

Diary for Natural Focus's 2014 China Adventure

This diary has been compiled by John Sinclair

In April 2014 21 Australians (almost all GO BUSH veterans) joined a specially designed tour organized by Natural Focus, a Thai Community Based Tourism organization managed (very well) by Poo, (Chookiat Kanasupul) with the help of four fellow Thais. The 17-day tour focused on the Pearl and Yangtze River catchments in Southern China. It was a rich experience travelling about 6,000 kilometres by bus, train and ship and taking in seven World Heritage sites and another proposed. Few other foreign visitors are privileged to have such a rich insight into modern China. However this didn't stop the group from experiencing a very authentic China, a China that seemed to be a vast major construction site especially of infrastructure (road and rail) and accommodation towers.

Introduction — Eve of Day 1

7th April

Pearl River — Guangzhou

Due to the dense blanket of smog we didn't get our first glimpse of Chinese soil until only a few hundred metres or so above the ground as we were coming in to land. Below us was the sprawling metropolis of Guangzhou which was better known to me in my schooldays as Canton. Whether it is the third or 25th largest city in China we know that it is huge on any scale. It certainly has a much larger population than Sydney.

We were met at the airport by our gracious Thai hosts from Natural Focus. It was great to renew our friendship with **Poo** and **Somboon** with whom Su and I had shared many previous adventures. However I was surprised to discover that I knew another of our guides **Sami**. I had stayed with her family in Pang Sa, a Lisu/Lahu hilltribe Village in the Golden Triangle in 2005. In the intervening nine years she had grown from young girl to a young woman and become an accomplished linguist who was translating Chinese to both Thai and to English. She is a great asset to the Natural Focus team. The other two Thai interpreters were **Ming** and **Ing**.

We had only time to deposit our bags at the hotel and clean our teeth after 14 hours of travel and then we launched into our China Adventure. With Poo in the lead we briskly walked to the Metro Station about a kilometre from the Everyday Hotel. Here we were to experience the efficiency of the public transport system in an unexpected way. We lined up waiting for the train to pull in and then stood aside waiting for the passengers to alight. Then before all of us were aboard the train doors closed and half of us were left standing on the platform. Luckily the trains run every 3 or four minutes and we were less reserved when it came to boarding the next train. We had another experience on our return trip. The train we were planning to board was jam-packed apparently with young people who had been to a sporting or entertainment event. So we stood back and waited for the next train. It

turned out to be equally packed but we were prepared and pushed our way aboard. The Metro is new and efficient and it moves lots of people (including us).

From our last station we walked down to the Pearl River and spent an hour walking along the riverside park watching the locals engaged in various forms of recreation from a form of chess to badminton, basketball, fishing and fitness exercises. It was a wonderful familiarization with a contented people who had almost an aura of serenity in their recreation, although we did hear more horn honking in the traffic than I had expected after witnessing such calm dispositions in the park. Superficial impressions were of a quite homogenous and contented society with plenty of scope for expressing individuality.

At 6.15 we gathered to board a boat for the dinner cruise as the grey light was dissolving into darkness. My first impressions were the fact that so many lights had been turned off in the high rise building in contrast with the blazing lights left when Australian office blocks cease business. However we were soon treated to a spectacular display of lighting engineering as lights illuminated the great landmarks of the city dominated by a tall communications tower that was illuminated by every colour in the spectrum and with ever changing colour schemes and patterns. It caused many comparisons to be made with the Tokyo tower but the lighting clearly surpassed Tokyo's that was switched off by 9.00 pm to demonstrate saving energy.

During many conversations renewing old friendships from previous GO BUSH safaris and adventures and forming new ones, I was asked to put the name of the arthritis herb Su and I use in this diary. (it is a convincing sign that we are all aging) The herb is known as **Gotu kola** (*Centella asiatica*). A Chinese man named Li Chu Yun who reportedly lived to be over 250 years old attributed his longevity to this herb. We eat a few leaves raw each morning and for us it works.

Day 1
Tuesday, 8th April
Guangzhou — Guillin

There was no time to get over jet-lag. Breakfast was at a street stall next to our Everyday Hotel. It consisted of rice porridge with some meat in the bowl but Somboon produced some coffee that was most welcome. Then at 8.30 the bus from the Daewoo Guillin Bus Company arrived and we packed the lockers underneath to capacity as we crammed in the luggage for 26 people and set off. It was impossible to tell the direction of travel as we headed out on a 2.5 hour journey out of Guangzhou due to the dense smog.

As we headed for the Cantonese World Heritage site of Zilli we were amazed by the diversity of items in the landscape that caught our attention in this greyed out environment. The landscape was quite hilly once we left the Pearl River flood plain and it was in the hilly area we saw the millions of Eucalypts that occupied any of the non arable land. They all looked to be tall single stems but later we started noticing some ratoon crops indicating that they are being harvested for pulp although this doesn't yet appear to have reached full production levels yet.

Another impression of the landscape was the huge numbers of ponds seen close to the road that were obviously used for various forms of primary industry from aquaculture to duck farming. The ponds were clearly the product of some central planning as were the other diverse forms of production from the rose and carnation farm to the patches of bamboo amongst the eucalypts. The agriculture in all of its forms was certainly intense

The amount of building going on was also mind-boggling. highways, freeways, new rail networks were criss-crossing the countryside. It wasn't hard to see because most of the new transport infrastructure is elevated. However some like the tunnels went deep underground burrowing up to five kilometres through hills for up to six lanes of traffic. We crossed one highway bridge that straddled a kilometre over a valley that was about 200 metres above the ground in places. Most of the engineering was excellent although we did strike a new section of freeway that was subsiding due to poor foundation. It was a nine hour journey from Guangzhou to Guillin and yet we travelled for hundreds of kilometres without coming to traffic lights due to clover leaves and flyovers. Further, unlike Japan with 70 kph speed limits speed limits here were up to 120 kph although our bus travelled between 80 and 90.

The road traffic was also intriguing. About 95% of the cars were of foreign brands, Toyota, VW, BMW, Hyundai, Ford etc however most were probably manufactured in China. The heavy vehicles though, trucks and buses seemed to be all of local manufacture and they constituted the bulk of the traffic on the highways. There were huge semi-trailers. For example, the car carriers had two cars abreast and most carried at least 25. Judging by the numbers we saw they were pouring into Guangzhou at the rate of hundreds per hour. Then to complete the cycle we similarly passed countless trucks leaving from Guangzhou with scrap metal, much being compacted former cars.

World Heritage site: We reached our destination Zilli Village part of the Diaolou World Heritage site about 10.30 am and had explored a World Heritage site that was created only in the late 19th and 20th Centuries with the wealth accumulated by Cantonese migrant workers who made fortunes in the goldfields of America and Australia. They returned to China to build what was for the time opulent houses that that needed to be secure from potential robbers and were looked over by 15 watchtowers. While the story is fascinating I found this to be the least impressive of any of the more than 100 World Heritage sites I have seen. Although it is describe by UNESCO as having a "*complex and flamboyant fusion of Chinese and Western structural and decorative forms*" I could see no outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in the complex. Likewise, although having an interesting story I didn't think it warranted World Heritage status and furthermore the site isn't well maintained.

We then headed into a restaurant at a Tourist Centre where we had a delightful and leisurely lunch. We didn't quite foresee though as we boarded the bus the next nine hours that we would be in transit while moving to our next destination, Guillin.

