

14 – FROM GUANGZHOU TO HONG KONG

Our last full day in the People's Republic of China.

Hot and sunny again this morning; breakfast was served at 8 a.m. Paddy Flanagan and I were given what we had ordered: a Chinese breakfast, which the others did not like the look of. This started with a bowl of savoury porridge – I later discovered that it was rice porridge. In it were chunks of either meat or fish. This was followed by a selection of different flavoured steamed bread rolls, which were quite tasty. It certainly was something different!

Tom told us about an amusing incident that had happened the other evening. He and one of his companions had discovered that basketball or ping-pong could be played somewhere in the hotel. He made a phonecall and asked if he and his friend could play basketball. There was a long discussion in Chinese at the other end of the phone. Eventually Tom was told that the ball was broken. When will it be fixed? Tomorrow? Maybe, but we do not know. In that case, would it be possible to play ping-pong? Another discussion in rapid Chinese. At last he was told, sorry – no; the ping-pong ball is also broken. When will it be fixed? Next week. At this point, Tom gave up. It seemed that when the Chinese were trying to cover something up, they just could not think of lies that sounded plausible. It also seemed that they were always unwilling to say 'no' to us. As Tom's story was so ridiculous, all we could do was laugh.

At nine o'clock we were driven to the local Friendship Store, which had little on offer. I just bought a couple of simple items for friends. Having looked around, I wandered into a large department store next door, which I found much more interesting. As well as the goods for sale, I had a good look at the various people in the shop: young girls, fellows, women with babies strapped to their backs, babies with split pants (no nappies used here!), old ladies with white hair in black dresses, and old men with white beards and wrinkled faces. I also noticed that the staff here seemed to be rather careless. Using some leftover Chinese money that Tom had given me, I bought some Chinese combs, three colourful towels, and two more writing brushes for myself.

After an hour and a half in these shops, we returned to the hotel, where we had lunch and I gave Tom some English sterling for the money that he had given me earlier.

In the afternoon we set off for the Dongshan Daxue or Sun Yat-sen University, which had been founded by Sun in 1924. When we arrived at the entrance, we had to wait until somebody eventually came and opened the gates. We then drove along an avenue, shaded by trees, and stopped in front of a large red-brick building. Here we were met by a long row of students and the head of their faculty. I shook hands with every one of the students and greeted them in Chinese; afterwards I discovered that they were all studying English! We were then brought into a large hall, where it was quite hot and stifling. Noisy electric fans were switched on to cool the place down. We sat down, were served cups of black tea, and given a very long and boring speech, which Miss Li translated. It was very difficult to make out what she said with the fans whirring; the snatches that we did manage to hear were mostly about the Gang of Four. This did not interest us in the slightest as we were thoroughly fed up hearing about them. The speech dragged on and on, and many of us dozed or fell asleep.

The head of the faculty kept telling us that he and his students were very anxious to learn from us. However, when the speech eventually ended, and we strolled outside and began to chat to the students, we found that communication with them was almost impossible. Although they had been studying English for two years, their command of the language was very poor, and our questions were either misunderstood or not answered properly. One of them had never heard of Shakespeare. Another one told me that he had learned English from an Irish man, who had just left China. We found it very difficult to engage with them as so many of us had never been to university. The head asked Patricia if we would like to have a discussion session. Patricia quite sensibly declined this offer, and said that we would just like to see around the place.

We were taken to the library, where we saw some rather obscure reference books in English, and small groups of students studying. We strolled back to the coach and were driven to a large building, where we were shown a large machine that I gathered was used for designing the hulls of ships. We clambered on to a platform which went up and down over a long trough of water, creating miniature ripples. It did not mean much to us.

Quite fed up by now, we finally left, waved goodbye to the students, and returned to the hotel. It turned out that although several of my companions had wanted to visit a university, they found that this visit had been a waste of time. When questions *had* been understood, the answers given were very evasive. On the way back, the lads and I joked with Miss Li. She told us that when she was studying in university, she used to get 90 or 99 for her examinations. I was not surprised. Yet she insisted that she was not very clever; indeed, she claimed that she was quite stupid. (Such claims are

common in formal and rather old-fashioned Chinese; politeness demands that you belittle yourself and elevate the person to whom you are speaking.)

