

Stacey Wong : New Zealand to China, NZCA Wintercamp 2009.

I always knew that I would one day travel back to China to seek my ancestry and connect to my culture, I just never quite knew how or when. When my two eldest brothers did the trip in 2004 and the last going in 2007, I knew it was only a matter of time before it was my turn. I bided my time and waited until I finally thought I was ready. I knew it would be an onslaught of information, culture, experiences and my chance to finally farewell the family members who were lost in China. I knew that maturity would go a long way in appreciating this trip. So come 2009, I decided I was ready to embark on this trip of a lifetime. At 19 years old I knew this trip was coming at the perfect time. I was half way through my degree and I was starting to wonder who I was in the larger scheme of things. My inspiration meter was running at an all-time low and what better to top it up than with some soul searching on a trip back to the motherland.

This trip had become somewhat of a tradition in my family, sort of a coming of age event for the grandkids, a trip that takes New Zealand born kiwis back to China to search out their ancestral villages every year. This trip is something I will never forget...and it gave me 22 new friends on Facebook.

All the people on this trip had such a strong sense of Kiwi identity and we were all in China for the same reason. We all wanted to discover what it meant to be a New Zealand born Chinese, wanted to see why exactly our ancestors chose to move their whole life and family to New Zealand. We also had nothing to do this summer and had encouraging parents at the sideline with a cheque book at the ready.

Our ten hour flight finally landed in Hong Kong airport where we drove straight into it. I was in awe at how rapidly China was industrializing and urbanizing. There was a strange beauty to it though, this hasty industrialization. It was then that I realized that we were in China during a massive shift in the way that they lived. The start of the modern age. Question: When was the first moment that I realized that I wasn't in New Zealand anymore? Answer: The very first day, in particular, when the bus driver decided to do a U-turn on a very busy highway in Shenzhen. It was then that I realized that I was not in my beloved Wellington anymore.

It was in Shenzhen that I realized how great language was going to be a barrier. Louise and I simply wanted to buy some make-up from the department store; disaster was going to unfold had it not been for Linlee. It was clear that the Mandarin speakers were going to be a very hot commodity in our camp. Staying in the Sunon Hotel was really fantastic, I would not have been able to navigate the streets of Shenzhen on my very first night, tired and confused and not knowing a word of Mandarin, so staying near the shops was very helpful.

The next day we went to the Splendid China and the Minority Culture Park and it was a really great opportunity for me to get to know everyone. It was great walking around Splendid China to anticipate some of the sights we eventually get to see once we start heading up north. I do feel though, that if I hadn't done as much research into the places we were going to that a lot of it would have been lost on me. I particularly enjoyed the Minority Culture Park as my Chinese culture had always taken a backseat to my kiwi culture and I had never even thought about looking past my own culture to the smaller

cultures that make up China. As a designer I found the shows extremely inspirational as I wanted to come on this trip to seek inspiration for my art and what I have found is this rich culture that transcends every expectation I had for it.

Once we started going to the villages and really looking at our ancestry it really started to dawn on me the sacrifice my ancestors had made so that my parents generation and the generations after could have a better life. Janet was amazing in organizing for my second cousin and I to meet with a village contact that my brothers had made in previous years. It was really fantastic having them there to show me around. They were so excited about us being there and were very quick to show us photos of our family to help us understand how we were all connected (Irene and I are fourth cousins!). I had seen photos of my brothers at the villages and my turn had finally come around and I found myself nearly in tears at the top of this rickety little ladder in my grandmother's home. I was in a completely foreign country where I felt so small and in this small, tiny area of China, I had a home and there were people who actually knew and cared who I was. On the same day I was able to visit my grandfather's village, so I dusted myself off with half a packet of wet wipes and a lot of assistance and went to find the house in which my grandfather was born.

One thing I believe we did differently to the years before us was that we stayed at the school and learnt kung fu there instead of going to Foshan and staying in hotels. Whilst it was annoying at the time, knowing that we could be staying in nice hotels without washing machines that flooded the bathroom, a shower without a squat in the middle of it and an elevator, it was one of the most enjoyable parts of the trip. It really gave us grounding and let us settle into a routine and gave us more freedom. We were allowed to use our free time between classes however we wanted to, we didn't need a bus to take us back to our rooms if we wanted to rest and we could go down to the markets anytime that we chose to. We didn't have a strict timetable like we did for the rest of the trip and that was nice. It was also the closest experience we had of really living in China. Staying at the school meant that once classes were over we could run around and play some sports on their vast sports grounds and interact with the other students (granted a gentle nudge was needed). Learning Kung Fu was definitely an experience, it required not only physical dedication (hot weather + long johns = not pleasant) but also patience and respect. It is something I would be very interested in continuing now that I'm back at home. Same goes for the Mandarin lessons, now that I have started to learn the basics I find myself very interested in learning more. The lessons were particularly helpful as they equipped us with some lines to take to the markets so those pesky shop assistants would hopefully rip us off slightly less. The school gave us a place we were familiar with and after travelling around Guangzhou for a few days it was nice going back to the school for the 30th anniversary to a place we knew.

