

CURIOUS ABOUT TODAY'S CHINA?

Thumbnail Impressions from Leticia and William Jarvis' visit June 2008

At this time, China has to be one of the world's most interesting places to visit. First of all, its history goes back to at least 4000 BC, rivaling Egypt as the oldest civilization. And this history provides a richness to the visiting experience. Secondly the geography and the Chinese people themselves are fascinating in all their diversity.

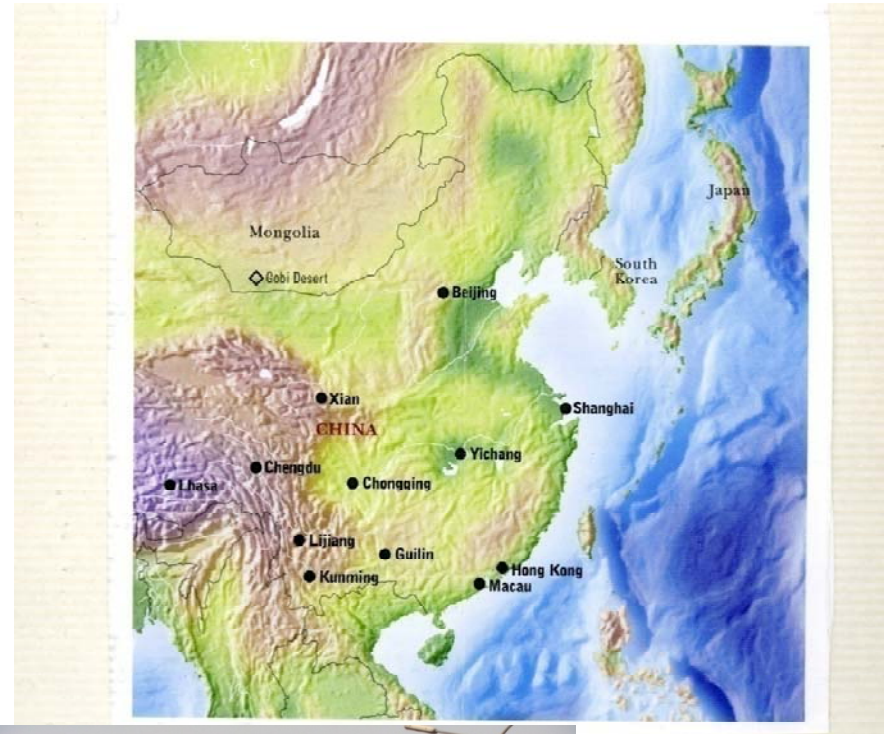
Of course, if you just visit Beijing and Shanghai you miss the real China which is found in the interior provinces. But no need to be wary about visiting these interior provinces, they are modern by our standards and easy to visit by way of an extensive airport and airline network.

The petroleum situation is interesting. All over the interior of China we saw long lines of parked diesel trucks waiting at stations for fuel. American people, who are expecting the price of petroleum to come back down, should imagine what it will be like when China gets some more refineries on line and starts fueling all these lines of diesel trucks. Let's try imagine about \$500 a barrel of petroleum.

The modern highways which now exist in all China are beautiful, all fully landscaped with many tree varieties on both sides. For 15 years or more China has been on a huge tree planting binge, equating tree planting with goodness. The trees are planted about five times more dense than normal. The more trees the better. With so many trees being planted, the Chinese take comfort in being green and fighting pollution.

CHINA OVERALL, 1.3 billion people. Best to start your visit with Beijing the sophisticated Capital in the Northeast of China and work your way to the Southwest, seeing Shanghai, Xian and finally the exciting Yunnan Province and the little picture postcard city of Guilin.

Here is China, ready for your visit!



Beijing's Modernistic Olympic Parking Garage, now finished!

BEIJING, 17 Million people, going on 20 Million. The visitors to the Olympics this year are in for a treat. Beijing is dressed up as no previous Olympic city. The parks and streets have beautiful flower gardens everywhere. Expect to see a very modern city. There is very little of the old China remaining in Beijing which along with most other Chinese cities has mostly caught up with the modern amenities of the US cities, like impressive modern buildings, modern freeways with traffic congestion. The cars are the same mix as the US, maybe even more SUV's. They have left certain major items for later, like in the next ten years to reduce the emissions from the diesel trucks and relieve the air pollution, which is so significant that on this trip we never saw the sun in Beijing or Shanghai. Also, you cannot drink the tap water in either place, something else to fix.

