



“TO THE CHINESE WAY”

China captivates another writer from the West

By Julia Dawahare

I could picture myself one of the many ladies riding my bike to work in my skirt and blazer, high heels and white gloves . . . getting up early and joining the outdoor neighborhood tai chi class.”

Nancy Heinzen loved the vibes of Shanghai, the most populous and, some say, the most cosmopolitan of China’s cities.

“It has a sophisticated feel to it,” said Heinzen, one of 14 travel professionals who had embarked on a tour of China with China Plus, a Texas-based tour company owned and operated by Chinese natives Chris and Ping Lee.

“You can ask me anything. I will have the answer,” a confident Chris Lee had told me before the trip. It was quite a boastful statement about a subject that encompasses a quarter of the world’s population and 4,000 years of history.

Claims are true

Within a few days of starting our trip, I began to suspect that Chris Lee’s grandiose claim was true. The Lees know not only the facts about their country, but also the people’s minds and hearts, which made the trip a fascinating cultural immersion.

We began in Shanghai, which is being positioned to become the new Hong Kong. It is a maze of multilevel highways and busy with construction, which is why its old moniker, City Above the Sea, is giving way to the newer Concrete Forest.

The heart of the city is a bustling scene of bicycles, buses and taxis filled with some of Shanghai’s 13 million inhabitants.

Our guide in Shanghai was Anna, or Leng Anna — guides in China adopt American names for ease of communication. We took a bus from our hotel, the Jin Jiang, where Richard Nixon reportedly stayed, to Bund promenade, where the Huangpu River separates

A bank program director traveling with China Plus tried her hand at a local musical instrument. The group later visited the fascinating terra-cotta army at Xi’an.

old Shanghai — meaning, roughly, before 1950 — from the new.

The old European-style buildings along the promenade contrast brilliantly with the modern and dramatic skyline sparkling across the water.

On the promenade, we first encountered “the hello people” — the droves of vendors hawking their wares. “Hello, hello, one dollar, one dollar, hello, hello.”

English isn’t known by many in China, and a simple “no” seems to have little effect. The phrase Anna taught us is “Bu yiao,” pronounced “boo yo” and meaning “No, I don’t want to take.”

After the promenade, we visited the Jade Buddha Temple. Anna told us that this is one of the best-preserved temples in China.

“It houses the largest jade Buddha in China, and is one of the most famous in the country,” she said.

It’s really beyond description, with enough gold and precious jade to make Elizabeth Taylor envious. The main Buddha is made of white jade, used for its seemingly superior beauty. His face is serene, with almost feminine features.



Religion returns... sort of

Freedom of religion, we are told, has been restored to China, but only about 12 percent to 13 percent of the population are practicing. The children of the ’50s and ’60s basically have no religion because of the country’s anti-religion regime when they were children.

But the children of the ’60s and ’70s and younger were allowed more freedoms. Because of that and increased Western influences, Lee joked, “religion was reintroduced to China with the hamburger.”

In the afternoon, we visited the Mid-lake Pavilion Teahouse in Shanghai’s Old Town. The large two-story pavilion is surrounded by a man-made lake and dates to the Ming dynasty.

We ordered Peach of Immortality jasmine tea. As the tea steeps in a clear mug, a white flower blooms from a pod in the bottom of the glass. Along with the tea, we were served a variety of snacks: goat meat wrapped in sticky rice, tofu, litchi fruit and boiled quail eggs — an enchanting and thoroughly Chinese way to cap off our first day.

Our guide, Edward (Sun Dongming), thinks his native city of Suzhou is the most beautiful in China. “Suzhou was considered to be China’s artistic capital for many years during the Ming and Qing dynasties,” he said. “The women of Suzhou are still considered the ideal.”

Dubbed the Venice of the East, Suzhou is a city whose main streets are lined with canals and charming arched stone bridges. Although it may be a stretch to compare this city to Venice, it does retain a patina that many Chinese cities are losing in their rapid efforts to modernize.

Everyone smiles

On a boat ride through the canals of old Suzhou, some of my fellow travelers were not so enchanted. Life along the canals is rather rudimentary, with people doing laundry and having only common facilities, but everyone is smiling.

Lee had explained that living communally is the Chinese way: “They are not happy in isolation.”

