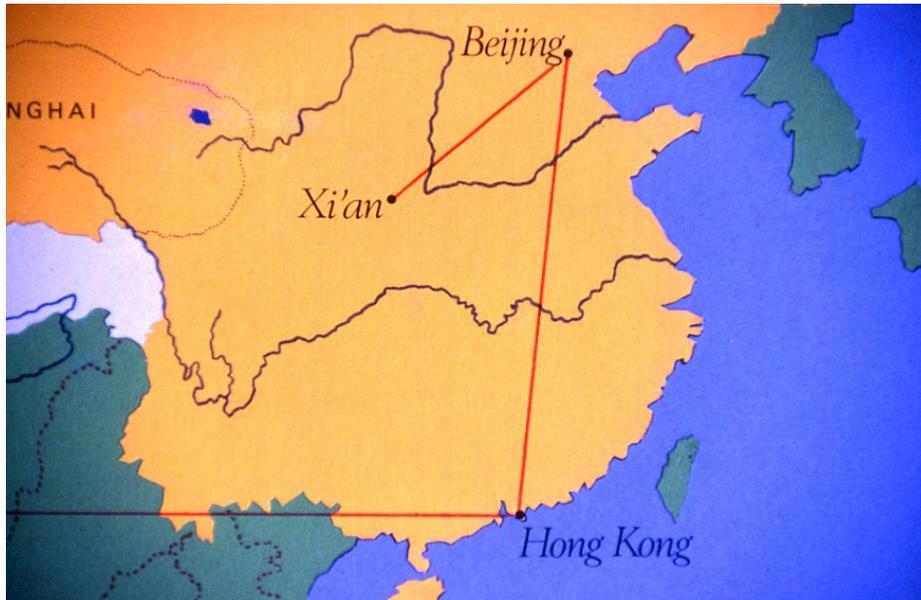


## 5 – XI'AN



*(Route taken by most members of the delegation)*

I woke at the usual time this morning; despite my extended sleep during the previous night, I now felt slightly dizzy and very low in energy. I wondered if I had caught a touch of sunstroke yesterday at the Great Wall.

It was dull and cloudy this morning. We were driven to the Temple of Heaven, but I was in no mood to visit it as I had been there before. I stayed in the bus when the others went off to see this famous attraction, and travelled with the driver to the other end of the complex. I killed time by writing my final six postcards while sitting in the bus. I was halfway through the sixth one when my companions returned.

We were now driven to the artistic quarter of Beijing, where there were dwellings built in traditional style. Here we were brought into a shop to see reproductions of modern Chinese paintings. We met Professor Shi Yi, the sculptress whom we had met at the Kilkennys' dinner party, and she talked to us, giving her views on the items for sale. I agreed with her gentle criticism of the modern works of art and her appreciation of the reproduction Song dynasty paintings, which were far too expensive to buy. Some of the items were reasonably priced, but most were being sold at

prices that only tourists could afford. I bought nothing but most of the others purchased some pictures.

I finished writing my last postcard in the shop, then wandered off with my companions towards the bus. Having posted the cards, I chatted to Professor Shi Yi and the Brennans. It turned out that the Professor had spent a number of years in Tibet, where she had been sketching and painting. She had also been in Ireland not so long ago.

After we had said goodbye to her, we walked to a nearby restaurant where we had been given a small room to ourselves upstairs. Most of us enjoyed an excellent meal, but I just ate some rice and a few morsels of chicken, and finished with some soup. We then left and retraced our steps towards the bus. A fellow wanted to change money for us, but I thought that negotiating with him was not advisable with our guides around, lest they disapproved of me dealing with an unofficial money changer. We now drove to the airport, for we were off to Xi'an. Once again I fell asleep.

I woke up, feeling somewhat refreshed, just as we stopped in front of the familiar noisy airport. We checked in, went through security, then headed for the departure gates. Here I was surprised to find ourselves being directed into the first class departure lounge, where we sat in very comfortable chairs and sipped drinks. Unfortunately the air conditioning was not working and it was very hot. I whiled away the time by writing my diary, which was by now very far behind.

We were soon called to our flight and we joined the queue outside. On the plane we found ourselves in first class, which was very plush. Once again, I returned to my diary writing. The flight was uneventful and punctuated by the distribution of drinks and presents: chocolates (I gave mine to Ercus), a lovely scented sandalwood fan, and cups of tea. En route we flew over some fine mountain scenery, a small walled city, and the great Yellow River. Finally, after about two hours we touched down in familiar Xi'an (where I had stopped en route to Lhasa).