SHANGHAI, 18 million people, going on 20 million. Shanghai, the leading business city in China, also a charming city, looks a little more natural at this time than the festooned Beijing. Shanghai has also preserved a bit more of its past with still existing sections of narrow streets and twisting alley ways, plus places like the large old French concession and all its sycamore trees, which haven't changed all that much. But the rule in modern Shanghai is a sea of high rise apartments and office buildings, not very Chinese looking anymore.

Do not miss the inspiring Jade Buddha Temple. This exquisitely carved Buddha is even more inspiring than the much larger solid gold Buddha in Bangkok, Thailand. With the Jade Buddha you experience an eternity of understanding. Luckily, this Buddha survived the ten year cultural revolution which took place about 40 years ago and which burned most of the old temples. Now, some of the most important ones have been restored, but only for the sake of art. The Chinese are not religious, never have been. You don't find them praying to the gods and asking for favors. They will burn candles in shrines and hope for good luck in an exam or something like that. The nearest thing to religion is Money, the key thing everybody wants. It is not uncommon for them to end a note and instead of saying "Best Wishes" like we would say, they cut to the



Huge Tiananmen Square, Beijing. Site of large student protest in 1989, now carefully guarded against such things. This is not bad photography, just haze in the air.



Great Wall of China, this section nicely restored for visitors



Airport road into Shanghai. Those big columns are elegant street lights.

The hazy air quality didn't detract from our enjoyment of this great city.

chase and say simply "Money, Money ". In other words, hope you get lots of it.

Nor should you miss the Confucius Temple; it is rare to find such a statue representation of Confucius and also a place to make your offerings to him. He is to China what Plato and Aristotle are to the Western World.

To visit the Water City in the outskirts of Shanghai is to get a taste of the real old China, Gondolier type boats with stores and houses fronting on the canals!

The mighty city of Shanghai quickly blends into the suburbs, which in turn blend into small farms and clustered farmers' houses. The farmers in this rich region have about an acre of land for each working person. They are not poor by any standards. Their houses are grouped together; all of them have three or four stories, with a pagoda-like turret on top, nice modern houses. Their parents and often their grandparents live in the upper stories of their houses. The little pagoda on top encloses the water tank for the house.

HANGZHOU, pronounced Hung Jo, about 5 million people. Not too far south of Shanghai is a delightful city visited by about 3 million tourists a year. The whole attraction is the enormous West Lake, only a few meters deep, but clean and well managed. On one side of the lake is the City of Hangzhou and the other side of the lake faces right up to the mountains, overall a picturesque setting, somehow tranquil in the midst of all the visitors. The fascinating attraction is to take a boat excursion on one of the several dozen gaily decorated boats that ply the lake. It is so romantic!



Confucius Temple,
Shanghai.



Ancient water town in
Shanghai outskirts.

I wonder if the Venetian
gondoliers copied the Chinese?



One of countless dramatic boat
excursions on West Lake in
Hangzhou, just south of
Shanghai

XIAN, 7 million people. It is no accident that the funerary terracotta warriors happened to be found in Xian. For Xian was the early capital of China and for many years the home of emperors. These early Xian dynasties lasted from the tenth century BC all the way to the tenth century AD. For a long while Xian was the largest city in the world. An early emperor, Qin Shi Huang, spent most of his reign (247BC to 221BC) creating his huge terracotta army in preparation for ruling a larger empire in his afterlife.

Visiting the scene of the excavations and seeing close-up some of the 8,000 terracotta warriors, you can see what all the publicity is about. It is not just about the huge number of terracotta pieces, but the fact that each warrior is a sculptured piece of art different from all the other warriors. In fact, each warrior is almost a museum piece in its own right. It is believed that the skilled artisans of that time fashioned each warrior from a real live soldier of the then existing emperor's army!