There isn't a lot to say about thenine hour journey to Guillin except that it was long and tedious. It was less interesting because the dense blanket of smog enveloped the whole countryside. I tired of looking at the alien Euclaypts. I filled some time mulling over the impact of the greyness and smog on our mood and compiling a couple of Haiku:

*A blanket of smog
 Suffocating the living
 Is most depressing*

*The sky isn't blue
 Thick smog blankets the country
 Life needs some sunshine.*

A fatigued lot were happy to unload and find comfortable and somewhat softer beds in our new hotel for two nights.

Day 2
Wednesday, 9th April
Guilin's Ligtang River Scenic Zone

We were ready and waiting at 9.00 am to see Guilin in daylight as we set off for the Ligtang River Scenic zone.

The lovely tree-lined streets of Guilin were most impressive. The main avenue trees were the fragrant Omanthus. This city though doesn't have the sophistication of Guangzhou because the transport is more basic and more adapted to peasant requirements. There were land-master tractor trucks and lot of large motorized tri-cycles with a variety of utility backs. Not knowing what to call them they seem best described as "tuk-tuk trucks". One of these was carrying a load of cats all caged up presumably headed for a market or abattoir. That prompted Peter N to describe it as a "catastrophe". There were many more Chinese branded motor cars. In general it felt a more authentic Asian city than Guangzhou. It was also a much more attractive city being enhanced by the tall karst outcrops peppering the landscape with the city flanking their bases.

About an hour from the city centre we passed the Institute of Tourism and a huge brand new University Campus. Alarmingly we also saw endless new apartment blocks completed and many more under construction as testified to by the 18 cranes that could be seen as we bumped along the road.

Most of the roads are made of cement, and thus it seems there is a difficulty fixing potholes. The Chinese seem to very frugal in their use of scarce resources like steel and timber and even bitumen (an oil by-product) and use the more available local material.

The attraction of the city was enhanced by the number of karst outcrops. As we ventured out of the city the number of these prominent limestone towers increased in density and grandeur

We didn't realize as we set off from the very comfortable hotel at 8.30 in our appointed bus that it would be more than 13 hours before we would be back, nor that we would experience more than seven different vehicles/vessels of travel during the day:

1. The bus to the river village (1.5 hours)
2. The small rafts motoring up the spectacular Ligtang river (2.5 hours)
3. A ride in a taxi from the raft terminal to the to another village for lunch
4. A 15 minute ride in a local bus (that was much closer to 50 minutes) to another village where we walked through the market with our cooking instructors to learn about local foods

5. A squeeze into a small convoy of vans that took us to the home of the Ya??/// Cooking school. After the class we took the same vehicles back to the market village to catch another bus.
6. Another ride in a local bus back to Guilin. The promised hour long journey in the rain back to Guilin that was almost two hours at least allowed us a little more leg room.
7. The taxi ride took us through the darkened industrial areas of Guilin to eventually and surprisingly emerge at our Golden Family Hotel at about 10.30 pm. .

What happened on and during those various legs, (each an adventure of its own) was to experience some wonderful scenery and experience some great cuisine as well as learning more about Chinese cooking.

For me the highlight of the day was to experience the majestic scenery along the Yintang River. As we approached the village to start our leisurely journey, we were awed by the dramatic landscape as seen from the bus with these tall regal looking karsts standing like giant monuments in the landscape. However when we travelled up the river those scenes were pale compared with the extraordinary grandeur of the scene before us. It was good enough for China to feature it on their 20 Yuan notes. There was a waterfall and lots of scenic beauty helped by the verdant vegetation and the variety of forms of the karsts. We had an interlude in our trip up the river at a small stall where some posed in traditional costumes with a stunning scenic backdrop.

The area is listed as a proposed World Heritage area. While the scenery would justify that it seems that the UNESCO is baulking at endorsement because the air pollution is so severe that it dims the vision of the place. We could not work out where we were travelling because we had no sun to orient ourselves by. It was quite unnerving.

*Invisible sun
Doesn't reveal where it rises
We need direction.*

*Through smog clad karsts
Though Man changes its chemistry
The river still runs.*

After a series of changes back on the shores we ended up at a cooking school set on the edge of a village with an amazingly serene and lovely outlook with people tending their buffalo and fields while we prepared some amazingly wonderful food under the guidance of our instructors. We prepared our own dinner and it tasted great. It was an experience to be treasured as the taste lives on. We have the recipes and the recipe book and now the inspiration and experience to try it all again.

Day 3**Thursday, 10th April****The Dragon's Backbones — "Longi"**

After a very late night we awoke to find that it was still raining, albeit lightly, but it was consistent. Following breakfast we carefully packed so that everything we needed for the next four days could be backed into our backpacks and a separate carry bag. This enabled the suitcases to be stowed away and locked in the luggage compartment of the bus where it would be inaccessible while we are visiting the minority groups.

At 10.00 am the loading of the bus started and soon we were underway heading for the hills. The two hour drive was again very scenic and exciting particularly as we got further into the hills and hit the winding mountainous roads. Here the first division of the group started to occur between the "OKs" and the "Slow Downs!". The latter identified themselves by screaming to the driver from the back of the bus. The driver though had his ears full of headphones for canned music and didn't understand English anyhow. He proceeded travelling at less than 60kph passing oncoming vehicles on this narrow road with only a hair's breadth between us. What was so unnerving was the precipitous fall from the road edge to the abyss below.

In Guilin we had been joined by a new Chinese Guide, Sarah who spoke good English. She wasn't Chinese as such but ethnically a Dong person, one of the several large ethnic minority groups in Southern China. Sarah grew up in one of the villages where the villagers collected enough to pay her fees through High School and University. Alas now she has married a Chinese man from Guilin and they have a three year old and she didn't return to her community although she helps explain them to us.

Winding our way up to and through the hills we saw many waterfalls, mountain streams, rapids and ravines. Some streams were being harnessed for small hydro-electric plants. The steep hillsides were clad with thick forest mostly natural with patches that had been converted to plantations, mostly cedars but with some single stemmed bamboo, even on incredibly steep slopes where some patches had been freshly harvested. This gave rise to small sawmilling industry.

We had lunch in a Zhouong (Yao) village. The Yaos have a culture of women only cutting their hair once when they are 18 before their hair is cut the first time to show that they are marriageable. After that their hair grows to two metres and is kept in a bun on their head;

Our next stop was after a breath-taking travel up a torturous road to the terminus of the road and a chair lift. Here again we were besieged by Yao women only this time they wanted to be our porters for the half hour up hill walk to Long Teng village. The 30 yuan (\$5.00) was good value, and while I wheezed and sweated up the well paved track, these diminutive women just breezed along carrying our loads. The half hour ascent though was in light rain which partially marred the spectacular views of the rice terraces meandering around the steep hillsides.

Eventually we arrived at our YWCA hostel in the mists. Inside though each room had an ensuite with a proper throne. Alas though everything we touched felt damp.

I must confess that I nominated April as my preferred dates to fit in with my commitments unaware that March and April are the two wettest months of the year in this part of China. We missed the school holidays in Australia but encountered more rain than anticipated. At least though it has not been cold. We expected much cooler weather.

Day 4**Friday, 11th April****Adventures in Yao Country**

The grey weather continued but this was due less to smog than to the incessant drizzle that at times became surprisingly heavy.

We ventured downstairs for many cups of mountain tea. We were at an elevation of about 600 metres that influence the ecology. Though the temperature was about 17degrees it wasn't chilly nor uncomfortable probably due to the 90% humidity.

