually involved to make any sort of silk garment.

Shanghai was almost as beautiful a city as its neighbour, Hangzhou. The boats on Hangpo River all looked so colourful and stunning and we were lucky enough to get a better view of everything on our cruise. One of the last organized events we had in Shanghai was a memorable acrobatics show. It was a great night of entertainment showing just how much talent that the Chinese people have, doing flips and balancing acts that I didn't even think was possible. One interesting thing I learnt from my time in Shanghai was that there's actually a language called Shanghainese.

Our final big city in China to visit was Beijing where we arrived by plane from Shanghai. Up until Beijing, the weather we had been experiencing was reasonably warm but Beijing was when we all had to pull out our thermals, beanies and gloves. The hotel that we stayed in was amazingly flash. Big rooms, a sauna that some of our group took advantage of and a lovely central area in between the 'U'-shaped layout of rooms with a forest-like set up with lots of greenery and chirping birds and seats so we could sit and relax all together in the evenings and any other spare time. The first set of markets we went to were the Pearl markets; a four storey high building full of markets to shop at for all kinds of things. I was shocked in my first experience of shopping here, within the first few minutes of shopping I had been literally grabbed by two sales people by each arm telling me to wait. Shopping at the Pearl and Silk markets brought a whole new meaning to pushy salespeople, but I learnt to get used to it and enjoyed the bargaining you had to do with these people. One place we went to where you could not bargain at was the Jade Factory. We were told what jade was used for, saw how it was polished and prepared at this factory and also taught how to tell if jade was real and also the better quality of it by the higher pitched sound it creates when tapped.

One of the best days of the whole trip would have been the day we went to The Great Wall of China and Olympic Village, after the jade factory. At the Great Wall, we were given the option of two paths, one easy and one hard and I thought I may as well go for a challenge since I was there. I did not realize what I was up against and how steep some of the stairs were. It was an incredibly tiring trek, especially because I was sick, so I only made it to about half way up the harder route but later found out that it was still higher than the easy route most of the others went up. After many people in

our group protesting after the discovery that we were not going to be taken to the Olympic village, we went there in the late afternoon. Despite it being freezing cold, it was amazing to have had the opportunity to be in the place where the Olympics had been held that year and we were very thankful to have been taken here. We took many photos of the ice cube and bird's nest and around the area that all looked amazing. There were so many magnificent buildings everywhere and I was in awe of how big the place was. If there was anything to be improved about the trips to the Great Wall and Olympic Village, then I would say to allow us more time in these places. Only one student went inside the bird's nest because we came five minutes before it was closing off but I'm sure others would have paid to go inside if we had more time.

Other things we did in Beijing included going to the Tianamen Square and Forbidden City. I had no idea how big it would be, but was astonished at how large the place was – so large that a whole day could have been spent there. It was great to be there but again, I felt that we could have gone through the place more thoroughly and been told more of the history of a place so famous, although I understand that this can be quite difficult with such a large group. We did some more tea tasting, had a delicious Peking Duck dinner and went to see a Kung Fu show another night. At the show we purchased popcorn from those buttered popcorn makers you see at the movies but were surprised to get sweet popcorn, it was different to what we'd expected as it looked just like normal buttered popcorn but was slightly sweet, though still tasty. The Kung Fu show was well done, telling the story of a young boy going through the hard training to become a master himself and pass on his skill and wisdom. We did a lot in Beijing, making it my favourite big city in China that we visited. I found it the best for both sightseeing and shopping, making it the perfect place to be to go crazy on our last and free day in China to spend all the rest of our yuan on at the markets.

I found Hong Kong quite different to China; the place was just as crowded but much more westernized. We no longer had to worry about squat toilets while out during the day and were pleased to see a large range of familiar branded chocolates in the shops. The rooms we stayed in were quite small but the hotel was still very flash and had a brilliant view, being on quite a high floor. Our visit in Hong Kong was also quite different because we were all left to do our own thing. There were no more organized meals together and so it was a lot harder to organize things together as a group, especially because we were told off for keeping our doors open. I quite liked how in our previous hotels we'd mostly been on the same floor and left doors open to be

welcoming for others in our group into their room. Quite often there would just be a massive group of people accumulating in one room, not surprisingly usually the rooms where someone had a laptop and internet access.

It was quite hard to decide what to do in Hong Kong because there is a lot to do in such a little time. I had asked numerous people their opinions on how best to spend your time in Hong Kong but everyone tells you different things and I realized that it really just depends on the person. I spent the first full day with my family; I met up with my cousins, uncle and aunty who I'd never met before for yum cha and then one of my cousins took me out for the rest of the day. We went to Star Avenue, shopped around a bit and then she took me up to the peak. Although we tried to get there at a time so I could see the view from both day and night, we ended up waiting in line for over an hour, but it was well worth the wait. When I got up to the peak, the view of the city was remarkable and I was very gutted to have discovered that my camera had run out of battery, but I bought a professional photo which turned out well. That evening I met up with my mum's cousin for dinner and walked along Star Avenue at night and got more professional photos done there in front of the beautiful scenery looking out onto the water there.

The rest of the time in Hong Kong was spent shopping, visiting Ocean Park and Macau and we also went out to see what the nightlife was one night. Ocean Park was a big place with lots of giant escalators and where we went on lots of rides and saw pandas. The pandas would have definitely been my favourite part of the park, especially because I didn't go to Beijing Zoo, though now I almost wish I had because the pandas were so adorable. We went to Macau on a separate day at about 4pm and took a ferry across but what we didn't realize is that it took over an hour on our ferry to get there so we had a limited amount of time there before we had to get back before the last ferry and subway to get back to our hotel. Most of us tried Portuguese food for dinner and also their famous egg tarts. The group I was with walked around the place a bit and explored the Saint Paul's ruins, tried egg rolls and their pork and beef jerky before going to the casino where we gambled a little bit before heading back to Kowloon.

The flight back was a long one, but most of us slept and it gave us the opportunity to reflect back on all the wonderful things we had done in the past month. Upon arrival back in Auckland, a few of us were teary eyed as we said our goodbyes to one another. It would be very different now back at home not having 29 others to keep

you company but no doubt long life friendships have been formed on this trip. From a learning perspective, the time spent in China and Hong Kong has been an amazing experience that has made me appreciate all the intricacies of my culture a whole lot more and gave a greater understanding of my family.

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