Patricia Bailey noted, “Our kids (in America) have everything, and some can’t look at you with those big eyes and smile.” This may have been the truest glimpse of old China we saw.

Another treasure of Suzhou that has escaped modernization and World War II is its private classic gardens. These jewels of landscaping art are the finest surviving examples of the tradition.

We visited the Master of the Nets garden, hidden at the end of a



The trip provided many opportunities to see Chinese in their everyday pursuits, including pulling noodles at a bakery, carrying baskets to a market and, opposite page, playing a popular form of Chinese chess.

blind alley that is packed with shopping stalls filled with various inexpensive items for sale. Purchasing from stalls such as these is discouraged by our guides because of quality, but it can be just the place to pick up a small remembrance.

A scholarly rich man built the Master of the Nets garden to be a contemplative commune with nature. It's a maze of spaces within spaces, each drawing the visitor nearer the center of the garden, where there is a pond encircled by verandas, pavilions and covered corridors and crossed by two arched stone bridges. At night, Chinese opera is performed here.

Mary Tebo was amazed. "This garden is beautiful. Not at all what I expected; more of a rock garden with rooms — so different than anything at home," she said.

Massaging the moment

"The city of Dazhu literally translates into 'Big Foot,'" Chris Lee told us. "It is so named because this is where the massage therapy of reflexology originated. We can all get a reflexology treatment tonight."

Practically the whole group took Lee up on his offer, and this was quite the experience. "That massage was beyond any outstanding body work I have had in the states, and I've had a lot," said Heinzen.

Reflexology concentrates on the pressure points specifically in the feet, but our treatment included a whole-body massage.

Dazu also afforded some spectacular and unexpected ancient artifacts — the Buddhist rock carvings.

"Zhao Zhifend, a monk who was well versed in Tantric Buddhism, started this great venture in religious sculpture more than seven centuries ago," said our guide, Leo (Liu Jiamin). "The work required 70 years to complete."

The setting he chose is dramatic in itself: a horse-shaped gully a third of a mile long with sheer cliffs towering up to 90 feet high.

As we descended moss-covered steps into the depths of the grotto, Leo continued:

"Looking up you will see several temples, the oldest built by Zhao Zhifend himself in 1179 and last rebuilt in 1684 during the reign of Qing Emperor Kangxi. This temple is still active."

Indeed, this day worshippers were burning incense and kneeling before small images in rock alcoves.

The Wheel of Life, a phantasmagoria on the theme of reincarnation with Zhao Zhifeng at its center, is perhaps the central and most lavish attraction here.

"The Sleeping Buddha is the most famous in China. It is

Bank directors show off their purchases at a local market.



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Nirvana as seen in a dreamscape," said Leo. The Buddha measures 96 feet long from head to knees, forming a backdrop for a splendid ensemble of life-size, lifelike attendants (bodhisattvas) wading waist deep through a river of stone.

"The spirituality is so palpable here, I believe anyone could find solace," said Helen Stout.

Xi'an is China's City of the Dead, or its city of ancient treasures. We had the most charming of guides to bring these ancients alive. Her name was Ping (Wang Ping), and she was a sort of tonic for our group when we were nearing the end of our journey and a little travel-weary.

Terra-cotta army

We began our tour of Xi'an with the terra-cotta army.

"The First Emperor, Qin Shi Huang, unified China in Xi'an. Twenty-two centuries later, in 1979, the 7,000 life-sized terra-cotta soldiers buried with him were accidentally unearthed by a local farmer who was digging for a well," said Ping.

The farmer is alive and well and was signing books at the excavation site.

The army is still in the process of being unearthed and painstakingly restored. One is able to see large sections of soldiers intact and in formation guarding the emperor, but many, many figures are lying in shards awaiting restoration.

We can only imagine how many slaves and riches were used during Qin Shi Huang's life to usher him into death.

"The discovery of the Terra-cotta Army made our city a tourist destination, but Xi'an was always China's leading historical site. It was the capital of China over the course of 11 dynasties, reaching its height at the Tang Dynasty from 618 to 907," said Ping. "Xi'an's historical sites are even more extensive than Beijing's, stretching back 6,000 years."

A young Chinese girl gets a ride in a handmade basket on the back of her mother.