With their packed lunch the fitter ones (all but five of the 21 set off for a five hour walk up and down through the terrace. Being in the more breathless category I descended down to the bus and cable-car terminus below with one of the feisty Yao porters carrying my load. As we passed through a village below we discovered a funeral was taking place. That accounted not only for the fire crackers but also for the sweet songs echoing around the hills as we walked down. It was amazingly pleasant and sounded like opera arias.

At the terminus we left our gear behind and climbed or were almost pushed into a cable-car for the 20 minute ride to the summit. Here we had hot tea, taro and sweet potato and took many photos before descending to the bus terminus below. The aerial and grandstand views of the terraces are impressions that can't be erased. It rained heavily during our cable-car ride and our thoughts went out

to the intrepid hikers and we hoped that it wasn't spoiling their adventure.

After lunch we then set off at 1.00 pm for the hour-long journey to the summit by road where our walkers were just dribbling in on schedule. They like us had enjoyed noodles for lunch and were thrilled by their accomplishment and delighted by the views and the experience. All 16 completed the walk although the senior member of the group completed the last 300 metres being carried in in a sedan chair to the amusement of the others.

Back on the Blue Bus for a two hour journey to our next destination that we were told was about two hours away. That was at 2.00 pm. However we finally reached Zhoaxiang village closer to 5.30 pm. The journey though through Gaungxi Province in that time was most interesting. We passed through an amazing number of villages, towns and cities that seemed like huge construction sites with whole streets etched in bamboo scaffolding to build new high rise buildings. There were also many very large streams by Australian standards that didn't seem to have names. Likewise the towns we either never knew the names of or now can't remember. What was apparent was that we had moved from the home of the Zhuang (Yao) people, the smallest ethnic minority in China into the territory of the Dong people, China's most numerous ethnic minority with almost 3 million people.

We had a 10-minute walk to the hotel. It was like most Yao building made of wood and on three levels (although some were taller). The second level is the living area and the upper level the sleeping quarters. They accommodate large families up to 17 people.

Ma'an village is the home to our guide Sarah's brother and after dinner that featured amazing cuisine climaxed by a Dong "cicada" song by our hostess, most went with Sarah to meet some of her family and sample some rice-based whisky. For some including the oldest member of our group it was time to help heal the strains of the day's exertions. Then it was up to the sixth level (without a lift) to our beds.

Day 5

Saturday, 12th April

Exploring Dong Culture and Country

Yesterday we briefly saw the sun and momentarily pale blue sky but today the sky was again grey all day and the closest we came to clear was briefly being able to see some shadows and at least being aware of where west was. Unfortunately though we undertook so many twists and turns thereafter that we can't be sure where we are now. It appears that

we have crossed out of Guangxi Province and the Pearl River catchment and into the catchment of the Yangtze River.

At 7.30 Poo took us on a brief walk around Ma'an. The Rain and Wind Bridge into the village took two years to build from 1912-1914 and doesn't include any nails, just mortices. There were so many interesting cameos of village life as we walked along the river —

- women out fishing in the morning mist for something like whitebait,
- the very anciently devised but most effective water wheels to lift the water from the river to irrigate the paddy fields;
- some interesting straw sculptures in the fields made from rice straw by Sarah's father;
- Sarah's family home where they made and sold rice wine and whisky;
- The Drum tower in the centre of the village with the community that we could see from the hotel with the village theatre opposite. (The theatre seemed to suffer from the lack of bracing which is an inexplicable Asian weakness.)

We returned to the hotel that Poo and the crew provided. It was a pleasant change to have fresh bread and boiled eggs. Then we set off on another foray to the adjacent Dong village of Ping. Here we called in at the school that Sarah had attended. Then we meandered in to another community square where there was a short but most impressive concert provided by some very talented Dong artists. Everyone danced with excellent coordination and sang and they all played two musical instruments. The instruments were bamboo flutes of a very complicated original design and with various models from alto to bass. Then there was a very original version of a guitar or ukulele. Of a very original design and all were the same. The whole performance was excellent.

We wandered back through the alleys and lanes and past another grander Drum Tower in another Village where many men and boys were entertaining themselves with games including something like chess and something like tors as well as ping-pong.

Back at the hotel and had our pre-ordered rice and were loaded on the bus at 1.00 pm for a ride of between three and four hours. (it turned out to be more than five with two unexpected delays. One was a truck blocking the road tipping fill over the precipice while a challenge at a checkpoint affected no other vehicles except ours and had us all scrambling for our passports.

The road though was very challenging and again excited the "Slow Downs!" although later in the day other divisions in the group emerged when Tony

Abbotts image appeared on the TV. There were wonderful views if you could bear to look especially one scene where the paddies were like reflective silver as they picked up the grey light. There was another experience where we had to pass under a new freeway that was almost complete but about 100 metres above us judging by the height of the pylons supporting it. Unfortunately the freeway construction had little thought for the mess they made of the road passing below.

Finally we reached the Dong village of Zhou Xing where we found a comfortable hotel.

During the day we had learnt a lot about China's ethnic minorities who were differentiated from the main Chinese population by language, culture and religion. We saw this through Sarah's perspective a Dong who now lives outside her home community. When she left and married a non-Dong she forfeited her land entitlement in the village. Married Dongs who leave the village to get work in the city don't surrender their property entitlements but reserve them for when they return. Dongs are exempt from China's "One Child" policy and can have up to three children. Sarah is one of four. However as a Dong married to a non-Dong she is entitled to have two children. We didn't explore what might happen if a quota was or looked like being exceeded.

Day 6

Sunday, 13th April

China's infrastructure development

Zhou Xing is a confecttted town to woo tourism. We were told that about 15 years ago the whole town was gutted. Existing dwellings were refurbished and the whole town paved and made as a model to be desired and admired by tourists that it hopes to attract in droves. Perhaps the public toilets at the entrance epitomised the ambition of the town (or at least of the Chinese authorities who planned it. The back of the cubicles in the male toilets were clear glass looking out on to a small waterfall. The problem was that there were only Asian squat toilets

After breakfast we strolled around the town mainly composed of Dong people and got some idea of life in town where most of the occupants seemed to be oblivious of tourists as they went about their business that seemed to be mainly construction pounding material to dye the indigo fabric for which they are famed while the rest carried on a support role of feeding and servicing the very large community.

We went to a museum after breakfast but it was little more than a classier craft shop.

At 9.00 am we boarded the bus and then the real adventure began. Whereas yesterday we travelled on appallingly narrow and winding roads when we exited the village we were on a first class highway with a landscaped median strip

Just over the hill though we were in for a surprise. A whole new city is being developed on the road into Zhou Xing. It is reminiscent of Gattlingburg in the US our other fringe communities adjacent to large tourist attractions. The only difference is that this was just so deliberate and blatant. There is even a high-speed rail line headed for the village which is unlikely to be oblivious to tourists for much longer.

Then we saw another side of china, the juggernaut which is rapidly installing infrastructure across the nation. It started with is getting on a Freeway and heading west. The freeway was unbelievable. About 30% was underground with tunnels some up to five kilometres long burrowing through hills; another 25% was viaducts many over 100 metres and some possibly 150 metres above the ground; the remaining 45% was on terra firma although often through deep cuttings. It felt at times that we were viewing the landscape as if from a low flying aircraft.

Poo advised that the road ran 2,200 kilometres from Chengdu to Guandong and it was completed in a year. Later we were to criss-cross another freeway under construction but we have no idea of its route or destination but it was truly awesome. It is fortunate that construction won't last for too long because there is enormous dislocation of existing traffic and little consideration given to how it is to navigate through this construction zone in the interim.