YUNNAN PROVINCE. In Southwest China, the striking Province of Yunnan neighbors the Province of Szechuan which was the epicenter of the recent magnitude 7.9 earthquake. In fact we felt one of the magnitude 5 aftershocks. This whole region is earthquake prone due to the large Indian tectonic plate inevitably sliding under the existing China tectonic plate in this region. Over the millenniums, this tectonic action has helped in the creation of the magnificent mountain range which inspired Shangri-La, and of course recently it was the culprit that caused the devastating earthquake. See below cities of the Yunnan Province, Kunming and Lijiang.

KUNMING, 4 Million people, Capital of the Yunnan Province. Kunming, located on a mile high plateau, is called the City of Eternal Spring. Its famous foliage and flowers are in abundance in its City Park along with the usual delightful lake. But the truly unusual thing about this park is the fact that it comes to full life every morning as hundreds of people do their exercise. Anything goes. One fellow can be heard almost all over the park as he exercised his vocal chords, repeatedly doing a high A and holding it



Leticia greets the actual farmer who in 1974 was digging a water well when he discovered the Terracotta warriors burial site.



Major excavation of Terracotta warriors.

Emperor Qin created his terracotta army in three pits, numbering 8000 soldiers, 130 chariots, 520 horses and 150 cavalry horses, all life size.



Tai Chi participant



Pekinese are among the few dogs in China. Name comes from the ancient capitol Peking, now called Beijing.

each time for a full ten seconds. Others exercising their feet by treading on pebbles in the rocks. All kinds of racquet ball "back and forths", an advanced Tai Chi group, another skillful group of forty or so learning a modern dance with fans. Anybody could join in; those less sure of themselves were in the back sort of following the leader. It goes on and on, a park loaded with morning people.

LIJIANG, most colorful region we visited, 1.3 Million people in Lijiang itself, which is surrounded by the large mountainous region of Yunnan leading up to neighboring Tibet. This is the mountainous area made famous by the novel Lost Horizons, which pictures its fabled Shangri-La, the valley of eternal life. In these same inspiring mountains, during the millenniums, dozens of communities of people developed their cultures in near total isolation from one another and from the world in general. Their isolation led to the most unusual and individual customs that one can imagine, ranging from the Meaws who had a total matriarchal society. The women were and still are the bosses. To the Naxi, where the women literally do all the work and the men hang around town playing cards and music. They call all these groups ethnic minorities and the government does many things to foster their communities. You can tell which minority is which by their really colorful and beautiful costumes.

To Leticia and myself a fascinating thing about the ethnic minorities is the fact that they do things and preserve customs that go back thousands of years. You can really see what the old agricultural China was like, such a contrast with the big cities of China which have lost so much of their colorful past.

GUILIN, Picture Postcard City, 1.0 Million people. Guilin, the most picturesque region we visited in China, receives about 12 million visitors a year, including 1 million international visitors like us, many times its modest population of 1 million. But somehow, it takes care of all us visitors, and I can only imagine many more visitors in the future when more Westerners discover Guilin. Many



Informal practice of modern dance with red fans in Kunming Park.



Colorful kids at the Park on Sunday.



Secret airport in Kunming where B17 atom bomber landed after Hiroshima.



Guilin Peaks from river boat.

Postcards from China (as well as the \$20 Yuan bill) inevitably picture the unusual little mountain peaks of this region. These peaks were formed by the limestone deposits laid down some 300 Million years ago at the bottom of the then Pacific Ocean.

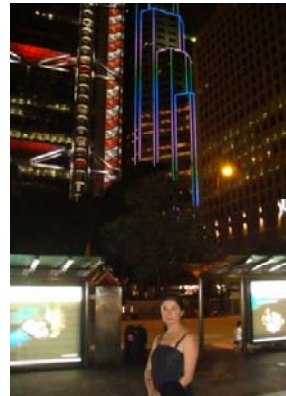
A totally different aspect of Guilin is that being in the far South of China it has a semi tropical climate which leads to an incredible array of fruit and melons. This accentuates the incredible fruit experience you find all over China. The typical fruit everywhere is the red water melon, a seed type melon, but incredible tart and sweet, always great to eat at breakfast and as a desert for other meals.

