

Lydia So
China Winter Camp Report 2008

I think the flavour of this Winter Camp could be described like a traditional hot and sour soup; it hits you with a spicy bite, makes you salivate with the tang of the vinegar yet for all the seeming lack of appeal, leaves you wanting more.

Highlights on this trip definitely included the kung fu classes - I really enjoyed being taught by the masters. It really gave me a respect for the discipline and physical difficulty of this martial art.

Visiting the villages was a real eye opener. Seeing how other's villages are in comparison to your own is very interesting. I came expecting to see how China might look if time stood still, I wasn't disappointed. I really appreciate the effort the Foreign Affairs Office and the school went to to get me to my home village. My maternal grandfather's village is in Puning which was some six hour bus journey. I was fortunate to be accompanied by the teacher from the school and was graciously hosted by her aunty. As I understand, in the ten years that this camp has been running, I am the first to have a village on the east side of Guangdong province. I am so glad I went - I don't think the trip would have been complete without visiting my village. I was amazed to find how many relations I had still living in the same village, in the same house that my grandfather, grandmother and mother once lived. Perhaps the most incongruous thing was seeing the home that was somehow still standing with a television in the middle of the living area.

The times I most enjoyed were the unexpected and spontaneous fun we would have just as a small group with time to kill. For example, in several villages we played ball with the kids at the school or nearly get mown over by the kids in the school! We had a basketball game with the teachers and they didn't seem to mind to postpone their classes to fit in a few hoops, even the bus driver got in on the action. Eva's village had a watch tower which became a great adventure. At the Sunwen memorial park, the guys bought a hover balloon and played frisbee with some of the kids enjoying the afternoon sun on the huge grassy field. And when we were at the Liying temple, a few people even bought bubble blowing machines!

We had exceptional tour guides for the Hangzhou, Shanghai and Beijing parts of the tour. In Hangzhou I really enjoyed the stories describing the romanticism of this city, it really made the trip. Other highlights must include the kung fu show - the legend of kung fu, which was exceptional; the boat cruise of West Lake and Shanghai and the Bund; the French Concession; Maoganshan street and art galleries; the hutongs; wandering the back alleys in Shanghai where a huge bun straight out of the steamer was only 80c! I was last in Beijing in 2004 and the transformation was noticeable - the streets definitely are cleaner. Another winner was seeing the Bird's nest and Watercube. Also the peking duck dinner was delicious.

In parts it would have been nice to have had some more time. For example, having two hours to explore the great wall wasn't nearly enough - perhaps Badaling would have been a better part of the wall to explore the sections which are in their more original form. Having been to Beijing before I feel that the parts of Beijing that are so grand were hardly touched upon - such as the Summer Palace and Forbidden City, we really only had a cursory glimpse at what are truly glorious places. I feel we sacrificed parts of the tour to go shopping, and as much as we all like to get a

bargain, I think one could get driven up the wall by the intensity of the bargaining process and the sheer effort involved. I also think two tea tastings was perhaps too many. I also believe that people were disappointed on missing out on going to Shenzhen. Another suggestion would be providing some information about the cost of living for budgeting for our free days.

Overall, this was a very well organised tour showing a diverse slice of China. I am very glad to have been involved in the 2008 Winter Camp and would highly recommend it to others. Thank you to all the people involved in its organisation to make it such a successful trip.



Photo of the courtyard of my maternal grandfather's house in Puning.