Freeways come with a price. Our driver parted with 225 Yuan for this amazing smooth and comfortable section of about 150 kilometres.

We had lunch in another new city, Banthai that seemed to have no old housing at all. After getting briefly lost due to the chaos caused by freeway construction we eventually found our destination Shiqiao village. Here we were again temporarily lost while Poo located our interesting our accommodation. Dispersed around the village.

We found ourselves in the home of the pioneer of paper making in Shiqiao. Wang Xingwu led the villagers to begin making ancient paper in 1998 when he developed new techniques for making coloured paper. We all enjoyed dinner there.

We has a most interesting dinner served in Miaow style. It was most entertaining with conversation being well lubricated from the Thai table by some very good rice whisky.

Day 7
Monday, 14th April
Shiqiao to Kaili and the train

This morning was spent exploring this and the adjacent Miaao village of Bar Bor Cun. The tour of Shiqiao was focussed particularly on the craft of paper-making

We saw the whole process except for the stripping of the bark from the mulberry trees that we were told grew wild in the hills. When the branches are removed the stumps coppice and so the harvest is sustainable. Back in the village the bark is steamed and softened and made pliable. The softened bark is meticulously scrutinized by people who remove any remaining outer bark so that just the pure inner bark fibre remains. It is then ponded into pulp and pin a tub it is collected on a screen which then goes through a process of drying. However we also saw one craftsman making patterns with plants on the surface of the wet screens for special paper. I have now watched paper-making in Laos and PNG.

After our exploration of papermaking, some went to explore the nearby newly created Tourism Visitor Centre that is expected to be fully open for business on 1st May. It had some wonderful crafts, batik, jewellery, paper and tourist information and some accommodation. It looked and effectively was mint new but the construction of the freeway towering over the project cast some sort of shadow on the future of the village and the life-style that the villagers have enjoyed to now and as we observed it. The construction that had been carried out all day Sunday working on the pylons continued under floodlights throughout the night.

There were some interesting messages to be inferred from the various interpretations written in English that suggest that there may have been serious reprisals against the Yang clan because the head of the clan served as a Colonel in Chiang Kai Check's Nationalist Army against Mao's communists in the civil war of 1948. The family shrine and many houses where the clan lived were burnt in a fire about that time.

In the village of Bar Bor we saw a classic and very natural Miao village. It was very compact and perched on high ground in a bend of the river.

I couldn't help noticing the number of buildings though that were listing in one direction or another because they lacked decent or any bracing to hold them upright. Such a simple principle should be relatively easy for the government to impart.

At about 11.00 am we were on our way. It was supposed to be a relatively short 40 km journey to our destination Kaili to catch the train. However, the

freeway construction had turned this ride into an obstacle course and it was quite a challenge for the drivers to get us through on the very last leg of a very challenging 7-day trip for them.

In Kaili at last we found a restaurant and had lunch. Eric found a bargain of a camera that he wanted but couldn't get access to money to complete the purchase. Others at least got money and some purchased small items like maps to try to see where we had been and fruit. I saw the fruit vendor carrying her load of apples, bananas and mandarins in on her pannier. I tested the weight she was carrying. I could barely lift it off the ground.

The waiting was a minor ordeal compared with the crowding at the station waiting for the train. However we were soon aboard and managed to get our sleepers that some opportunistic interlopers had used before our arrival and we were soon on a 14 hour overnight journey to Chongqing. Heading roughly due west for the first three hours before heading north. All the way though we could see the transformation occurring in this most populace country on Earth and seeing the huge cities we soon appreciated just how they fitted a population 500 times greater than Australia into an area only a little greater than the size of Australia.

It was a long night on the train in a car that had 66 sleeping berths. It wasn't the most comfortable night.

Day 8
Tuesday, 15th April
Chongqing & Daza Rock Carvings

We were all astir by 6.00 am to see the sea of high rises of Chongqing appear around us. However we travelled for at least 30 minutes through this urban juggernaut before we reached the train station. Here we were met by Jerry who arranged for our heavy luggage to be transported to the ship while we went to a Chinese restaurant to have a massive and varied breakfast mainly based around dumplings and dim-sims instead of the usual rice.

At 8.30 the group of literally the great unwashed made their way to a bus. It was larger and roomier than the Guilin bus and we had some extra leg room. Jerry then pointed out the demographics of Chongqing a city with a population of 33 million. It has 1000 bridges and many tunnels and we saw a fair proportion of them in a day there as well as the incredible freeway system. While once the city had been almost wiped out by plague it was repopulated by decree of the Emperor and the tradition of being a migrant city continues as its large population is

fully employed on an enormous expansion of construction and industry. However having once for eight years (1941 to 1949) been the national capital, it now remains a major administrative and commercial centre for southern China. The people love spicy food. 20 years ago there were few cars but now the city has an amazing but congested network of roads to cope with the rapidly increasing volume of cars

Our first journey was a short trip to the Huguang Guild Hall where we met a most interesting local guide a young woman whose came from a family of four siblings because her parents ignored the one child policy. She took us through this museum that was built in 1685 following the repopulation of the city. We went through the complex learning much of Chinese life and the religions of Buddhism and Taoism as well as some of the confusion philosophy that was well depicted in some of dioramas. We were told about the housing nearby that was being demolished and replaced because some apartment buildings 70 levels high had no lifts. Other relics of Mao are also being replaced. Even the statue of Yu the first King had to be replaced after being damaged by the Red Guard. We met the Big-leafed Banyan Tree that is the emblem of Chongqing and the retail end that had some excellent souvenirs

From the temple museum we then had a 2.5-hour journey to our next destination the Daza Rock Carvings World Heritage site. It was about 150 kilometres (2 hours) west from Chongqing.

Our journey though was allowed us to experience different aspects of the countryside and of the civil controls as applied in turn to our bus driver and to Jerry our loquacious guide with separate check-points for each.

We noted the uniform colour schemes of the various rural communes. One between the exploding town of Daza East and the Rock Carvings seemed to be focussed on horticulture producing variety of fruits including strawberries and loquats, as well as advanced trees for landscaping. We also saw during the day how these advanced trees were being employed after relocation. Many lined freeways and new projects where landscaping was installed as soon as possible.

The main destination though was the Daza World Heritage site where we passed through a new entrance the new Entry Station and witnessed an awkward dispute between Poo and Jerry over the charges that should be applied.

What was overwhelming was the degree of development under construction around this site. There were at least a dozen cranes building a huge resort complex based on this World Heritage site.

Although everything about the site was new including the relocated and very mature Camphor Laurel trees that formed the avenue leading to the actual inscribed site were done within the last two years it was all being tastefully and attractively developed. Even all but two of the Camphor laurels survived the trauma of being transplanted due to impressive husbandry even extending to a sub-bark nutrient drips being inserted.

The actual World Heritage site was most impressive. I had earlier this year seen the Golden Temple of Dambulla that has a number of rock carvings illustrating Buddhism. However the Daza carvings were more impressive in volume and diversity as well as the crafted displayed. We learnt that these carvings were initially inspired by one man and were all carried out from the 9th to 13th Centuries.

In contrast with the other World Heritage site we had visited at Kaiping, this one was being meticulously curated and preserved and the integrity protected.