HONG KONG, 13 Million people. As their parting gesture to Hong Kong, the British left a new, huge international airport which will surely draw visitors for many a year to come. In our case we were using Hong Kong as a gateway to the ex-Portuguese Colony of Macau, just an hour's ferry boat ride down the coast from Hong Kong. By the way, they are now building a road partly over the ocean connecting Hong Kong and Macau.

MACAU, 0.5 Million people. Our last stop. Though now officially a part of China, Macau still has the charm of a Portuguese colony. Its quaint central town includes historic Catholic churches fully open to the public. In the last few years Macau has acquired with mixed results some of the gaming houses from Las Vegas, not so much entertainment just rooms full of gambling tables. One exception, the Sands is a fun place, the best architecture we have seen in a casino. The new Wynn hotel is deadville, as well as the MGM. But the casinos are making money, due to the Chinese penchant for gambling, The logic behind Chinese gambling seems to be that the Chinese culture includes many references to Good Luck. Their wedding dates and many other life's decisions are based on selecting the best dates; and then you have things like Fenshu. This whole concept of being able to influence your good luck carries over to the gambling table, the supreme arbiter of good



A mist shrouded mountain valley reminds us of Shangri-la from the story Lost Horizon.



Hong Kong light show displayed every night around 9 pm.



Leticia enjoys the Portuguese architecture of the buildings.



San Dominic Catholic Church in Macau displays Virgin Mary behind the altar. Open to visitors.

luck.

A HAPPENING TELLS SOMETHING ABOUT THE CHINESE. We had just spent two days in the high mountains where, in the quest of a hidden valley like that of Shangri-La, Leticia and I followed the little mountain trails like sure footed mountain goats. The next day however we were walking in the rain across the pedestrian streets in the town of Li Jiang. We were there to get a painting from a famous living Chinese artist. On a stone incline my foot suddenly slipped on the wet stones. Trying to balance myself, my left leg twisted 90° and my ankle twisted under my body as I collapsed down with my umbrella. What a devastating feeling! I feared the very end of my bad soccer knee. For a long while I lay prone on the wet stones not able to move. Leticia and the Guide held umbrellas over me as my knee slowly eased back into position. Then, out of nowhere, a middle aged Chinese man appeared and without saying anything joined in holding his umbrella over me. When I finally agreed to sit up, the Chinese man was right there lifting one side of me, and our Guide the other. They took me out of the rain to a little shop where an old Chinese woman graciously brought out a straight backed chair. At last I could sit and contemplate the future. Our flight to Shanghai would take off in just two hours. Changing flights was out of the question. Meanwhile, our Guide could not even locate his car and driver on his cell phone. But the Chinese man was still there by my side, and he said in Chinese that he had a car and could use his car to get me out of the pedestrian zone. As he drove us across town he had another idea and stopped at a little pharmacy to buy with his own money some anti-inflammatory pills for me. He seemed to know just what was needed at each critical moment!



Chinese Sports Doctor wrapping it up!

Our Good Samaritan Chinese then volunteered that he knew the best sports doctor in town. A visit to this Chinese doctor at once might permit me to continue my travels. With this in mind he proceeded to drive us to the Doctor's office, a most unlikely little place whose wide open doors were facing right on the sidewalk. The young doctor took a drag on his cigarette and professionally took a look. Without hesitation he felt all around my greatly swelled ankle. His feeling itself caused an excruciating pain, but he said no bones were broken. The knee which had hinged sideways was mostly back in place and only partially swollen. He mixed his own medicine in a stone bowl and, as he proceeded with bandaging my leg, his dangling cigarette shed a few ashes on the bandage. I noticed his elderly assistant sitting nearby, was also smoking (a large water pipe) and puffing clouds of white smoke. Outside on the sidewalk there were a few curious onlookers.

The Doctor did his job and I was still able to catch my plane to Shanghai with the help of a wheelchair! I missed only one full day from our itinerary!

Only when I arrived back in Napa did I get an X-ray and discovered I had been getting around with a broken fibula.

The good news is that the Chinese Doctor had firmly bandaged the whole leg, and my broken bone is now well on its way to healing. The whole exercise was an interesting commentary on the Chinese, both the good Samaritan and the doctor who performed the right treatment for the wrong reason!



This is the painting, done by a famous Naxi artist, we were going after when I slipped on the stones.



Leticia greets two lovely Naxi minority dancers.