

Andrew Gin Feedback report for the NZCA Winter Camp 2009

I had never been overseas before and had done a little bit of research into the cities we would be visiting. I was looking forward to seeing all of the cultural and historical landmarks in China and see for myself the enormous changes taking place. Unfortunately I had run into a significant problem before even leaving New Zealand: I had left my passport at home – not at my brother’s apartment in Auckland, but in Christchurch! I was reading the travel notes a few days earlier and it said it may be prudent to have a scan of the front page of your passport and visa saved on a USB drive. So I scanned it and saved it to a drive and thought job done – but the passport was still in the scanner. Fortunately my parents were able to courier it up on the next flight up to Auckland and I was able to take the next flight out to Hong Kong. Thanks to Janet for being able to get me onto another flight!

I was a little bit anxious when Janet was describing what I had to do when I got to Hong Kong; get on a bus, get off at the Hong Kong border, go through customs/immigration, then get back on the bus to the Chinese border and go through the customs/immigration again. However I could speak a bit of Cantonese so I was able to manage it without any drama. In fact, I quite liked having the chance to speak Chinese other than at home; it was a strange feeling to be able to speak Cantonese and have someone speak it back to you as if you are a local. Feeling “strange to be normal” is the best way I can describe it. For example I feel like a foreigner in New Zealand when I speak Chinese in public, yet it felt different –and- somehow familiar at the same time speaking Cantonese at Hong Kong airport.

The tour started with the Magnificent China and Minority Culture Park visit. The scope of the park was huge and it was a great way to see aspects of China we would not have been able to fit into the Wintercamp. Given that China is so large, even a miniature version of it is enormous and there wasn’t enough time to really look at all the plaques to get a historical background on all the buildings.

Shenzhen is quite a major city (as it is an SEZ) and it may have been good to see other attractions in Shenzhen, given the amount of investment the government is pouring into it. However given the timetable, this was probably not possible as it may have meant less time in the other cities. I was glad there was a return to Shenzhen after the initial stay, as I didn’t get a chance to get a ‘feel’ of the city (as I arrived 5 hours later!).

The time spent in Xintang (second city of the trip) seemed a bit more diverse as more of the city was seen (mainly during the bus trip to the villages). You could feel that the city had grown organically in contrast to other cities, which seemed to have more formal planning and expansion. Janet told us Xintang produced almost all the jeans exported from China and saw this in the Xintang villages. Seeing the jeans being worked on in the street gave insight into what ‘Made in China’ really meant and I liked this aspect. When I got back from China, I was looking at the labels of expensive clothes and saw they were made in China; looking at the price made me do a double take, knowing and remembering what I had seen in Xintang. For many people on the trip, there would have been a point at which everyone realised they were in China, not New Zealand. For me, it was Xintang and knowing there are other cities like it, seeing first hand the engine that is driving China’s growth.



Village outside Xintang

Following this was the stay at the Overseas Chinese Vocational School. I thought all aspects of this stay were excellent. The Kung Fu lessons were great and I really enjoyed the physical challenge. It would have been good to see some Kung Fu demonstrations other than the demonstrations at the 30th anniversary celebrations, but this may not have been possible due to the modesty principles. I'm glad we learned a complete sequence of movements from start to finish rather than a set of unrelated moves (which I was partially expecting).

The language lessons were also enjoyable and gave us knowledge that would be useful for the rest of the trip. The Chinese calligraphy was also enjoyable but there wasn't any painting. This was probably due to time constraints.

Interactions with the local students were also enjoyable, however it would have been good to have a bit more time. I didn't really get a 'feel' of what the school was about and felt we weren't really a 'part' of it; we were just there for the cultural lessons. The sports games were good and more interaction with the local students would have helped with this also. When we were leaving, we still felt a little like strangers as students would still stare at us wondering who we were. A week is probably too short a time to fully grasp the culture of the school though. I'm sure after our performances, no one would forget us and I liked being given the opportunity to perform and leave a mark.



A photo frame in my grandfather's house; my father's graduation photo is in the lower centre.

