

"NZCA Wintercamp 2009"

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As a participant on the 2009 NZCA China Wintercamp, I would first of all like to thank the New Zealand Chinese Association, Janet Joe, Virginia Chong, the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Office, my fellow participants on the camp, and our supportive families for providing us with one of the greatest experiences of my life.

Everything from the kungfu lessons, visiting our ancestral villages and getting suits tailor-made in Shanghai, to performing the haka in front of 1500 people and eating Peking duck in Beijing, made the trip one I would recommend to all other young New Zealand Chinese like myself- who have the slightest interest in visiting China one day.

The trip has helped me make many great new friends, see some amazing sights and historic places, and experience China in a way I will never forget. I could write and talk for hours about everything we did and saw, and the unbelievable amount food we ate each day, however I will compress it all and write about the key highlights, and offer a few recommendations for future trips and 'trippers'.

Highlights of the Wintercamp 2009:

1. Guangdong Overseas Chinese Vocational School

Our stay at the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Vocational School was a brilliant way to settle into life in China- being really fun, active, and educational. Out of all the activities and sights we saw apart from visiting our ancestral villages, this school was definitely one of the greatest highlights and experiences of the trip. It was here that we learnt our basic mandarin; that jeans are not great for doing kung fu or the 'ma paw' stance; boys can enjoy knot-tying classes more than girls; China has amazing food; and most of all, it is near impossible to teach the school kids how to play touch rugby.

The school provided a great chance to interact with some locals, and we really enjoyed the opportunities to play them in sport and meet and talk with them in the classroom. Learning kung fu each morning was a great start to each day, and the first time I have done any sort of martial arts. In fact, I enjoyed it so much that I have seriously contemplated returning in the future to learn more. As an added bonus, this daily workout not only provided us with some vital exercise to offset the month long marathon of eating, but it also gave us a wide range of new photo poses that would be used throughout the trip.

The accommodation and facilities at the school were comfortable, and I would have loved to have stayed there longer. Whilst the bathroom facilities involved shared shower/lavatory cubicles, and the beds were made like stone, each room was spacious and had plenty of room to relax, do your washing, and live for the week long stay. It also offered something different to the hotel rooms which we stayed in for the rest of the trip, the best part being that we could get outside and play sports away from the bustling China city life and busy streets.

With each tour group expected to perform several acts in front of the school each year, it was just our luck that we were to perform ours during the 30th Anniversary of the school in front of over 1500 people. A quick recommendation for future groups, be prepared. To add to the pressure of our performance, we had counted on having at least an additional week to learn, practice and polish our acts. However during lunch one day we were surprised to be informed we would be performing that evening despite only a half hour of prior practice. After a nervous bus ride to the school, and a crash-course in haka practice, we got on stage and let the adrenaline rush carry us through.



2. Visiting our Ancestral Villages

While I have had the grateful experience of visiting China and our villages on two previous occasions with my Grandfather, the experience of going back for a third time was just as special.

Walking back through the villages, reuniting with relatives we had met on our trips back, and stepping into our ancient family homes again, felt so familiar and exciting. Seeing the familiar faces of our relatives and even those of some of the villagers for a third time has strengthened our 'link' back to the villages. Having relatives who you can meet, give photos too, and learn your heritage and family history from, really enhances the experience of going back to China. I would thus recommend that each future participant on the Wintercamp, take the time to learn about their family history before the trip, and take back some photos of your family, or a guestbook which you and future family members can go back and see. Photos are highly appreciated by the relatives in China, and it was funny to see that one of ours carried a photo of my family in his wallet!

Going back as a group we realised just how closely linked New Zealand Chinese are. It was to our surprise that although many of us had never met prior to the trip, that our ancestors were from the same villages, and in one case, neighbours and close-relations. In each village there were different sights to see and it was interesting to hear stories about the various villages, and the history of each others' families.

As we learnt, you are also highly likely to be forced into accepting a 'gift' from your relatives before you leave as kind gesture. In our case, two bags of unusual tasting fruit. My advice, you must take them. But if you want to get rid of them later, pretend to place some in your mouth, say "mmmmmm" loudly for others on the bus to hear, then offer as many as you can to the group to try...worked well for me.

3. Beijing and the Great Wall of China

While we saw some amazing temples, acrobatic shows, factories and sceneries throughout our trip, the capital Beijing, offered the best of the best. I had always imagined the Forbidden City and the Great Wall to be awesome places to see. But the sheer size of each place, and the actual feelings you had when being on the Great Wall and inside the walls of the Forbidden City were beyond explanation.

Each step up the wall, and each time I took a look around the landscape, it was unbelievable to think that we were actually on the Great Wall of China. The stairs were steep, uneven, and in places icy. There were tourists everywhere, young and old, most dressed up in thick jackets and beanies, and some crazy girls in heels. It was a tough climb, but highly enjoyable, and I would have loved to have had more time to climb further and soak in the scenery.

For those seeking a chance to try some exotic food, Beijing was the place to do it. With a short subway ride to Wangfujing, we found ourselves gazing down an alley of foodstalls selling the types of food I had been waiting to find. There were starfish, seahorses, scorpions, grubs and many other 'delicacies' to test the palate. The best food on offer was the foot-long chicken, pork, beef and lamb meat kebabs that cost a mere 2 Yuan each. The worst however, were the burnt, crispy, and 'off' tasting barbequed starfish sticks.

