

## China Winter Camp Report

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Going on the China trip was one of the best decisions I've made. Travelling through China, visiting my Grandparents villages, and sharing this experience with a whole lot of new friends. I found myself discovering my culture, learning more about my ancestral past and gain a greater appreciation to my lifestyle and surroundings much more than before.

The great adventure began on 23<sup>rd</sup> November where we boarded our plane and after 12 long hours we landed in Hong Kong airport. Because our flight was delayed, we had to jog to the connecting terminal which felt like it was on the other side of the airport. I noticed how grey and smoggy it looked outside confirming that we were far far away from clean, green NZ. We had a short flight to Guangzhou and an hour bus ride to Foshan, it was then that we were suddenly shocked at the level of dangerous driving displayed by the locals. There were so many nearby misses that kept everyone eyes on the road, there were numerous toll bridges, no road markings on the motorways and the drivers always tooted their horns and hardly used their brakes until the very last second.

In Foshan we learnt how to cross the road – the secret was to cross with the locals and keep moving across slowly even if the vehicles did not look like they were going to stop, it was pretty scary at first but we all mastered it in the end. This is also where we were first introduced to the squat toilets – a real shock to some and a new experience for others. There were many buildings with storeys of shopping (which I had never seen before) and I was very eager to explore. There are so many shops and different styles and everything had more detail to them, there was more service at stores and many more people in the streets - even at night. We learnt Kung Fu over the course of 3 days, it was much more difficult than the masters had made it look. We all had very sore legs after holding our positions for long lengths of time and repeating the routine again and again, but in the end we all had it stuck in our heads. It was a great bonding activity and even though I didn't like it at the time, looking back now I realised that I thoroughly enjoyed it.

We then travelled on the bus road tripping for two weeks visiting almost everyone's ancestral villages. It was very interesting comparing and contrasting the villages. Some were completely abandoned, others had a few people who lived around the area and some had been renovated with many people living in them. The highlight of the trip would definitely have been going back to my ancestral villages. I went to my grandfathers village in Bai Yun where I met my distant cousin for the first time. It was so exciting because my father had not been back to China yet, so I did not have any photos of the village or the area and so I had no idea what to expect. I was so excited when my cousin took me to the ancestral hall and pointed out the names of granddad and the other members of dads family. It was an amazing feeling being at the same place as all of the many ancestors before me would have come to this exact hall to play games, meet friends and share celebrations. Right next to the hall was the place where my uncle would have gone to school and I could just imagine what that must have been like as I was standing outside looking at the walls of the school. We then went to my grandfathers house where he was born in which was only a couple of minutes away from the hall. I was so overwhelmed and happy to be in the exact place that my granddad lived and grew up in nearly 90 years ago.

At my other grandfathers village in Guangzhou, my cousin and I meet our third

cousin for the first time. We recognised him immediately as he was identical to the many photos that we had seen of him from other family members who had previously come to visit the village. He showed us where our family house had been, but it has now been replaced by four 5 storey apartment buildings. They were all very tall, tiled and tightly packed together – I swear that you could pass things through to the neighbouring apartment using the windows. He also showed us our great great grandfathers house which had a unique curving roofline to it. There were still things that we could see inside the house, but we didn't go inside to see in detail. We learnt that he was a government official in the Ming dynasty and other great stories which was very fascinating to hear about. He then took us to his house where we meet his family and they asked us about our extended families because many members of the family have been back to see the village and they recognised them in the photos that other family members had showed us. It was great sitting there and chatting to them about our history and our families, I thoroughly enjoyed it and was disappointed when we had to leave. Its hard to believe that if my grandparents hadn't gone to New Zealand I would be living here, it makes me appreciate my lifestyle so much more.

In Guangzhou we went to another village where we rode in little overcrowded carts through narrow pathways really fast, it was so much fun. Then we lit some extremely noisy fireworks outside the double ancestral hall. We also went to the school where we tried Chinese calligraphy, painting, played sports with the locals and met all the student who studied English during the performance at night.

In Shenzhen we went to a theme park called the magnificent china and minority village cultural park. It was awesome – we saw a miniature version of all the main tourist attractions (some which we will be going to) in miniature form while we were being taken around on a train. We saw a live horse riding performance where the stunt people performed a lot of tricks and wars using their horses. We then saw a cultural performance by a group who had travelled all around the world. Some of the outfits were wonderfully detailed and the dances were all very traditional. I thought that some of the performers must have had sore heads holding up the hairdos and large hats and headdresses. Lastly we watched a live evening concert which reminded me of the Beijing Olympic performance because everything was all overlooked at in great detail. The outfits, dances, performance, music everything. There were acrobatic, stunts, fireworks, jokers, boats, dragons, a waterfall, fire even a laser. I really really enjoyed that performance.