We left the site late and didn't arrive at the embarkation point for our voyage until after 7.00 pm. After three days without a shower most were happy to get a meal in our smelly state. We were so late that Poo had to abandon ideas of providing us a more affordable dinner in a restaurant ashore and scramble off with Ing, Mint and Ami to catch a train. They will enjoy fewer hassles over the next few days while we are travelling aboard the *MV Anna*.

Once on board it took considerable time to allocate us to cabins and to reunite us with our luggage. Then at 9.15 we trudged up to the 5th Deck for a 45-minute briefing on ship protocols and other arrangements. Unfortunately neither in the briefings nor in the notes in the room was there any reference to wifi that turned out to be incredibly poorly managed leading some of our group to abandon attempts to use it even at outrageous prices and clumsy arrangements in total despair. While this was occurring the *MV Anna* slipped the Chongqing moorings and started heading down the river.



Day 9
Wednesday, 16th April
Yangtze Cruise — Fengdu

The morning was another grey day. The ubiquitous and tedious smog continued to blanket the river corridor while many were doing Tai-chi under Dr Xu's guidance before breakfast. After breakfast we went ashore at Fengdu, another town that had been relocated to lift the populace above the anticipated 175 metre higher water level.

Our guide through Fengdu was a local, Debbie. She spoke excellent English that she acquired while attending a tourism course in Chongqing. However she is a local and with her parents and grandmother had to relocate when the three Gorges dam was built. Now her grandmother who resented the move and is over 80 lives with her family on the 8th level of a multi story tower that has no lift.

Debbie told us that the cost of an apartment that was purchased from the government was 6000 Yuan per square metre. The family has a four-bedroom, two bathroom 180 m² apartment. It has no car accommodation. (*See attached Children's story inspired by Debbie's experience*).

Our visit to shore though wasn't to view the city of Chengdu though, but to view the Ghost City, a collection of Buddhist and Taoist temples on a hill top. The temples date back in origin almost 2,000 years). The temples attempt to epitomise Hell with a diversity of horrible punishments being depicted from being boiled in oil to being hung drawn and quartered. The expression "*Eat your heart out*" assumed a new meaning here. We went through many temples and there were tests to prove love to help with maternity and many other places. There were people here to pray, seek good fortune and to meditate.

Here at the very summit we came face to face with the image of Gama, the King of the Underworld. It was here that Barry produced his incense sticks and many joined in his offerings.

Back on board the *MV Anna* continued its voyage stopping for an optional tour to Shi Bao Zhai a beautiful temple that has survived the rising waters as one of the gems of Chinese architecture. Most of the group were more focussed on the R&R but those who did explore ashore said that the experience and experiencing the nine storied red wooden building that clung to the side of the rock enabling monks to more easily ascend to the summit.

In the evening there was entertainment in the form of a presentation of a great variety of costumes of Chinese minority groups that was widely applauded.

Day 10
Thursday, 17th April
Yangtze Cruise — The Three Gorges

The day began again with Tai Chi in the 5th level saloon. Then after an earlier breakfast those wanting to go to the White Emperor City (about half the group) set off for the White Emperor City that overlooks the Lui Gate, the entrance to Qutangxia Gorge, the first of the Three Gorges.

Four of these giant floating hotels were moored abreast of each other. The *MV Anna* was the third one out. So we ran an obstacle course to get ashore.

Luckily there were escalators up the bank which allowed us to save our energy for the 330 steps we had to ascend to reach the White Emperor City. We were guided by a very diminutive guide, Betty who spoke very good English that she taught herself by watching English language movies. She was very young and about to get married. She is a native of the City where we were moored, Fengdu. It has a population of a million people and is the fourth largest city in Sichuan Province.

A short bus ride took us to where we could walk across the new bridge to the White Emperor City that now sits atop an island whereas it was previously on a dominant peninsula guarding the entrance to the gorges. The climb ascended to a wonderful vantage point where we could see the image depicted on the 10 Yuan note.

We heard some wonderful stories of Chinese wisdom and loyalty while touring the temple. One described how a wise Prime Minister was able to meet the challenge of producing 100,000 arrows at three days notice to save his life. Instead of manufacturing them he sent a boat filled with straw dummies into enemy territory as a decoy. So many arrows were fired at the straw dummies that when he retrieved the boat he easily met the requisite target of arrows.

It was an interesting excursion where we also learnt more about the Yangtze and Chinese history.

Back aboard the *MV Anna* we watched the four vessels slowly peel off the mooring in turn and then make the fascinating 8 kilometre passage through Qutang Gorge before lunch. It was a beautiful gorge. The sheer vertical cliffs were most impressive and we imagined that we could see niches that housed "hanging coffins" but we were as mystified as the Chinese how such niches were accessed in ancient times.

After lunch we passed a large city and entered into the Wu Gorge which is even larger, longer and more magnificent. However it was extremely windy and

that meant that the scheduled excursion up a small side gorge the "Goddess Stream" had to be abandoned in favour of a less exposed mooring

The highlight of the scenic delights though were not found in the tree gorges themselves but in a late afternoon side trip we made in a smaller local craft cruising up the Shendong stream. It would have been even better with better light but we saw marvellous reflections and a lot of traditional life. However for me it was the majesty of the scenery in this very narrow gorge and the sighting of some hanging coffins inserted high on the cliffs that were the most inspiring aspects of this two-hour tour.

The evening produced a farewell banquet in the dining room and a Cabaret on the 5th Deck that I had to abandon early as I succumbed to a virus attack and retreated with urgency to the bathroom and an uncomfortable night. I missed seeing the movement of the MV Anna through the locks. I was to miss all outside activities including meals for the next 18 hours.

Day 11 Good Friday, 18th April Yangtze Cruise — Three Gorges Dam

The day dawned in a heavy fog. We were moored and I had nothing to do except to think up a couple of haikus.

*Fog obscures the land
Direction needs clarity
Keep your goals in sight.*

*Dams block rivers
Obstacles block ambitions
We need alternatives.*

Barbara provided this summary of the visit to the power station

Happy 64th birthday Barry!

An early start with breakfast at seven o'clock for a 7.45 start to see the Three Gorges Dam. Unfortunately there was a very heavy fog with visibility down to 200m.

Our guide Cherry, spoke English fluently. She grew up in the area as her father worked on the project and she was totally conversant with all aspects of the dam, from the design concept in 1984, commencement in 1998 and completion in 2004.

The bus took us to the Security Building where we were screened before going to the dam.

We were able to gain an overview of the project from a 10 m by 4 m 3D plan layout, including the "lake" above the dam, the double-lane, five-step

shiplock system capable of transporting vessels of 10,000 tonnes (which we had experienced the previous night for those who had stayed awake to witness the lowering of the "Victoria Anna"), the left and right bank Powerhouses separated by the Dam Spillway, the 32 penstocks and power generating turbines.

In addition, the 3000 tonne capacity vertical Shiplift currently under construction will be the largest in the world when completed. This was of particular interest as it is world-first technology.

The construction of the dam resulted in 1.2 million people being relocated. There was a large education program beforehand to explain why the building of the dam was necessary for the greater good of the 24 million people whose lives were being affected by the Yangtze floods.

The group then ventured out into the light misty rain and heavy fog, up 200 m of escalators (Please pay attention to the distance between the pedals when the escalator works, in case of collision between feet and broach) to the lookout (No surmounting in Thunderstorm) which would have been fantastic on a fine day. The hundreds of swallows hawking indicated the low barometric pressure. The tourism infrastructure is impressive, shops with books in Chinglish on the dam and maps of the project were bought, one unfortunately in French.

On return the sad news that we would be bussed to Yichang as shipping had been cancelled on the Yangtze due to the heavy fog.