Change comes to the Yangtze

"The Yangtze River divides north China from south. It is the longest river in Asia, and one out of every 10 people in the world live along its shores."

So began the introduction to our once-in-a-lifetime experience down the Yangtze.

My traveling companions and I had all gathered on the upper deck of our cruise ship, one of Victoria Cruise Line's fleet. Our river guide, Daniel, gave us the facts, but they can't begin to describe the sights and experiences we had over the next four days.

First and foremost, everyone on our tour felt privileged to have been some of the last tourists to have seen the cities and ancient artifacts had destroyed by the summer of 2003.

The landscape alternated between misty mountain vistas and urban renewal. On our shore excursions, we saw whole cities being moved up the hill to safety. We were told that 1.5

million people would be relocated.

And as we cruised, Daniel intermittently pointed out ancient pagodas, rock carvings and the supposed site of Shangri La. In contrast, we toured the dam site at Sandouping, which is the largest water conservancy project ever undertaken.

But the most awe-inspiring site on our Yangtze cruise was the Lesser Three Gorges. We disembarked the Victoria 5 at Wushan at the confluence of the Yangtze and Daning rivers and boarded a motorized sampan boat.

The emerald water of the gorge was a strikingly clear contrast to the muddy, turgid waters of the Yangtze. Alice Baran was immediately enthralled. "This is so peaceful. I haven't seen one yet, but I swear I can hear the chattering of the monkeys John told us to watch for," she said.

Our guide, John (Zheng Shiming), who spoke impeccable English, pointed out the mysterious fungus of

longevity (lingzhi) growing high on the cliff face.

"Also see the rows of square holes bored into the cliffside. They extend the entire length of the gorges and are all that remain of an ancient plank walkway that allowed easier access to salt mines far up the river. It was destroyed by the Ming army."

The gorges were separated by lush terraced fields growing a variety of crops. Children along our route waded waist-deep into the water, holding long poles affixed with nets that reached for our boat in hopes of a gift from the tourists.

The water was very shallow, and we sometimes got stuck on sandbars, and our sampan drivers struggled against strong currents. John assured us that our downstream return would take only half the time as our upstream trip. But, we were in no hurry to leave this misty, green paradise.



Xi'an also has China's sole surviving city wall of any major city, built during the Ming dynasty. The restored earth and brick structure, with its archers' towers intact, stands 40 feet high and is eight miles around. Our group took an afternoon stroll on top for a bird's-eye view of the older part of the city.

In a nutshell, if you love Chinese history, Xi'an shouldn't be missed.

Our group happened to be in Beijing on the eve of a momentous event. For the first time, China's leader was retiring instead of expiring, and a new leader was being elected.

Great wall... Imperial city

China's capital has more known attractions than any other city in the country. The Great Wall, as Nixon was quoted as saying, "is great." The Forbidden City defines "imperial" and is so vast — 9,000 rooms, encompassed by a wall of 12 million bricks — that it numbs the mind.

But after two weeks of steady sightseeing, perhaps the most pleasing attraction in Beijing was the site of our last dinner in China, the Beijing Quanjude Roast Duck Restaurant.

Eating in China had been a pleasant adventure for our group. First of all, we always ate at large round tables with a lazy Susan in the middle on which, meal after meal, Chinese dishes would appear one after another until we were dizzy. Sharing our meals this way, we all got to know each other a bit better.

We had some culinary adventures along the way: noodles elaborately made in front of us in Xi'an and firewater — think Chinese moonshine — in Dazhu. But our Peking duck in Beijing was the grand finale.

The restaurant has seven floors and can serve 2,000 guests. As we entered, we could see the ducks being prepared and roasted by the chefs.

On this last night together, we had a private dining room. A special house wine was served, nicely sweet to complement the duck. We had dim sum to start.

The duck, which was carved at tableside, had a beautifully lacquered finish and was accompanied by the traditional pancakes, scallion and hoisin sauce. The dish was traditional but not typical; everything was a notch better.

The next day, we would board our separate planes for the long flight home. But on our last night in China, we were at our communal table immersed in the sharing of food and friendship, and we raised our glasses: "To the Chinese way."

A tour member, top, gets up close and personal with a panda. The Yangtze River's Three Gorges, left, have been inundated since the tour.

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