When we arrived back at our hotel, I had a rest and a cold shower afterwards. Later I met the Canadians in the dining room. The man gave me a letter and some money, and asked me to post the letter in Hong Kong, from where it would travel more quickly to Canada. One of the ladies asked me if I would deliver a monologue into their tape recorder, as they had discovered that the English-language teachers here were badly in need of hearing fluent English spoken with different accents. I told them that I would ask some of the others to do this for them.

At our table, I asked the Tyndalls, the Brennans, and Paddy Flanagan to do this. After the meal they met the Canadians, and some of them used my room to do the interviews. On the landing I sat with the Canadian man and chatted to him.

Later, Tom appeared on the scene, looking quite excited. He and four of his mates had gone out for an extravagant meal in a high-class restaurant nearby. They had been welcomed by the manager, who asked them if they were the Irish people. One of the dishes they had eaten had featured green vegetables that had been cut into the shape of shamrocks. Tom now produced a folded piece of paper and opened it, revealing a few of these shamrocks, which he had saved. Everything had been done to make them feel at home, and a taxi had been organized to return them to our hotel. The meal had been excellent and had been worth the £10 that they had paid per head.

Later in the evening, I found Miss Li chatting to the Canadian man at the reception desk on our landing. Paddy Flanagan then arrived. When the Canadian man left, he and I began to chat to Miss Li. This time she was anxious to know if we could understand her English, for she felt that she could not explain herself properly sometimes. We put her at her ease by telling her that of course we could understand her clearly. She told us that when she had first started working as an interpreter, she had been quite nervous; now she was more relaxed and enjoying her work as she was meeting so many different people.

Paddy now invited her to sit with us on the landing and drink some tea with us. When he went off to fetch some English books for her, Miss Li spoke to the man at the reception desk and ordered tea. We sat down in the comfortable armchairs and the tea was delivered to us, free of charge. Miss Li now flattered and slightly embarrassed me by declaring that I must be a very easy person to make friends with, as the Canadian man had entrusted me to post his letter in Hong Kong.

A moment later, Paddy returned and invited us to join the Brennans and the Tyndalls. We carried the tray of tea things down to the Tyndalls'

bedroom, where we found Mr Yao and Mr Wei. We sat on the beds, and Mr Yao attempted to do a complicated card trick, which he performed behind a towel. However, as it kept going wrong, it caused a lot of laughter. After this, Dave entertained us with a number of tricks and games, which he did very well. There was a lot of jollity; even Mr Wei opened up and laughed his head off. He even pretended to bet 'one hundred yuan' on one of Dave's tricks. He regarded this as a great joke, for only capitalists went in for gambling and betting. Miss Li also enjoyed the fun and laughed, though I felt that she would have enjoyed a quieter form of entertainment, such as just chatting with one or two of us. Earlier Tom had invited her to go to the posh restaurant with him and his pals, but she had refused, saying that she had other things to do. I had noticed that she tended to be rather reserved, studious and, above all, very courteous.

After Messrs Wei, Yao, and Miss Li had left, along with the Brennans and the Tyndalls, Paddy and I fell to discussing our amazing trip, for by now we were feeling a little sentimental. Afterwards I ambled down to the end of our corridor, where I found a party in full swing, complete with booze, in one of the bedrooms. When I peeped inside, Mr Wei was thanking us all for the present of a few gifts, which had included two small booklets containing views of Ireland that I had sold to Christopher for 3¥. (I had used this money to pay for the stamps that I had needed for my remaining postcards.) Mr Wei now hoped that the mutual understanding between both our countries would really increase, and also hoped that we would return to China some day. Because of his sincerity, he got a warm round of applause. Mr Yao then said that he had nothing more to add, but wished to repeat the sentiments of his comrade. After more cheers and applause, they left, and so did I. I collected two more little booklets with views of Ireland, and ran after Mr Yao, whom I found watching television on the landing. I gave him the booklets, thanked him for everything, and let him know that I had really enjoyed my stay. Again he complimented me on my slight knowledge of Chinese, told me that it was a pity that I had not used it more, and hoped that I would continue studying the language and come back to China. He wanted to know when I would return; of course, I had no idea when that would be possible. I told him about my job, my life at home, and compared it with life here in China. I said that I had been very impressed with the country and people, and added that many people in the West tended to be rather cynical about China. He admitted that living and accommodation standards were still poor in China, but said that everyone was healthy and well fed. I discovered that he had brought eight English-speaking groups around the country during the previous year. After this friendly and intimate conversation, he shook my hand, warmly thanked me once again, and wished me a good night's sleep.