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Back on board chaos reigned because the dense fog had closed the river to all shipping movements and the MV Anna was obliged to remain at its mooring and alternative plans made to get people to Yitcgang to continue their Chinese connections. The ship arranged for buses to be on shore. However their arrangements for porters to get the luggage ashore fell well short of perfect and rather than wait in the fog we gathered our own

The bus journey to Yitchang was interesting although very foggy. We passed some very posh villas beside the river that might well have been a posh suburb of an American or Australian city. The riverside was landscaped and it appeared to house a number of high tech industries.

At Yitchang we were reunited with Poo and Mint and met the bus to carry us for the next seven days. That

was about 2.00 pm. Then it was on to an amazingly flat long freeway travelling to our next destination near Mount Lushan.

Day 12 Saturday, 19th April Mt Lushan World Heritage

The rain travelling yesterday continued during the morning as we rose to explore the surroundings of this strange hotel we found ourselves in. It was a place close to the Jiujiang rail station. Those people with windows that opened on to the daylight heard train horns and trains rattling through all night.

The reason for this stopover was to visit a World Heritage site Mt Lushan which has the distinction of also being a UNESCO Geopark because *"the park area features the effects of Quaternary glaciation, and exceptional geological up-thrown fault scarps from the Quaternary age."*

So it was with anticipation that we headed out of town to this site. It seemed a little inauspicious when we turned off a freeway but after passing plantations growing famous Lushan tea we arrived at our destination already crowded with tourist buses.

We had gathered glimpses of the mountains as we approached. They were very attractive and were laced with wispy clouds to enhance them. I wondered why this site was a cultural rather than a natural site. It transpires though that it has inspired many Chinese poets and has other cultural significance. As we progressed up the gorge I also began to appreciate that it was not a wholly natural site because over many years the Chinese have gone to great lengths to enhance its natural beauty with supplementary plantings of maples and with creation of weirs and pagodas to create a greater attraction.

The scenery though can't be captured in words and we hope that it has been caught on film. Our Thai guides carried shopping bags of bread and apples and cake that we ate at a pagoda at the end of the track. It was then Poo offered an option of an extended three-hour walk to another exit but when weighing up the involvement, those who toyed with the idea and we returned early to the hotel where many room keys needed to be reactivated. However it was a quiet and welcome break.

That evening Poo's team celebrated Sami's birthday at a restaurant with very authentic local menu before we returned to see what interesting things we could discover on Chinese TV.

Day 13 Sunday, 20th April Heading for Huangshan

Easter Sunday dawned fine but grey. After another interesting meal in yet another local restaurant near our eccentric hotel, (our third meal venue) we finalized packing, waited for Barry and then headed off for Huangshan on a four to five hour drive. It proved to be much longer but it was full of interest. When someone spotted five double bed mattresses piled up on the back of the diminutive tuk-tuk truck Bob was quick to describe it as a mobile brothel.

The matter though which had us most gasping were the number of cranes. At one stage we reckoned on at least 50 in our field of vision as we passed at another where there was massive apartment construction being carried out sixteen cranes were counted on the one site. Construction and high-rise abound in the cities and soon to be cities. However there was also extensive construction in the rural areas we passed through only all of this seemed to be accomplished without the presence of the ubiquitous yellow cranes hovering over the constructions.

We wonder when it might stop. Despite China's professed "One Child policy" the population has reached 1.4 billion and they seem to be building accommodation to cater for twice that number.

*Small molecules
It can take countless billions
Before overflow.*

Our Route G56 Eastwards for about 500 kilometres followed south of the Yangtze River. While we were close to the river there were many factories and industries. One large factory was a Suzuki car factory. As we veered away there was much less.

One highlight was crossing the outlets of the largest freshwater lake in China that flowed into the Yangtze. We couldn't see much of the lake but we were aware of its extent from what we could see from its periphery.

The great highway was surprisingly empty. However of the traffic that did use it and pay the toll (our toll was 350 Yuan (\$70) most were trucks. Over one section I counted the oncoming traffic. About 60% were trucks, 30% were private cars and were 10% buses.. We remain curious though while the buses we ride in strictly observe the 80 kilometre speed limit and slow down for tunnels while we are constantly passed by other buses. Perhaps they think foreigners must observe the right thing?

We had noted though yesterday that some wheelie bins had been set on fire by vandals. Today I noted that there were no overpasses where the traffic below wasn't shielded from potential rock throwers from above.

We arrived at our destination near the foot of the Huangshan Mountains at about 4.00 after a 6.5 hour of travel with a comfort stop and meal break. We are staying in a much more comfortable and conforming hotel than yesterday.

Days 14 - 15

Monday & Tuesday, 21st & 22nd April Huangshan Mountain

The morning dawned as per weather forecast with cloud and light rain. However the cloud was so low that Poo made an executive decision to scrap the planned nine hour walk up the mountain because visibility had been reduced to such an extent that photography would be futile. It was a very wise decision and one that would be appreciated the next day by would-be walkers when they had a taste of what they missed in a descent into the Grand Canyon.

We were all well kitted and prepared for this challenge. We had some all too tantalizingly brief glimpses of this landscape as the shuttle wound its way through the hairpin bends to the cableway to the summit. In the cable car the visibility was further reduced but in places we could see the cliffs almost reaching out to us.

From the cable-car terminal it was a relatively short hike to the hotel but the rain predicted for the afternoon and evening seemed to have arrived earlier than forecast. However this didn't stop us gasping with delight as we encountered magnolias and rhododendrons what were lightly sprinkled through the landscape. However it was the pine trees that gave the landscape its special character especially those that were so tenuously stitched to the rocks.

Despite being a week day and heavy rain we were amazed by the turnout of Chinese to these mountains. We had to jostle with them at every stage and they weren't deterred by the weather.

We booked in at the Bei Hei Hotel that turned out to be surprisingly much better than we had expected and retired for lunch before emerging at 2.00 pm to see if the weather may improve and offer a chance for better visibility and photography.

Tackling a diary to describe such a dramatic landscape has proven to be a bigger challenge than any other diary entry of this China Odyssey.

However since this dramatic landscape that deserves so many superlatives and has been a source of inspiration for generations, I thought I would attempt poetry to help describe it.

Huangshan

*Granite towers thrust heads high, oft in vain;
Their rugged fasces shrouded by mists and rain
Small chattering streams tumble about their base
Weaving random patterns of silvered lace*

*From skeletal soils persistent seeds give birth,
Tenacious pines spring forth to hold on to this earth
From some boughs spring buds and flowers
And amongst the branches squirrels play for hours*

*For eons Huangshan has experienced natural
evolution*

*While below its mists humans staged a cultural
revolution*

*For millennia Huangshan's beauty has inspired poets
and artists,*

Drawn to this sanctuary of peace above the mists.

*Huangshan's excellence is now of world renown
Yet another outstanding jewel in China's crown*

We woke early to seek photographs of the famous Huangshan sunrises. It wasn't raining but the fog was thicker than ever. Seeking any sort of photograph was an exercise in futility.

At 8 am the whole group emerged and decided to follow Poo to a different chair lift to an alternative Park Entry Station. It was a grand tour that mainly went down, down, down. However our advice is that we started at 1800 metres and descended to 1400 metres. Yet when we got there the Cable car ascended the mountain and didn't descend to the entry station. We therefore had to jostle over 3 kilometres at the top to get to the chair lift we had come up on.

