

Having heard many reports of the New Zealand Chinese Association China Tour from various cousins, friends and aunties, it was my turn to go on the trip of a lifetime. Having spent in over a month in China at the 2006 Guang Dong Winter Camp, my new friends and I have started on a wonderful journey of discovery and excitement, learning about our culture, heritage and also ourselves as Chinese New Zealanders. After being home for a month, reflecting on the China Tour is similar to re-reading a treasured book. Special sights, great food, and good company... I couldn't think of a better way to see it.

Final year exams were soon over, I got the necessary injections and exchanged some money, then before I knew it, it was 7:30am on Saturday the 25th of November, 2006, at Auckland International Airport. Twenty-four buzzing 18-26 year olds, some parents, some shy siblings, and 24 big bags, some pretty empty, some pretty full, congregated in the group check-in area. After some incomplete group shots, it was goodbye to home, and hello to the 11 hour Cathay Pacific plane ride over oceans to the mother country.

Disembarking at Hong Kong, we were met by a southern China "winter" more tropical than our "spring/summer", which brought out the memorable bright purple tour t-shirts, emblazoned with a kiwi and a dragon, symbolising where we're from and where we were going, in both person and in place. The boys had been sceptical of the colour, however we all grew to associate the colour with the differences and the familiarity between the trip and home. The tour hoody is fantastic, the white shape of New Zealand printed on the back, has the names of the cities we were going to, and the names of all the tour members on it, was very "Huffer" and fondly worn by all on the trip.

An arduous continuation of the journey to our first hotel involved hopping off the bus twice and passing through immigration twice more to get into China. So much travelling and not enough sleep was not the best formula and I seriously thought I was going to be sick before the last immigration stop. But luckily for me, and my newly adopted "Je Je", that didn't happen. Many of the tour members had not been to China or Asia before, and were in awe of all the Chinese people, the different buildings, and scenery, and also the traffic. The bus stopped in what seemed like the middle of the road to let off a passenger going to another hotel, before finally, we were in Foshan, at the right hotel and given a list assigning us to hotel rooms, to which we warily dragged our bags to and followed instructions to go to the restaurant for dinner. Dinner at 9pm China time, which was equivalent to 2am NZ time... not surprisingly no one was very hungry and all were very keen to fall asleep in their fan.. I unfortunately don't remember what was for dinner apart from soup and sweet and sour pork, but it was the beginning of plentiful Chinese meals, for breakfast, lunch and tea.

All up as early as we could, we trudged to breakfast in our shorts and uniform t-shirts, all ready for breakfast. From there we followed Janet for what was to be a lesson in "Shanks' pony in China 101: How to get around without getting run over". The next four days were to be spent at the Huang Fei Hong martial arts academy, learning Kung Fu, in an authentic looking courtyard our friends back home would be impressed by, and 25 degree heat and extremely high humidity. The memorising of the sequence order and execution was more challenging for some of us, and the Sifu (masters) were very patient and helpful, even when they had very limited english, and spoke mandarin, whereas like most kiwi Asians, we knew little or no Cantonese. It goes to show actions speak louder than words sometimes. The hip hop dance instructor of the group was quick to pick up the routine and became the usual caller to keep everyone in synch, and I was proud that a female kiwi was leading the group.

In the end our Kung Fu performance to many Guang Zhou officials, reporters and visitors to the centre ran relatively smoothly despite the performance happening outside the walls of our practice sanctuary, and in a different orientation. We were in no way up to the standards

expected, and we could feel the public noting our incorrect stances, or false starts. When called up again, the New Zealand national anthem was sung very nicely, and the spectators were shocked and impressed when the boys took off their shirts and gave an awesome rendition of the Ka Mate haka. One of the main reasons for the stunned remarks of “Wa! Chiu sarm, chiu sarm!!!” were because despite the heat, it was winter for the locals, where even the children were dressed in several layers of long sleeved clothing. Foshan is not a place I would be keen to visit in summer!

In the evenings in Foshan we attended the scheduled Mandarin classes. It was not ideal to be taught about a new language after we’ve done a full day of Kung Fu and have jet lag, however I pity the people who already knew mandarin and sat through the lessons discussing different words and pronunciations of much more complicated material. With everyone jetlagged, and still settling into routine on the tour many had restless nights without much sleep, but full days of Kung Fu settled this. I liked the idea that Janet put us in rooms with different people at each different hotel, and I’m really glad there were enough stops to allow me to get to know all the girls really well.

It was from that first hotel that I learnt that everything in the hotel room needs to be checked in the beginning, or you get a surprise at checkout when the staff report you have a broken lampshade in your room... I didn’t even know the room had a lamp shade... Then we packed into the bus again and we headed for the ancestral villages.

On our last night in Foshan, our two young Sifu joined us for dinner at the hotel and our whole tour group went with them to a good bonding session of karaoke. Fortunately there were English songs and some of the group are regulars at karaoke bars in Wellington, so the evening ran very well.

Taishan was the first stop. The hotel in Taishan was pretty basic, not as nice as Foshan, but situated next to a pretty lake. Some of the group who had never been to China were a little shocked at the perceived lack of hygiene standards and the idea of washing your cutlery and plates in hot tea before the meal, however this ritual is part of the experience and just became routine.

The first Seyip village we got to was a quaint little village with the grandmothers sitting around playing cards, and chickens and the odd dog running free, beside paddocks of crops. The Chinese farmers really do wear those ice cream cone-shaped hats in the fields! This introduction to village life was a bit of a wake up call to us, and I know we all started wondering “what if our families never upped and left China?!!”.

