

## Reflection on the China Trip

By Darrel Woo

It had been almost 30 years to the day since I last set foot in China. This August, 2015, it was my honor to accompany the Jinan-Sacramento Sister Cities Corporation (“JSSCC”) to the sister city of Jinan, to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Sacramento’s relationship with Jinan, China. The delegation of thirty was led by then Chair of the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, Phil Serna accompanied by his wife, Roxanna.

This fourteen-day trip included seven students from the Natomas Charter School who were with the One Voice Project, three of their teachers as well as the school’s founder and executive director, Dr. Lam Ting Sun. In addition to my wife, Nancy, the group included former Mayor Heather Fargo and her husband, Alan. Because this trip was to include a visit to the Shandong Experimental High School, and because the Sacramento City Unified School District (“SCUSD”) has Chinese language elementary schools (Mandarin and Cantonese), I was able to convince Area Assistant Superintendent Tu Moua to also make the trip; accompanied by her husband Matt.

JSSCC scheduled a whirlwind tour, and for the adventuresome, this was the trip to take. Hardly time to breathe, but this was certainly not a relaxation vacation. We were also pleasantly surprised by some “firsts,” never to again be experienced in our lifetime. That is, the clean air in Tianamen Square. The day we visited Tianamen Square, the English language Chinese Newspaper, China Daily reported the cleanest air in Beijing in a generation. But more on that later.

China today, is much different than that China of a generation ago. Many



problems we face in California are faced in modern China. Air pollution is high. Traffic moves at a snail's pace during commute time because the congestion is so high. While we were there, I read news articles telling parents not to spend so much money on the latest electronic gadgets as they prepare their children for back to school. Also, there were stories about families willing to pay up to \$10,000 a month for a closet so that they would have an address in the "best neighborhood" in Beijing, so as to have the opportunity to get into the best schools.

We landed in Beijing on August 24, and were immediately delayed to our connector to Shanghai because of a typhoon. But nonetheless we made it to Shanghai, the old city previously occupied by Europeans and Americans. You can see the Western influence as the area near the Bund looks much like the Washington DC where hotels as the Mayflower resides. Our youth ambassadors took a touring day on the Bund and inside the Oriental Pearl Tower and Shanghai Municipal History Museum, to practice their songs, to the delight of all, save one. The lone holdout was the patrol officer at the Bund. He was nervous because of the crowds our ambassadors attracted. To all others, they were stars and celebrities; everyone wanted to take their picture with them!

In Shanghai, after a visit to a silk factory, there was a "free" afternoon. (Love my silk comforter, pillows, and jackets. Travel note, if you purchase lots, it may be worth it to ship it back to the US, rather than carry for two weeks.) Many of us elected to take the optional tour to Hangzhou, where we visited an area of street vendors and shops, a cruise of the famous West Lake, and visited the Dragon Well Tea Plantation, where my wife and I purchased the family pack of Empress Dragon Well Tea, and expect to live a hundred more years.

Before flying off to Xi'an, we took a walking tour of Shanghai City walls. In Xi'an, we visited the vast digs of the First Emperor of China, whose vast army of terra cotta soldiers, their officers, horses, and chariots face the enemy, and guard the tomb of the first emperor for all eternity. After a visit to the Big Wild Goose Pagoda, we were treated to a dinner show highlighting the Music and Dance of the Tang Dynasty and a sumptuous dumpling dinner, the specialty of the region.

When we landed in Jinan, a city of eight millions, the following day, we were greeted by a delegation for the Jinan Foreign Affairs Office (JFAO) and then whisked to a hotel for lunch with the Deputy Director of the JFAO, and some of his staff. Imagine, a city, in a country as large as the United States, our sister city with its own Foreign Affairs Office. Our delegation was served a sumptuous lunch of twenty-four dishes, around a round table seating twenty-four,

with a glass lazy susan to match. Lucky for us, we did not match each dish with a toast of moutai, as the custom is bottoms up! Lucky number 8, was enough for me. Jinan, is also known as the City of Springs, and we would return for an evening performance at Black Tiger Spring Park later in our trip.