Our marathon walk though took us through the Grand Canyon. What was more amazing than the mist-obscured grand views was the ingenuity and engineering skills that had gone into the development of the walking paths. In many places we passed across the vertical face of sheer rock cliff faces with the track somehow miraculously cantilevered out over an abyss. The track construction was such that despite the wet conditions it wasn't slippery.

After walking for five hours we arrived at the Park exit and caught our shuttle bus to the restaurant below where we finally sat down to a lunch of warm noodles and mushrooms at 2.30 pm.

Our next destination was to the World Heritage cultural site of Xidi and Hongcun. It was a delightful scenic drive but after a shambolic distribution of

group members to various guest houses we nearly wore the wheels off our luggage getting to our appointed guest-houses.

Huangshan World Heritage Comments

Huangshan is a Natural World Heritage site. Although China has many cultural World Heritage sites it has few Natural sites and of these Huangshan must be the top of the list and deservedly so. It has outstanding geological values. That allows it to qualify as a UNESCO Geopark. That plus its natural beauty allows it to qualify for World Heritage under two natural criteria as well as one cultural criteria.

It was strange though to see so much engineering and anthropogenic infrastructure inside the park. There are no less than five large hotels and a TV transmitter as well as three cable-cars/cableway. However this is clearly the most heavily visited natural World Heritage site I have yet encountered and the pathways and the cableways were essential to cope with the crowds. We were there in an off day, a rainy Tuesday and not in summer but the crowds were already daunting. The park would be loved to death without this infrastructure.

I stayed in a hotel and I am wrestling with the philosophy that would not allow such infrastructure in a National Park when clearly the environmental impact of alternatives would be greater.

During the five hours we saw two different track construction gangs at work. Each seemed to be about 15 to 20 in size and both seemed to be installing new tracks, bridges and stairs. While most of the work from mixing the cement to conveying it to the site was done manually. However the work was well finished and solid. We also saw one man working on maintenance. He was roughing up some new laid concrete to provide a non-slip surface. What was also impressive is how so much work was accomplished in very primitive conditions without the degree of OH&S requirements experienced in Australia.

There were litter bins everywhere. This certainly wasn't a carry-in carry out park. We saw several men wandering around emptying the bins and collecting the litter that was still so casually discarded, particularly the cigarette butts

I was also impressed by the signage and the Park logo that so well encapsulated the image and values of the park.

Day 16 Wednesday, 23rd April Hongcun Village World Heritage

We woke early in this delightful and hospitable guesthouse and wisely took Poo's advice to get out early to explore the village before the flood of day-trippers that would start to stream in from 9.00 am.

At 6.00 am the public areas of the village were all but deserted and we managed to see most of it before the influx. Also anxious to get an early start were the artists. This village seems to attract countless art students and they were spread around one of the two lakes in the village seeking to capture the images and reflections in the village.

By the time I returned to our guesthouse for breakfast, we discovered that after two hours I had snapped off 130 images. It is just as well that I had downloaded these images because there was for a short time during the day that I was without a camera having written it off as lost forever when the guest-house miraculously found it.

This village has a strong feeling of authenticity to it dating from the 8th century. The water which serves as a drainage and fire fighting is reticulated in meandering wooden drains. This water ends up in the lakes. However the number of houses centuries old and still in use justify this village's World Heritage recognition. It was a living village and some new houses were under construction. Even they were being built in a style that harmonized and blended into the character of the original architecture.

When we strolled out on to Moon Lake there were no tourists, just two women in sight at the very edge of the lake. One woman was washing clothes with tremendous gusto as if to relieve frustrations. The other was plucking a chook and washing the body in the lake.

The main feature and attraction to the public eye are the two lakes. Crescent Lake is at the entry to the quaint village and the Moon Lake is in the middle. Both in the early morning tranquillity have mirror like surfaces reflecting all about them and attracting photographers and artists. However we found the best attraction were the old buildings. In our meanderings we were overwhelmed by the treasure that was in Chenzi Hall. It is a building that could easily be missed behind a plain wall facing the street, but inside there was 3,000 m² with spacious halls and side halls all adorned with the most intricate wood cuts and paintings of a period centuries ago yet perfectly preserved. It was in Chenzi Hall that the UNESCO World Heritage

certificate is located and it certainly appears to be the most appropriate place

We met and were befriended by Wang Senqiang the author of a book we purchased. He is described in the frontispiece as author of several books and "*a reader and a thinker*". It was one of those encounters where one can sense an instant affinity despite the language barrier.

After thinking that our luggage wheels may fall off the previous evening today Poo arranged for the luggage to be delivered to the bus which had to be parked outside the village. Then we all headed to the bamboo forest where our aching legs were tested again to ascend to a lookout over the village we had just left and its twin village with which it is inscribed.

Leaving there after lunch the bus travelled through some most attractive countryside and villages and after almost an hour rejoined the freeway G56 which we had followed all the way from Yitchang. After a further 37 kilometres we passed back through Huangshan City. Then it was a frustratingly slow journey averaging just over 60 kph as we moved towards Hangzhou. Our anxiety was whether Somboon would make the train that was to take him to Shanghai. It was due to leave Hangzhou at 9.00 pm if he was to catch his flight before his visa expired. As it was, we missed the Railway Station. we threw Somboon into a cab (and Ing to help interpret Chinese for him). He caught the train with not much time to spare.

Coming into the city of 8.8 million the density of the smog inspired a small haiku:

*Some fouls the clean air
The product of combustion
It will consume us.*

Then our problems then began as when we arrived at our scheduled hotel only to discover that they had missed our booking but that we would be upgraded and sent to another hotel. Then a new problem arose over the transfers to the alternative hotel as arranged. Over the next hour or more we and our luggage were jumbled into various cars and taken to the alternative hotel. The waiting seemed interminable given that we were tired and hungry. It was even worse to be left sitting in a car going nowhere and not knowing what was happening. We can only describe this move as chaotic.

It was almost 10.00 pm before we found our respective rooms and even then we had not found food. Still it had been a wonderful day and another chapter in our China Adventure that is now nearing an end.

Day 17 Thursday, 24th April Hangzhou World Heritage

There was a slow start after our chaotic arrival in Hangzhou last night. After a subdued and ordinary breakfast at our hotel we assembled at 9.30 for our main foray of the day, an exploration of the City's West Lake, a cultural World Heritage site.

There was some chaos getting into seven different taxis where each driver spoke no English but eventually we ended up or were rounded up at the appointed destination the jetty to board the tour boat for a view of this famous lake.

Hangzhou is a mega city but it has been a mega city for more than 1000 years. From about 1100 to 1200 A.D. it was the largest city in the world. It was a city cited by Marco Polo. It was the capital of China from 1132 for a period of the Soong Dynasty. So despite the chaotic traffic, it has been and remains a most sophisticated city, and that sophistication is epitomised by West Lake.

West Lake and the hills surrounding its three sides, has inspired famous poets, scholars and artists since the 9th century. It comprises numerous temples, pagodas, pavilions, gardens and ornamental trees, as well as causeways and artificial islands. These additions have been made to improve the landscape. West Lake has influenced garden design in the rest of China as well as Japan and Korea over the centuries. It meets three of the World Heritage cultural criteria.

*"The lovely Spring breeze has come
Back to the Lake of the West.
The Spring waters are so clear and
Green they might be freshly painted.
The clouds of perfume are sweeter
Than can be imagined. In the
Gentle East wind the petals
Fall like grains of rice."
—Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), excerpts from
Spring Day on West Lake[3]*

We went for a cruise across the lake in the most elaborate craft and it was interesting. However after a Japanese lunch we sauntered around the periphery of the lake seeking to take a ride around the lake in one of the many electric buses that travelled a one way circuit.

