

China Winter Camp 2009

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This was my first time to ever visit China, and I have been waiting for this trip for several years, as my two sisters have both gone on the Winter camp in previous years. Before going to China, I had very little knowledge of the towns, people and the culture. It seemed like from our very first day in Shenzhen, it felt overwhelmingly real that we were finally there after waiting for so long. I learnt that we can't compare China to how we view it in movies, we needed to go there ourselves and experiencing the culture firsthand. Leading up to the departure, I was getting excited and anticipating the wonderful four weeks planned for us. I also couldn't wait to meet the others on the trip, only knowing a handful beforehand.

On the 22nd of November (the day had finally arrived!), we left New Zealand, all set on an adventure to learn, visit and experience China. The flight to Hong Kong was long, but we were entertained by movies and games before we crossed the border into Shenzhen, China. Walking around the city for the first time was very different; the streets were busy - surrounded by people and cars. After a long day of traveling, we were all ready to have a feast! Having ten course meals for lunch and dinner meant that we got to try all sorts of dishes, there was plenty of food to fuel our busy days.

The purpose of this trip was to find our ancestral roots and find a sense of belonging. This was our opportunity to visit our ancestral villages, and get an idea of living conditions and environment that my grandparents grew up in. It was a real eye opener to see how people lived, and the development of their homes, I wasn't expecting to see such modern houses in the rural villages. I had the opportunity to see two of my ancestral villages. Both sides of my family have all left China; nevertheless it was a very valuable experience to visit the villages. In Taishan, I had a look around my Grandfather's village on my Dad's side, not being able to locate the exact house. The village was slowly developing with new shops and some sort of transportation system was about to be constructed. It was a fascinating experience. I was lucky to meet up with my Great Uncle and Auntie who happened to be in Taishan at the time (coincidental timing!) to take me to visit my Grandfather's house (on my Mum's side). It was very special to see where my grandfather grew up. This small village (close to Taishan) was in a more rural area, and wasn't as developed as some of the others. There was a river that ran by the village, and the house was situated close by. Nobody lives in his house, but it is kept in good condition as it gets locked up. I was surprised to see how nice it was, the house was two storey's high and the rooms were really big. It was such an amazing opportunity to experience.

We stayed at the Guangdong Overseas Chinese Vocational School for several nights to experience their student life and interact with the students. While we were there, we had Kung Fu lessons in the mornings, they were tough and tiring, but our teacher was very kind and helpful to us and I can take the skills that I learnt back home. The language classes were quite difficult to follow, because there were a range of Mandarin speakers and non-speakers. My vocabulary before these lessons was very minimal, and the words I did know were in Cantonese. It was very useful to learn practical words and phrases, especially in the markets. I really liked interacting with the other students at the school, playing basketball and soccer with them. It was nice to be involved with their sports day opening ceremony and the 30th anniversary of the school. It was really good to watch their celebrations.

After the official tour, we had two weeks left in China and three nights in Hong Kong. Probably the highlight of the entire trip was going sightseeing and visiting well known landmarks. Biking around the West Lake in Hangzhou was breathtaking; walking along the streets of Shanghai and in Beijing where we got to climb the Great Wall, go to Temple of Heaven and Forbidden City. Another favourite activity was shopping at the markets! The shops were very tightly packed and most shopkeepers tried to lure us in to have a look. This was a great chance to use bargaining skills to get the prices down. I really enjoyed talking to the non-aggressive shopkeepers who were very interested to know where we are from, because we look Chinese yet couldn't speak Chinese. Needless to say, I brought back a lot of things to remind me of this trip.

Being in China for four weeks definitely got me into a routine. There are so many things that I am going to miss now that we're back in New Zealand. It's the little things that I'll miss, like washing our dishes at restaurants before eating, shopping and bargaining, the wake up calls, huge meals, staying in hotels, room parties, long bus rides, driving on the right side of the road and our various catch phrases and nicknames. Mostly I'll miss the company of the 22 other tour members, but luckily we can keep in contact and meet up every now and then. Everyone was a pleasure to be around, and I have so many memories of us all having fun.

I am grateful for being able to go on this Winter camp, and I would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Chinese Association for putting this trip together for us. I would especially like to thank Janet Joe for all of her hard work in organising everything and helping us with anything and everything, we really appreciated it. And lastly I would like to thank my parents who gave me the opportunity to come on this trip.

Overall, this trip has taught me a lot. Now that I have seen where my ancestors grew up, I can appreciate my grandparents coming over to New Zealand and giving me the opportunities I've had. I know my life would be completely different and challenging if my family and I were living in China. It has also taught about the things we take for granted in New Zealand. Things that we consider "needs" or day-to-day items are luxuries in China, the main aspect being bathrooms. It has been a valuable experience to visit China, and I hope that I will go back someday, because of the amazing memories I have from this trip.