Hangzhou is one of the most beautiful cities that I've been to because it is full of many natural elements which harmonise so well together. It reminded me of New Zealand as it has a mountain side covered in many trees – which were very warmly coloured during their autumn and it is all surrounded on three sides by water. We visited many temples, and sampled some very fine green tea where we were taught about the different grades, types, flavours and ways of consuming tea. The most memorable event in Hangzhou was taking a bike ride around the Western lake everything looked so perfect, I stopped many times to take pictures which resulted in me and a couple of others having to pedal extremely fast near the end to catch the ferry in time.

Next stop was Shanghai, we went on a night cruise along the Huangpu river. Everything looked much brighter and more alive at night than during the day. I guess it must have been all the colourful lights that kept moving across the sides of the large buildings. We went to the Yu gardens where we saw many gigantic goldfish in the water, and many large stones in the landscape. My favourite show of the trip was the acrobatic show - where we saw 10 people on one bike, people performing on climbing poles, people changing hats rapidly, jumping through hoops and

motorcycling in the ball of death. On our free day we easily got the hang of using the subway (once we hit the English button) and began the great fun of bartering with the shop assistants in the huge markets at the subway station. We came back with a huge bag of purchases mainly a lot of cheap, but fairly good quality imitation accessories.

We then flew to Beijing, this was by far the coldest city but it had the most appealing sights to see. First stop was the Temple of Heaven. It looked even better than the pictures that I had seen, probably because all the renovations had been completed (the deadline being the Olympics). I could believe my eyes when the bus pulled up at our hotel – it was so big, new and best of all it was right next to the multi-storey shopping mall in the middle of town!

The next morning when we went onto the bus the temperature reading was 4°C, sooo cold. We went to Teaming square and the Forbidden City it looked very much the same as we passed through many many gates, but the level of detail involved in all the buildings, gates, and stone carvings simply amazed me. Summer palace did not feel very summer-like to me, the whole lake had frozen over and I could see the steam coming from my mouth on the cold still morning. The palace was nicely camouflaged into the grey surroundings but it looked very large. We went to the Jade factory, Ming tombs and Sacred way.

But the most exhausting walk was the one up the Great Wall. I unknowingly took the wrong path and later discovered that it was the steeper one of the two routes. In next to no time I felt myself puffing up the uneven steps, three weeks of sitting on the bus did not help with my already poor level of fitness. Some were high, others were low, some were long and some were short. There was snow on half of the staircase and the wind would blow right through me everytime I would walk pass a gap on the top of the wall. I had so many layers on I felt like a marshmallow and I couldn't move my arms as freely as I would have liked. But I finally made it to the top which was extremely satisfying and we began our slow walk back down again.

The next most anticipated stop was the Olympic village. Everyone rushed off the bus to take pictures outside the birds nest, water cube and the indoor sports venue. It was unbelievable being at the same place where all the worlds top athletes had been only 4 months ago. Seeing the same buildings that we had seen on the tv so many times during the Olympics was awesome. We were all waiting for the water cube to light up since it was gradually approaching nightfall but only the Olympic tower light up for us.

The food in Beijing was very interesting. We were served beef with ... 100s and 1000s but the steamboats, and Peking duck was delicious. In Shanghai we tried their famous dumplings filled with soup which I quite enjoyed. Eventually all the food started to look and taste the same after awhile and I found myself at Mc Donald s and KFC much more often than I would in NZ, even then the food at the takeaways was different. There were taro pies, egg tarts, and all the burgers were hot and spicy at the KFCs in Beijing.

Hong Kong was our final destination which everyone spent doing their own things – so as a result I hardly ever saw some people. But my cousin I enjoyed using our octopus cards to get to place to place and to use them in stores where we needed the right change. We got to visit our family on Hong Kong Island, go to Disneyland to see all our childhood characters, Ocean Park had some fun thrill-seeking rides and heaps of night street markets. I really enjoyed Hong Kong because it was so western, people spoke English and they celebrated xmas much more than in NZ. There we special photo corners in the shopping malls crammed full of Xmas things and the whole sides of buildings would be lit up with Xmas lights and themes at night.

Reflecting back on China, it was a trip that I will never forget and I look forward to my next visit there again. I now know more about my families past, and have a much greater understanding of how fortunate I am to be living here in NZ. I have found myself during the trip and I now see things differently knowing how other people live in China. So what did I bring back from China? Lots of shopping – tailor-made cashmere coats, bags, purses, scrolls, jewellery, clothes, watches – Rolex and omegas (imitation of course) very little Cantonese and Mandarin, almost 2000 photos, 30 new friends to share memories with and the experience of being in China which is one that I will treasure and always remember.