Accompanied by Bruce, from the foreign affairs office, we headed to Tai'an, Mount Tai, by bus the next day. You can see Tai'an on a 5 yuan note. Tai'an is the mountain where the first emperor and many others would climb the elevation of 1500 meters, to pray for peace, prosperity, health, good harvest and abundance for his people throughout the kingdom. Many people make the sojourn up the mountain, climbing the 7000 steps. I even watched, as a man with a pole across his shoulders a full five gallon bucket on either end, cheered on by the people, struggled to make it up the last few steps. We of course took a gondola. Mount Tai was considered half way between heaven and earth, as it is the highest peak of the five sacred mountains above, and the Yellow River below.

Because the emperors would carve their thoughts and wishes into the rocks at the top of the mountain, the carvings are of immense historic value and provide insight to the evolution of the Chinese written language. At the peak is the Jade Emperor's Temple. On a lower peak is Confucius' Temple.



The next day, onto Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius. This city of only 650,000 is the closest size to Sacramento. This city is a World Heritage site. We visited the Confucius Temple, where we were treated to a unique special outdoor ceremony, the family home of Confucius, and the Kong Family Cemetery. As Confucius was born 551 BC, imagine a huge family cemetery. I noticed that the cemetery was segregated by generation and I noticed the burial site of the 77th generation. Everyone buried in China is designated by a dirt mound. Confucius as leader and

most revered is buried under a mound several stories tall, a small hill. The first emperor, on the way to Xi'an is under a mound the size of a small mountain.

Back to Jinan, where we were treated to a special dinner hosted by the Jinan Foreign Affairs Office and the Mayor's Office. The Mayor's Office also remembered fondly the prior visit of Supervisor Serna's father and then Sacramento City Mayor, Joe Serna. The next day, Supervisor Serna as head of our delegation, represented us at the Opening Ceremony of the Jinan International Sister Cities Festival. We exchanged Sacramento Kings Basketball Jerseys with members of the Shandong Chinese Basketball Association team. Many were over 7 feet tall and the tallest of our delegation, Supervisor Serna was taller than none of them. Next we visited the Jinan Duty Free Zone and then to the Shandong Experiment High School, alma mater of our leader Grace Liu, where, after a discussion with administrators of this school with our education representatives, our youth ambassadors performed for some of the 5000 students and exchanged thoughts and ideas during a rousing question and answer period. Most notable was the question from our ambassadors about what free time is taken up with and the blank stares from Jinan students, as the concept was seemingly foreign. I was impressed that all the Shandong Experimental High School students wished to attend the top universities in the United States after graduation, Columbia, UC Berkeley and Stanford to name a few.

Before leaving Jinan, we visited the modern Jinan Opera House and Theater complex as well as the Jinan Art Museum. We noticed that the streets were eerily quiet, unlike the usual rush hour traffic we had been accustomed to. We found the answer when we arrived at the Jinan Art Museum. On a really large flat screen television, everyone who could was fixated on the live televised program. That day, was a national holiday, and everyone in the country were celebrating the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the end of the War of Aggression with the Japanese. Parading thru Tianamen Square were representatives of the victorious regiments, as well as a sample of the arms of the modern Chinese Army. Indeed, there was a sense of pride felt throughout the country. The eighty-five percent (85%) of the arms displayed had not been seen by the Western World, so I am sure there was great interest throughout the world. In acknowledging the modernization of their weaponry, President Xie Jin Ping announced to the world that he was reducing the size of the military forces by 300,000, down to a mere 2.1 million.

Leaving Jinan, we boarded a bullet train from Jinan to Beijing. Most of the trip, we travelled at 308 km/hour, which is equivalent to 191 miles per hour, only slowing down when we came alongside a town. This was the smoothest train ride of my life. Did not feel any tracks, and only when an adjacent bullet train travelled in the opposite direction did one really appreciate how fast we were travelling.

Much was packed into Beijing. After arriving in Beijing, at the train station we were met by Amy, our Beijing tour guide, and then whisked off to the Temple of Heaven. The walk to the buses from the station platform was unfortunately about a mile and the walk from the bus drop off to the Temple itself was about a half mile.

Sacred Way of the Ming Tombs, and the Great Wall, Jade Factory and rain were the order of the day. Too bad it rained while we were on the Great Wall, as half of us were hoping for a toboggan sled ride on the way down. Even our first lady Michelle Obama has ridden the toboggan.