After the stay at the Guanzhou Vocational School, we went to Taishan. My relatives on my father's side live in Taishan, but my ancestral village (Ban Hung Choon is the best way I can spell it) is outside of Taishan. Seeing others visit their villages and relatives seems like a standard, normal part of the trip. However you can't really grasp how the others feel until you visit your own relatives and village.

When I walked towards the village, a man greeted me, asking me in Chinese "Are you Leung's son?", Leung being my father's name. The feeling of this can be best described as a shock. "Wow" is all I could think; I am far away from home, yet here were people who were related to me and knew my father. It was astounding having my relatives show me the house (the house is currently unoccupied) where my grandfather was born. What made it hit home even more was seeing a graduation photo of my father standing with my grandparents in a photoframe! I inspected the photos in the frame a bit more and there was another of my father and my grandmother standing in front of the Bridge of Remembrance, a landmark in Christchurch. Seeing things like this really seem to close the gaps, that this house wasn't a house of a distant relative, it is tied to me directly.

I also visited my grandmother on my mother's side who lived in Guangzhou city with my aunt and her family. I liked that we had the opportunity to spend dedicated time with our relatives; despite having

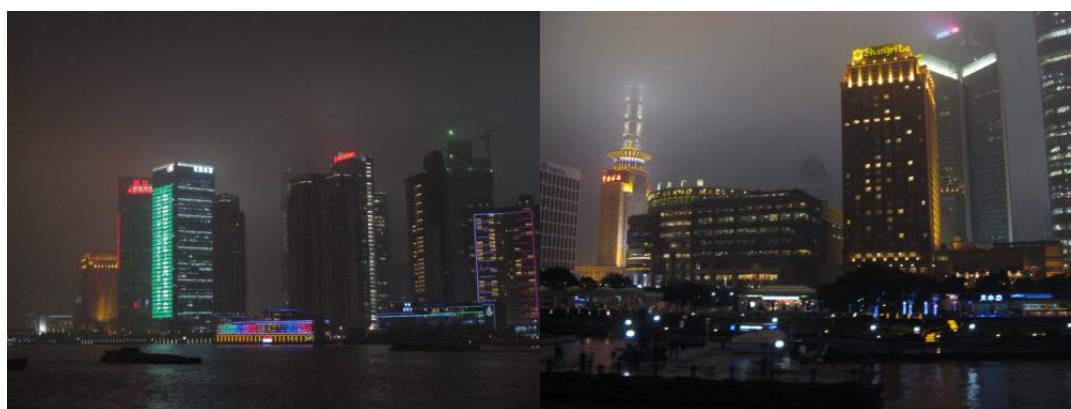
never met my aunt's family before, we were able to have an in-depth conversation at a restaurant about the differences between New Zealand and China and where we thought China was heading in the future. My vocabulary wasn't able to completely cover such deep topics, but I was able to manage by using more basic words to illustrate what I was trying to explain as well as having my cousin translate as he could speak a little bit of English. This experience made me feel lucky that I was able to speak Chinese and wished my vocabulary were a bit wider. Visiting the ancestral villages and relatives was a highlight of this trip and on its own makes the trip worthwhile. It is a testament to the skill of Janet, Jessie and the group organisers that they were able to track down everyone's relatives in the world's most populous nation!



Another photo frame in my grandfather's house; my father and grandmother are in the centre photo

Hangzhou was the next leg of the trip. I really liked the scenic bike ride around Westlake; it seemed to slow the day down, as this part of the trip signified the end of the 'root seeking' part of the trip and the start of the tourist part. While the first part of the trip was slow and easy, this part onwards, the trip seemed to pick up the pace and I couldn't really absorb it all as easily as the cultural parts in the first half of the trip. It was great learning about the history of Hangzhou as I had never even heard of it and did not realise its historical significance.

Xitang was the next stop of the trip before heading to Shanghai. This water village's houses were all several hundred years old and seeing old architecture still intact was one of the things I was looking forward to on this trip.