However it was only as we started working out where and how to get on to these crowded buses that we began to appreciate the degree of sophistication and leisure of the people of this daunting city. Although it was a Thursday, the park was packed with people enjoying a variety of forms of recreation. They were riding cycles and walking.

They were spontaneously engaging in ballroom dancing. They were making music on Chinese violins and singing. They were courting but there were lots of old men sitting and talking or playing cards and mah-jong. It was a joy to see so many people undertaking so much and such a variety of spontaneous recreation.

After almost abandoning hope of being able to crowd on to a bus we found a number of buses that allowed us all to climb aboard for a further appreciation of the throngs of people outdoing what seemed like a Sunday promenade around the lake.

Despite the sign we saw in one place that there was to be no fishing, there was one section of the lake where fishing rods were thicker than anything I have ever seen on Fraser Island. This must have been a special zone because when we crossed the next bridge there was not a rod or fisherman in sight.

Having experienced the drive and seen the extent of the gardens and the landscaping I agree that this site well qualifies for its World Heritage status. While I hadn't seen much promotion of it as a World Heritage site and we could find no postcards or literature about it, there was the best and largest World Heritage sign I have seen prominently displayed in a special plaza not far from the Art and Culture pavilion. There were also other measures being taken to protect the integrity of the site. For example, on our boat across the lake, although there was a toilet aboard, this was not allowed to be used because it could foul the lake. The maintenance of the site was brilliant. It was clean and tidy and a credit to this huge and ancient city. One of the more attractive features of visiting this park is that at no stage were we harassed by vendors or touters. Such activity was banned and is obviously well policed

Our next bout of chaos arose in trying to return to the hotel. It wasn't as simple as hailing cabs and getting them to deliver us. We failed in that attempt after several relocations. Then we tried for a bus. We were willing but we couldn't all fit aboard the bus that passed our hotel. Finally Poo summonsed the bus he had chartered to take us to Suzhou that was waiting at our hotel to come to collect us.

The trip to Suzhou was over 150 kilometres. We travelled at 100 kph in contrast to the previous bus travel but we were passed a number of times by a very fast train travelling at more than twice that speed. As we neared Suzhou and darkness fell we became caught in traffic and didn't reach our hotel until almost 8.00 pm.

At 9.00 pm we all assembled for our final dinner together which was a special treat provided by Poo. It was a hot pot and more than the usual amount of

alcohol was consumed as we celebrated what has been a most remarkable journey of discovery in China.

Day 18 **Friday, 25th April** **Suzhou World Heritage**

There were some sad reflections as we dispersed after a wonderful trip and a pleasant parting dinner.. About half the group was due to take up Poo's offer to explore Suzhou's World Heritage Gardens but just before we were due to head off at 10.00 am it was discovered (a) that the hotel had lost the extra night's booking for the seven who were due to remain a second night and (b) that the hotel had only two rooms available for a second night. That caused some upheavals and delays in the gardens excursion but it was resolved with the Fearless Leader & Su opting to move on to a hotel in Shanghai for the night.

With farewells said, Poo, Sami and ten others headed off to the Humble Administrator's Gardens that dated back to the Ming Dynasty (1509). There has been a new addition in the 5.2 ha Gardens precinct. In 2006 the work on the new Suzhou Museum was completed. I found the museum as interesting for its architecture and design as for its exhibits. Outstanding Chinese architect I.M. Pei whose family is from Suzhou was commissioned to design this wonderful building when he was 82. He had designed building in many countries including Australia and a new gallery for the Louvre in Paris. The exhibits though truly reflected the rich cultural heritage of this City. We could well have spent more than an hour there.

We ate street food for lunch before Poo introduced us to a guide, Happy who took us through the Classical Gardens of Suzhou rather more quickly than I would have preferred. These gardens that meet five of the six cultural World Heritage criteria are masterpieces of Chinese landscape garden design in which art, nature, and ideas are integrated perfectly to create ensembles of great beauty and peaceful harmony. However our guide, Happy had strict instructions from Poo to have us back at the hotel by 3.30. In fact we were back there by 2.45 pm. Still the rushed glimpse of these great gardens was enough to make us feel that the listing was well justified.

There was of course the unexpected and new plans for travelling to Shanghai were formulated. However eventually we all arrived at the Suzhou Railway Station which seemed as busy as any major London Station where we caught the 6.14 bullet

train for a surprisingly short trip to Shanghai. It was short because the Bullet train was travelling at 299 kph (just short of 300). Then the surprise was unveiled. We had the most spacious comfortable apartment and the softest bed of the trip for our last night in China. It was something we hadn't anticipated when we had enjoyed breakfast in Suzhou.

Day 19 **Saturday, 26th April** **Shanghai**

This is a day not originally intended to be included in the diary but spending a day in the world's most populace city demands at least some mention. However despite the forecast for light rain with a predicted 3mm in the morning it poured. This of course didn't deter Poo and his entourage of half a dozen. We negotiated our way through the Metro and emerged to even heavier rain in the area we had come to visit, an ancient village on a canal. In the deluge Poo found a gondolier (Chinese style) who would take us a short distance up the flooded canal to a lock and back. The water levels had risen so much that we just managed to squeeze under a lower bridge.

Then having replaced one worse for wear umbrella (strong wind gusts as well as rain) we headed for a small restaurant in an avenue of restaurants. Then after a magnificent meal we retraced our footsteps to the hotel where Poo and Co took off. Four were flying to Beijing but Sami was booked on the 450kph super-bullet train and was scheduled to reach Beijing ahead of them.

We tried to see around Shanghai but the scenic tour turned out to be a fiasco not to be recommended because we had to wait for 50 minutes for the hop-on and hop-off bus that runs only once an hour. The ride could have well been in Tokyo or New York or Paris because the main things we observed were brands that are seen and promoted in many places. The dress style and the transport were similar to those seen in other major cities of the world. Shanghai could have been Sydney except that the population is Asian instead of a multicultural city and the high rise taller, denser and richer.

Summary

This was an amazing three weeks and it was unanimously agreed that we would never have had such a comprehensive experience of China if we had travelled with any tourist company. However with Poo and his great Natural Focus team, Somboon, Mint, Ing and of course Sami we had an unforgettable experience.

The Minority Groups were well covered and we certainly appreciated that, particularly walking with those wonderful women porters through the field of Longshen, the backbone of the dragon and the dancing and interactions as Ma'an with Sarah. Some people voted the homestay at the paper making as amongst the top experiences.

World Heritage was another strong theme. We managed to take in seven World Heritage sites and one proposed World Heritage site in the time ranging from cultural villages to gardens and a lake and to the lofty heights of Lushan and Huangshan that were shrouded in mists. Still despite the weather we did appreciate why they are held in the highest esteem. There was also the Daza Rock carvings that fall into a category of their own.

We were more than anything impressed by the degree and pace of building and development. Any thoughts that we may have entertained that China had a long way to go to catch up to the standard of living in Australia were quickly dispelled. Even more corrections to thinking was required to appreciate just how sophisticated China's engineering and designing capacity were.

True there are pockets of primitive construction techniques we witnessed but the Chinese are getting things done to improve their living standards. However they are not as far behind as we may have imagined. The only question arising in our minds was whether they may have over-reached themselves in construction and whether all of the apartments we saw will be occupied and put to good use.