Once we finished up in Guangzhou, things started to really happen in fast-forward. We visited Hangzhou, which, really is one of the most beautiful places in the world. You forget that under all the smog, pollution and over-population there are places like Hangzhou in China where there is beauty hiding underneath the surface. We had an amazing time visiting the city's main attractions and hearing around its history of romance and tragedy. We didn't spend long there however and we were onto our next stop in Shanghai via the Wuzhen water town, which really was something special on its own. Shanghai was my favourite stop on the trip, I would love to go back and really have a better look around

as I feel like I missed out on so much there. It may not have had the same rich history as Beijing but it's a city that has an amazing future. Some of my favourite buildings were in Shanghai and the rapid development of this city is nothing short of astounding. The tailors markets were also a highlight of our time in Shanghai, I had tons of fun getting my designs made into real garments and seeing everybody in their tailored garments afterwards, the boys all looked very smart in their tailor made suits. We also got to start our journey to becoming haggling masters in the fake markets under the Science and Technology Museum. The clubs in Shanghai were amazing. Full stop. Our time in Shanghai was brief and we all were looking forward to heading to Beijing so we could start taking in all the sights.

Beijing is incredible. The history and culture surrounding this city is so rich and amazing. I felt a bit ashamed that I didn't know as much about my own culture as I should have, this culture and history is my families and I knew next to nothing about it. As a designer you search and search for a source of inspiration that is yours and different to everyone else's and I had this rich, wealth of visual and cultural inspiration that I had completed neglected. We'd sit with Janet at meal times and she'd be able to tell us all about we were going to see the next day so that it did hold some relevance to us. There were so many amazing places we went to but my favourite was on the very first day once we landed in Beijing when we went to the Temple of Heaven. It was such a beautiful place and it started our journey to learning about the rich history that is China. The day we went was perfect, a bright winter's day. The beauty of the place on that day just transcended all photos I had previously seen of it.

Our time in Beijing included other mind blowing places such as Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City, Ming Dynasty Tombs, Summer Palace, a tour of the Hutongs and more. The Kung Fu show in Beijing was certainly a treat, their lifetime of practice put our 3 days of practice to utter, utter shame. The Great Wall: The single most physically and emotionally draining experience of my life. My family have a sad history when it comes to the Great Wall and climbing the Great Wall drew another parallel between myself and my late Aunty. It was my first chance to go back to where she died and say my goodbyes. So a big thanks to Janet and Oscar for organising an opportunity for me to buy flowers and pay my respects properly. My time in Beijing was absolutely astounding, not just the beautiful sights but also the shopping! The Silk Markets were so close which made shopping so easy, when we'd brought too much to carry, we simply ran back to the hotel, dropped off our stuff and ran back to do some more damage. Some of the trippers and I found this fantastic Art area called the 798 Art District in the Dashanzi area (thanks Dan for discovering it!), I was so impressed with this art space that I went back again on our next free day. Even if you're not an artist or a designer I would still highly recommending visiting the area as it was certainly one of the highlights of my time in Beijing (except it was just SO cold!)

The unorganised portion of the trip in Hong Kong was also a lot of fun, a lot of the Cantonese speakers were relieved to be somewhere we they understood the language after a month of struggling, being a non-Cantonese speaker myself I still struggled throughout Hong Kong (but I did pick up some choice phrases for next time my mother talks about me in Cantonese!) After seeing many temples and Buddhas during our travel around China we still wanted to ride the Gondola to see the Big Buddha. We also gathered the troops and went out to Ocean Park in our tour tee-shirts and then headed out to the Avenue of Lights. My only regret in Hong Kong is not getting an opportunity to visit Macau and not hitting the shops as hard as I hoped I had.

This trip was really a trip of a lifetime; I had the most amazing time of my life. I managed to learn more about Chinese history, language, culture and myself in one month than I had in 19 years living in New Zealand. As cliché as it is, this trip changed my life and now that I have discovered my Chinese culture, it is something I never plan on giving up. My sincerest thanks go to the New Zealand Chinese Association and Virginia for organising such a trip and our tour guides Jessie Chen, Sunny, Kelly Lee, Richard, Calvin and Oscar for making this trip as rewarding as it was, their wealth of knowledge of their home meant that we were able to learn so much about our culture and experience China like we should. Also thanks to the International Vocation School in Guangzhou for accommodating us and making us feel so welcome. And lastly, thanks to all the amazing, amazing people that I shared this experience with, I have made friends for life and will forever hold them dear. And to Janet Joe, who without her, our trip would have crashed and burned. She was amazing with her patience and knowledge of China, and was just generally awesome. I would highly, highly recommend this trip to every New Zealand born Chinese that is in a position to do this trip as I can guarantee that you will discover what it means to be a Chinese born in New Zealand. I've fallen in love with China and plan to travel back as soon as I can. Thanks again NZCA and I'll see you at Easter.