That night we followed instructions from cousins and sisters and friends who had been the previous year, and searched for Freedom City, the night club, which was literally next to the hotel, the neon lights visible from the hotel restaurant. We dressed up in our best party outfits and headed over to the club... What an introduction to nightclubbing in China!! First of all, being from New Zealand the weather was lovely and warm, and I who will take a jacket everywhere did not require one this night, especially with the close proximity to the hotel! Once inside we were chased down by the wait staff to pay for seats at tables, which entitled us to a selection of drinks – various flavoured RTDs, beers, and more fresh fruit – where we would be without our tour father figure and interpreter, Tim?!! All the other patrons were seated and drinking and talking, while performers entertained before the main dance floor was due to open at midnight. We had a great time dancing around to western songs reminiscent of what would be playing at home, and next time will get together and dance straight away!

We had a fantastic night, departing on a high and bought some late night munchies on the way home. The stall holders had the charcoal barbeques that are used for satays to cook a whole variety of meats, chicken wings, tasty sausages and so forth. We threw caution to the wind, ignoring all those tales and fore-warnings of not eating from little stalls because of the lack of hygiene and risks of hepatitis and so forth.....The chicken wings were great! Even Dr Steve had a little bite!

The next day we were off to Guang Zhou and it was from here that we were to visit most of the ancestral villages. The hotel started off on a bad foot with linen requiring changes and a lack of sleep catching up on everyone, but we had time to chill out, sleep and revitalise. The Sunday was spent driving around Guang Zhou in the tour bus visiting the sights of our "home" city. I regret not making time to read up on all the sites and attractions in China. A little more information would have been helpful, possibly in the form of a paragraph or two of written information, possibly on the itinerary, which we could read for more details on the bus if required. We visited the Chen Ancestral Temple where I had fun playing a traditional flute, thinking about which one to buy, and then not ending up buying any at all... then we visited the Yiu Xiu Park with the hill with statues of 7 goats atop (apparently where all the Youngs go, as in Chinese it sounds like the word for sheep), and the Guang Zhou museum which had nice buildings, scenery, ancient stone tablets, many examples of pottery, canons, and other archives. With an introduction to the memorial in Chinese, the Dr Sun Yat Sen memorial hall was another building.

The visit to the Technical College today was a very happy experience. We really enjoyed conversing with peers from the school in Guang Zhou and sharing games and songs with them. The impromptue karaoke was particularly enjoyable and we were impressed with the chinese language skills of the overseas students also studying at the school from non-Chinese origins! It was a very nice day which we all thoroughly enjoyed and will always remember.

The village visits were wonderful. I was fortunate to visit my ancestral villages of Pong Wo, Se Gong and Narm Cheung, and surprisingly on arriving home, I discovered that I had also spent a day at my Pohr Pohr's village also! It was a very special experience to see where my family originated from, looking around the ancestral homes with a strong feeling of familiarity and belonging, and I will remember it forever.

Despite the noticeably cooling temperature as we headed north, the Xi Tang water village and Hangzhou were two of my favourite places on the trip. I loved the atmosphere and history of the water village and rather think the rain and mist made it all the more authentic. Hangzhou, City of Romance, was lovely based around the West Lake.

Shanghai was interesting, but being halfway through the trip where everyone was tired, spending a long time at the tailors and not fully understanding the background of the Old Shanghai Town made the city rather plain in our minds. We enjoyed the Yu Garden and markets and getting clothes made was novelty.

Moving up to Beijing, the weather got colder, but in contemplation of the ever-nearing completion of the tour, everyone picked up and made the most of the tour. The overnight train from Shanghai to Beijing was thoroughly enjoyable and I am really glad we got the opportunity to experience it!

The Beijing history and sights were great, although once again, my lack of prior research on the sights and history left me unable to appreciate the full Beijing experience. It was quite a change to be in such cold weather and had fun dressing up to keep warm! Tiananmen

Square and the Forbidden City were great and we enjoyed the rickshaw rides, though felt a little guilty to be driven around by other people cycling us around! The Summer Palace was magnificent, and it was exciting to see the frozen lake. Climbing up a section of the Great Wall was breathtaking. Being such a famous icon, many of us felt it difficult to comprehend that we had truly made it there – We were in Beijing, China, at the Great Wall! What a great feeling to stand atop the wall and look out over the valley and the winding path back down to the base. This Great Wall was also the end of the LCD screen on my digital camera, but luckily most of the sightseeing had been completed! It was a long day sight seeing and it was dark by the time we got to the Sacred Way, however walking through there in total darkness was something we would never be able to do again. The clothing market and our 'local' Silk Street market were fantastic and very exciting, and I know my mandarin was improving with all the bartering and chatting. I regret not buying a few things there, and I intend to return at a later date.

Holding our own Cheong Sarm ball at the Hotel in Beijing dressed in our new tailor-made cheong sarm dresses and the boys in their suits was fantastic. Everyone looked stunning and the photos that captured the event will always be a special point in everyone's album. It was one of our last nights in China before Hong Kong and so following those photos on the stairs in the hotel lobby, the tour group headed out once again to sing karaoke.

Hong Kong was fun, and we managed to get to Ocean Park, the Avenue of Stars, and buy out most of Granville Road, see some of the new Rolls Royce cars at the Peninsula, and stand in line to wait to enter the Louis Vuitton shop!

We started off as a group of near strangers, but with the experiences we have shared, I know we have formed memories and friendships for life. With twenty three new friends to keep in touch with, the resurgence of the group emails and frantic text messaging has already led to a "China Trip Reunion in Auckland with the excuse being Krystle and Larina's 20th birthday, and with other birthdays coming up, we hope there will be many more!

Thank you very much for this wonderful opportunity.

Sarah Young