The following day, we visited the Hutong district by pedal operated rickshaws, then the Forbidden City and Tian'anmen Square, the Summer Palace and a pearl factory. This last evening, we were treated to a dinner of a restaurant specializing in Peking duck. Tianamen was still decorated with the grandstand and other displays from the parade, and because of the rain was not as packed as one might find normally. At the Forbidden City, our youth ambassadors once again gave a performance, which drew lots of crowds accompanied by requests for photos with our performers.

Because of the aforementioned anniversary celebration, factories and industry around Beijing were ordered closed August 28, and automobiles were restricted to odd/even driving days, in accordance with license plate numbers. These measures and the rain, resulted in the cleanest air quality Beijing has seen in a generation. Unfortunately today, Beijing is back to having the second worst polluted air in the world, second only to Delhi, India. Twenty years ago, seventy percent of Beijing's population travelled by bicycle.



Today, this city of twenty-four million has a population of four million automobiles. Luxury SUVs and automobiles by Lexus, Mercedes Benz, BMW, Volkswagen and Audi abound. Autos are as ubiquitous as the bicycle once was. It seems that China has entered the era of conspicuous consumption. And with so many American-style fast food restaurants, signs of childhood obesity were beginning to show. Almost everyone has an iPhone, and everyone wants to live here.

The principles of Feng Shui (wind and water) are highly respected in China. China is the middle kingdom, the central place between the heavens above and the underworld below. Beijing is situated respecting all the five major elements of the earth, fire, water, wood, earth and metal. Beijing is the Capitol and the voice of the middle kingdom and is laid out in accordance to feng shui principles. (Consider that if China were shaped like a rooster, Shanghai would be its belly, full and wealthy, Xi'an would be the heart, and Beijing would be its throat). The center of Beijing is earth, representing power. This is where the chairman, President and officials live.

The East part of Beijing, getting better and better, because wood is from a tree and continues to grow. That is why the CBD or Central Business District is located in the east.

The North part of the city is water, symbolizing wisdom. This is the location for the major schools. The South part of Beijing is fire, to burn something. So all news communications are located to the south. They keep an eye on you and burn you if you do bad. West is metal, wealth and prosperity.



The value of property is very high, because of its proximity to the Forbidden City. Some apartments go for about a million yuan, and the best run about three hundred and fifty thousand per square meter. You can believe that these are nearest the best schools too.

Beijing is ever increasing in size. Twenty years ago, Beijing comprised of two rings (freeway) with Tiananmen Square and the seat of power in the center. Today, Beijing is comprised of six rings, sixteen thousand square kilometers. Even at 60 kph, or about 35 miles per hour without heavy traffic, it takes three hours to drive north to south or east to west.

Closing thoughts: We travellers were served all abundant quality meals, but if you have ever travelled on a cruise ship, sometimes there is just too much food. A nice problem to have. We also did not see any crime, although we did see many of men in uniforms of authority (a strong incentive to keep crimes at bay I'm sure). Homelessness was zero to non-existent, perhaps a

testament to the family values of the Chinese people. The hotels we stayed were by and large fairly modern, four and five star hotels, and their breakfast buffets were varied and tasty. Some times coffee was different than what we're used to. But, many of our rooms were simply outstanding.

China is adapting to handicap accessibility although not much in the older areas like the Forbidden City, and Summer Palace or Great Wall. I was impressed with the cleanliness everywhere we travelled including the clean highway rest stops with lots of vendors and Starbucks (which will not take your American Starbucks card) and McDonalds. Many areas still offer eastern as well as western toilets. Be prepared to bring toilet paper and face masks.

Very nice guides, who spoke excellent English, and armed with a great sense of humor. Our private bus guides have the patience of saints, trying to be welcoming and accomodating. I was struck by their willingness to share their personal thoughts about the state of the country and the government, which was unheard of a generation ago. They expressed their opinion on marriage, government, the one child policy, etc., although, we were admonished, that what they said on the bus, should stay on the bus. The one detractor of an otherwise outstanding trip, is that the Chinese do not eat many things cold. They believe that cold is not good for the digestion. As a result, beer served with meals were seldom greater than a degree or two above ambient. Not good for consumers of ice cold beer.

I hope that I am able to make this trip again someday. I am thankful to my travel buddies also known as 1 (yi) thru 30 (san shi) (daily roll calls in Mandarin).

Signing off, #16 (shi liu).