4. Shopping

Considering I had a plan to not buy too much, my evaluation at the end of the trip and tight fit back into my bag on the way back, proved that China is a place you just can't resist spending up in. Although I was a long-shot from many of the girls in terms of shopping, I certainly came back with my fair share. I think like everyone else, the thrill and enjoyment of haggling is often more satisfying than the actual purchase.



The majority of us found the Tailors Market in Shanghai (near the Nanpu Bridge subway station), to be the best place to buy clothes on the trip. Most of us leaving with a set of tailored shirts, suits, and cashmere coats for only a fraction of the costs paid back home. This market also felt a lot more genuine and trustworthy than the marketplaces in many other places, where shop attendants would yell out at us saying- “Genuine Armani suit! New fashion, make in Italy. I give cheap price to you!”

When shopping in China there are several tips to remember:

- a. Avoid eye contact unless you actually want to buy something.
- b. Start low with your price and don't give in too easy.
- c. If you miss out on something, shrug it off and apply the “Walk-away” technique. If you walk away, they generally drop their prices. But if not, there's always many more stalls selling the exact same product.
- d. Remember you have to find room in your suitcases (or someone else's) to take it all home.
- e. Also be aware of counterfeit money in circulation.

5. Food and good old Chinese meals

It is a well-known fact that Chinese culture and people have a tendency to place great importance on their food. So unsurprisingly, the large meals which we enjoyed but tediously ate three times a day, have been classified as one of my biggest highlights of the trip. From buffet breakfasts including all-you-can-eat wontons, dim sum, char siu bao, bacon and eggs and jook, to 9-course meals every lunch and dinner; every region, city, and restaurant offered food we just couldn't turn down and felt guilty about leaving behind.

Asking around the bus before every meal, it was astounding to hear how many people were ‘starving’ and couldn’t wait for the big feed ahead, considering we had usually just had a full meal only a couple of hours earlier, and spent the hours in between sitting on the bus. The meals were such an occasion each day that we even formulated ‘The A team’- a team of the top eaters in the group, dedicated towards finishing **EVERYTHING** on the table.

The best restaurants in my opinion were: the Peking duck restaurant in Beijing, the school cafeteria and buffet yum-cha restaurant in Guangzhou, and the canal-side restaurant in the Xitang water village. In each visited region, we were offered dishes and delicacies special and traditional to their specific parts of China, and I constantly found myself discovering new ‘favourite’ foods. We ate so many different dishes that we can barely remember what we ate, but thanks to Natalie and her dedicated effort to record a ‘food-diary’, we can all look back and gasp at the quantities we demolished, day-in day-out.

Recommendations for future participants:

- a. Don't bother taking cans of spaghetti or baked beans over with you- you will only end up eating them cold on your last day in Hong Kong.
- b. If you want to take food, take snacks, chocolate, lollies, and biscuits- you never go hungry and most western food cravings are satisfied at the hotel buffet breakfasts.
- c. Take one power adapter and a multi-plug to charge your electronics.
- d. Take a suitcase over a backpack if you have the option- they have more room, and you aren't required to carry your gear often enough for a pack.
- e. Take thermals, but if you need beanies, scarves or gloves, they are cheaper to buy in the markets over there if you don't have any.
- f. Take a pair of lightweight long pants for kung fu.
- g. One or two laptops per group is ample- internet cafes are cheap, and laptops are really only needed for transferring photos.
- h. Always be ready in case you are interviewed and filmed for your village TV channel.
- i. Save serviettes from the restaurants- not all bathrooms have toilet paper.
- j. If you have time, learn as much Chinese as you can before you go, or take a phrasebook.

Recommendations for future trips:

- a. Maybe have more organised sports events or physical activities after the stay at the school- great fun, a way to interact with more locals, and time to get some exercise. Sports or activities could include: going to a basketball club, visiting more universities/schools for games, or learning to play table tennis.
- b. Definitely return to the school for future trips. Seek possibility of more kung fu/language/cultural classes. All were fun and offered some great lessons about Chinese culture.
- c. Shorten the times when participants are dropped off in city centres to 'explore' between sights. Often we did not know where to go, and had too much time to fill just wandering streets. For example, Hangzhou- 3 hours in the city centre could have been less, would have preferred to walk around the lakes for 2 hours; 4 hours in the markets in Beijing vs. more time on the Great Wall- we could go to the markets everyday.
- d. Provide a written list of all the best sights, things to do, and advice recommended for each city. Janet had some great advice and incredible knowledge, and it would enhance the trips if we could source that knowledge on the go- more convenient than having to find/contact Janet when out and about. Maps for each city would also be good to gain a better feel of each city and its geography.

All in all it was a great trip, and I am glad I took the opportunity to go. It was an amazing cultural experience, and one which really makes you proud to be New Zealand Chinese. Travelling back to China to seek our roots and experience the culture and homes of our ancestors should be an integral part of all overseas Chinese. The chance to travel and experience the culture with 23 awesome friends (and cousins), and a great tour guide (thanks Janet) should not be passed down.

Once again I would like to thank everyone involved in the trip for contributing to a great experience. It was an awesome month seeking our roots, and I would highly recommend the trip for all others wishing to go back, make new friends, and learn more about our Chinese heritage.

Cheers,

Logan Lim

A few more pictures from the trip...



The marble hole where our Yeah used to play.



The Longjin Tea tasting session.



View from the watchtower in the Gua Ling village.