Pudong district on the Huangpu river cruise

Shanghai can be considered the first true metropolitan city I have been to. While Beijing and Hangzhou have a rich ancient history, Shanghai has an involved modern history (early 1900's onwards). Seeing the foreign trading houses on the Bund symbolised this history. The river cruise at night was excellent too, especially as it was foggy that night, it really made the city come alive. For me, Shanghai seems to be a microcosm of the change China is undergoing; the rate of change in Shanghai is huge. For example Janet told us the Jin Mao and Shanghai World Financial Centre could once be seen from the base of the Oriental Pearl tower (where we were standing anyway), but they were now partly obscured by partially completed towers that had been put up in 6 months. I also saw glowing sparks from welding in the scaffolding surrounding buildings under construction while out at night. This gave me the impression that Shanghai is a city that never sleeps (well the builders and welders don't!) and can be listed alongside the world's major cities such as New York, Paris, London.



Left Photo: the Jin Mao tower (centre) and the Shanghai World Financial Centre

Right Photo: The Oriental Pearl Tower from the Shanghai World Financial Centre Sky walk

We flew to Beijing from Shanghai and it was here that we definitely noticed the change in temperature. For me, this city felt like the most "Chinese" of the cities we went to as it there were fewer English signs (unlike Shanghai for example). The ancient history here is all about excess and opulence and it really is incredible to see the various landmarks, which are hundreds of years old, still standing. It was great to finally start seeing landmarks that we had seen in miniature in Shenzhen. The first of these was the Temple of Heaven. One aspect I had looked forward to was being in the exact areas where people would have been hundreds of years ago. Just walking along corridors and through courtyards, it is hard to believe I'm really walking through an ancient temple, where hundreds of years ago, people were walking through the exact same spot.

The Forbidden City was also amazing. The scope and expanse is vast and you could easily spend a whole day there and still not see everything. After the tour visit, a small group of us went again on our free day to see the parts that were closed off due to increased security for a visiting foreign official. It was also incredible to see they had aligned so many buildings north to south, in line with Tiananmen Square and the Drum and Bell towers. The level of tiny detail applied to these buildings (such as the roofs in the Forbidden palace and the paintings decorating the Long Corridor at the Summer Palace) is unbelievable and hard comprehend such workmanship exists even today let alone hundreds of years ago.

Hong Kong was the wind down of the trip. Given three free days, we all took this opportunity to slow down the pace a bit after the intense touring. Almost all of us went to visit the Tian Tan Big Buddha on

the first day and Ocean Park on the second. The third day I spent exploring Hong Kong, but not straying too far as we were flying out later that day and I didn't want to miss the flight!

All aspects of this tour (the stay at the school, visiting the ancestral villages and touring Hangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing) have been excellent. It is clear to me that the Wintercamp formula has been refined over several years and that adding anything to the fully loaded 30 days will unfortunately mean something else will need to be removed or shortened to make time for it.

I am glad the itinerary included what it did, as there was nothing I would have wanted to see instead. My only suggested improvements are to perhaps have more time spent in Shenzhen, or see more of the city during our time there (but not if it means less time spent elsewhere as I think the tour organisers have got the balance with the limited time just right!). Also possibly more integration during the stay at the Overseas Chinese Vocational School could be achieved by more interaction with the local students, but this is no big deal.

The second half of the trip already feels quite tightly packed and adding anything else would make it even more hectic. I already feel the second half is a bit harder to absorb everything (because of how much is packed in), but am glad that we were able to see so much. I definitely preferred seeing what we did, instead of the alternative, seeing less in order to have a more leisurely place.

Given China's huge size, it wouldn't really be possible to fit much more in the trip (such as other cities for example Chongqing etc). So with this part, as all the major cities have been covered, I think the organisers have also got the balance perfect.

I'd like to thank the NZCA and Virginia for organising the trip. I'd also like to thank the tour guides for their in depth knowledge and Jessie at the Guangzhou Overseas Chinese Vocational School and Janet for tracking down all our relatives and villages. In particular I'd like to thank Janet for not only being a knowledgeable tour guide but also having the energy and patience to organise our group! I highly recommend every New Zealand born Chinese to take this trip.