I then looked in at the party, which was still in full swing, left, and went to bed at midnight. Our trip was finally coming to an end.

It was a bright, sunny morning when I woke at 6 a.m. After I had taken a shower, I went out for a short walk along a tree-lined road not far from the hotel, and stopped at a picturesque park, where I saw people doing their morning exercises. All around me people were walking or cycling to work. I was quite amazed to see young women sweeping the streets. It felt good to be out and about, and at one's ease, on such a lovely morning. By the time I had strolled back to the hotel in time for breakfast at seven, I had worked up a good appetite for my fried eggs.



Mr Yao, Mr Wei, the author, and Miss Li outside the hotel, Guangzhou

An hour later we had gathered all our luggage together, and were clambering aboard our coach. A jacket was handed to me – I had left it behind in our room. As there was a delay for some unknown reason, we filled in the time by taking photographs of each other, and of our guides. At last we set off on the short journey to the very large and clean railway station, which was packed with people. We went up and down escalators with other tourists whom we had seen in our hotel, and finally arrived at our platform, where a very smart and comfortable train awaited us. We boarded it, and our guides came into the carriage with us. We were all very sad to leave them.

The guides then got off the train, leaving us unescorted for the first time in Red China, and waved to us as the train moved off at 8.30. We felt very sorry for these people who were trapped in their own country, without any hope of seeing the outside world; only high-ranking government officials owned passports here. It must have been patently obvious to them that we led far better lives in the West, and that we did not have mind-numbing

propaganda constantly forced upon us (apart from ubiquitous advertisements, of course). Several of us had felt that Mr Wei might have been a plain-clothes policeman because of his rather serious and reserved manner, though he had certainly lightened up during the previous evening. We had all warmed to Mr Yao because of his impish sense of humour; without him our trip would surely have been rather dull. The more relaxed atmosphere of Guangzhou seemed to have brought out the best in the two men.

We left the station and soon were travelling through the lush countryside, on our way to Hong Kong. We passed hundreds of paddy fields, little villages of white houses, muddy rivers, and magnificent mountains.

At 10.15 we arrived at a busy little station in the middle of nowhere, with a red Chinese flag on the roof. We removed our hand luggage and carried it through passport control, a bank, and the customs. Then, after a short delay, we marched out of a busy waiting room along a white corridor decorated with political slogans, and approached a small metal bridge that spanned a river. We had reached the border with Hong Kong. Two People's Liberation Army soldiers stood guard at our end. Goodbye, Red China!



The border between China and Hong Kong

We crossed the bridge into the New Territories, an extension of mainland China. At the other end of the bridge were two guards dressed in British uniforms. A high fence of barbed wire, which reminded me of a concentration camp, rose on each side of the railway tracks in order to keep the Reds from fleeing into Hong Kong. We then entered a white building, where we had our passports checked by Chinese lads with long hair and smart uniforms, though they had discarded their jackets and were in their shirtsleeves. Their manner was quite careless.

When everything was in order, we left the building, and came to another high fence topped with barbed wire. Affixed to it was a large notice, written in the old style of Chinese characters, and in English. It read:

DO NOT SPIT

BEWARE OF PICKPOCKETS

Bang! We had stepped out of our time machine and were back in the 'real' world.