

Impressions of China

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Barbara and I travelled to China with a group of ten Canadians (eight from the Vancouver area and two ladies from Edmonton). We had excellent English-speaking guides throughout the trip and everything ran like clockwork. We left Vancouver on May 2nd and returned on May 16th, 2012.

China is indeed a fascinating country with a rich history and culture, much of which was ignored by the West for many centuries. The country is changing fast and is without doubt an emerging superpower. During our trip we visited seven different cities (Beijing, Wuhan, Yichang, Chongqing, Xi-An, Suzhou and Shanghai). The smallest of these, incidentally, was Yichang, with a population of only 4.1 million! Between Wuhan and Yichang we had a five and a half-hour bus ride which gave us a glimpse of rural China.

A highlight of the trip was a four-night cruise on a river boat on the Yangtze River. We visited the Three Gorges Dam (largest hydroelectric project in the world) and took in the sights of the Three Gorges along the Yangtze. Of course we visited the usual tourist attractions (Tiananmen Square and Forbidden City in Beijing, the Great Wall, Terracotta Warriors Museum in Xi-An and the Bund in Shanghai). Everywhere the strong work ethic of the Chinese was in evidence. Development in the cities is proceeding on a massive scale. In Shanghai alone we were told that there are about 2,000 high rise towers under construction

with 26 or more floors! Forests of tower construction cranes were everywhere to be seen in the cities. In Suzhou I counted 22 visible from our hotel window. Highways were generally excellent with many new bridges, overpasses, etc., under construction, including several major bridges across the Yangtze River.

In spite of the frantic pace of construction, China is taking strides in beautifying the cities. Most of the main roads and highways have carefully tended flower beds and trimmed box hedges along the centre dividers and are bordered with freshly planted ornamental trees for as far as the eye could see. Many new parks have sprung up, planted with immaculately kept flower beds, shrubs and trees. In two weeks of travel I never once spotted an example of graffiti. The streets and parks generally were the cleanest I have seen anywhere, with virtually no litter in evidence. Smog in the cities however is a persistent and noticeable problem. The hotels we stayed at (4- and 5-star) were excellent, and food (all Chinese, except for hotel breakfasts, which offered Western style buffet breakfasts as an option) was tasty, sumptuous and varied.

In all the tourist areas, helpful signs were posted in Chinese and English. For enthusiastic devotees of Chinglish (among whom I count myself) there were many examples of hilarious translations. Buffet hotel breakfast included "Corn flanks, walfees and gilled tomatoes." Glimpsed highway signs warned,



The Fengjie Yangtze Bridge is a cable-stayed bridge which crosses the Yangtze River in Fengjie, Chongqing, China. Completed in 2005, it carries 4 lanes of traffic. (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)

“Beware, Fowl Weather,” “Do Not Drive Tiredly,” “Oversize Vehile to Right,” “Overload Control Puarantee Safety” and “Sedimentation Observation.” The latter was spotted in a rock cut and presumably should have been translated as “Watch for Falling Rocks.”

One of my favourites, sighted in a park: “Grass Smiling. Please Let It Alone.” Two more signs spotted in a public toilet: “Toilet Seat, Carefully Fragile” and “Please Waste Paper in Trash.” Signs posted on a stair in a Shanghai restaurant: “Beware of Slippery” and “Carefully Slide.” At the bottom of the stairs was a take-out food counter, advertised as “Outer Sell.” A sign in Suzhou at a boat loading dock warned would-be passengers: “Do not frolic when visiting.” Another on a low stone arched bridge over a canal advised: “The Bridge Opening is too low. Please take care of your head.” Sign on a high wall surrounding a

monument: “Civilized Watching, No Climb.” Finally, some helpful advice beside an airport metal detector: “Please Accept Inspection Consciously.”

Just imagine if we posted our public signs in English and Chinese the hilarity that would be provoked among Chinese speakers as a result of a few carelessly rendered brush strokes!

Chinese paper currency bears the image of the Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao. Having said that, in two weeks of travelling through China I only recall seeing two photos of Mao. One of course was the large iconic portrait dominating Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The other was a photo on the wall in a souvenir shop. Only once did I spot the Hammer and Sickle insignia, on a red banner somewhere. Our Chinese guides, who were well-informed, assured us that most educated Chinese are embarrassed by the excesses of the Red Guards

and the Cultural Revolution. In their eagerness to erase the old and build a new Workers' Paradise, much damage was done to some historic monuments and temples (most of which have since been restored), not to mention the widespread persecution and forced re-education of intellectuals and other perceived counter-revolutionaries. No one, it appears, wants a return to that kind of revolutionary fervour.

China has of course opened up to the West and, in recent years, has relaxed its relations with Taiwan. Mainland Chinese are now visiting and investing in Taiwan, and the Taiwanese have built hundreds of factories in China. Students from mainland China now attend universities in Taiwan and, we were told, some 720,000 people had relocated from Taiwan to Shanghai in the previous 10 years. I was even surprised to see copies of a biography of Chiang Kai Shek for sale in an airport bookstore.

Foreign brand cars, all built in China, are everywhere (Volkswagen, BMW, Honda, Toyota, Ford, Buick, Peugeot, etc.). Major American fast-food chains and retail giants are represented in the larger cities (McDonald's, KFC, Starbucks, Dairy Queen, Walmart, The Gap, to mention a few). UK's Tesco was spotted, as well as all the major US hotel chains (Ramada, Hyatt, Holiday Inn, Sheraton, etc.). There was even a knock-off Haiyatt Hotel sighted somewhere (or maybe the large sign at the top of the building was misspelled). Mao would be spinning in his mausoleum if he could see what his beloved Workers' Paradise has become!

The Chinese we met were all friendly and many were curious. On several occasions, a Chinese family would approach us to have our photos taken with them. Everyone in the cities appeared to be well-dressed and the young all fashionable with their jeans, iPhones, iPods and other assorted devices. The streets were clogged with cars, all appearing to be almost new, with hardly a scratch to show. In view of the unconventional driving habits and cheerful disregard for traffic rules, this was surprising. In two weeks of travelling I only recall seeing one minor rear-ender, in Beijing I believe. Not that many bicycles to be seen but hordes of motorized scooters abound, most of which appeared to be battery-powered.

There is much more to recount (visits to two world class museums, the Olympic stadium in Beijing, a silk factory (can't resist describing the marketing of dried and powdered silk worm poo for use as an anti-snoring remedy!), the superb acrobatic show in Shanghai, etc.). At least the above should give you a flavour of the country, admittedly from the point of view of a brief, first-time visitor.

Suffice it to say that China is indeed a country well worth the visit. •

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