Outside the heat hit us – it was like stepping into a furnace. At first there was nobody to meet us. Mr Wang finally found two men waiting inside the terminal building; apparently the airport staff would not tell them where and when we were arriving! We were then brought to a small Japanese minibus and driven into the city while our new guide gave us a 'brief introduction' to Xi'an. Mr Wang and Miss Liu were still with us, and would be until the end of our trip. I liked Mr Wang, but Miss Liu was rather hard to take at times, for she had a tendency to become a little irritable.

Our journey came to an end at the rather ugly-looking Renmin (People's) Hotel in the city centre. However, it was very plush and clean inside. We had been given suites: a double or twin bedroom, a bathroom and sitting room, all of which were pleasantly cool and well furnished. We were now really

wallowing in style! The only trouble was that it took our luggage a long time to arrive from the airport, and so there was very little that we could do. Using the soap and shampoo supplied, I took a welcome shower and washed my hair. Toothbrushes and toothpaste were also supplied.

Afterwards I was taken to the local hospital for a checkup, but the doctor was not available – she was out having her evening meal! Back again at the hotel, Ercus and I went out for a short walk before dinner. By now I was feeling a good deal better. We kept our eyes open for money changers, but did not encounter any.

At 7.30 we met the others in the hotel lobby and walked to the restaurant building. Here we were welcomed by a glamorous young lady in a long green brocade *qípáo* or body-hugging dress with the skirt split partway up the side. (Earlier Ercus had noticed that when a poor fellow in rags pushing a handcart outside had passed by, the girl had turned her back on him and had gone indoors.) The inside of the restaurant building was huge and spotlessly clean – so different from the miserable hovels outside.

We were now shown into a private room and introduced to an elderly man, Tian Kegong, who had quite an impressive title: Vice President of the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Shaanxi Chapter. He turned out to be a pleasant and good-humoured old fellow, aged 78. The banquet that we were about to enjoy, he explained to us, was his way of welcoming us to Xi'an. We began with the usual toasts, starting with a small glass of beautiful cloudy-white wine. This was followed by a little glass of sweet red wine, and then some of the local (and powerful) *máotái* – all very fine. The meal was excellent, each dish being served on clean plates, which were removed when we had finished them. The meal concluded with helpings of the famous Xi'an dumplings, and for dessert we were given ice cream with a dash of *máotái* poured over it. After this, Paddy exchanged presents with Mr Tian, and we were all presented with individual gifts: cotton bags for the ladies, a scented plaque of the Terracotta Warriors for the men, and a book about Xi'an for everybody.

We then wished the elderly man goodbye and walked back to the hotel. Our new guide then brought me back to the hospital in the minibus. I now learned that this was military hospital with a section for foreigners. We met the lady doctor in the lift and were shown into a clean surgery, where I filled out a form and told the doctor all my symptoms (the cold, the cough, the sore ribs, possible sunstroke, and some mild diarrhoea this morning), using the guide as a translator. My temperature was taken under my armpit for the cold, but all seemed to be quite normal. I lay on the couch (a painful process) to have my ribs and pulse checked. Breathing deeply was painful. My blood pressure was then checked.

I then went downstairs to the X-ray department with a young nurse who was very charming and who spoke excellent English. She had been learning the language for only three years. She only looked about seventeen years of age but must have been in her twenties. A young man took an X-ray of my chest but, because something went wrong, another one had to be taken. The nurse and I then went back upstairs. There now followed a long wait, during which we chatted about this and that. By now it was getting late. It was wonderful to get such good service here without crowds of people!

Finally the X-ray was brought up to us. I was asked if I had ever suffered from tuberculosis (I had not), for it looked as though I might have. Anyhow, all was clear, and I was told that there was nothing to worry about. The chest pain had been caused by excess coughing. I was given four different types of tablets and a bill for ¥51, which I paid (unfortunately) in FECs. However, for £10 this was excellent service!

Happy, we said goodbye and I was driven back to the hotel. I took seven tablets, got into bed and soon fell fast asleep.

Keeping to our usual daily schedule, we got up at seven this morning and were greeted by the glamour girl at the restaurant when we entered it at 7.30. Inside there was a little bit of confusion as to which one was our table, but it was quickly found for us. We breakfasted on slices of orange, toast, boiled eggs and jam. There was difficulty in obtaining spoons to crack our eggs and stir our Western tea – only two could be found. One of the glamour girls fumbled around in some drawers and, on finding nothing, exclaimed, 'I'm so sorry!' It seemed that these girls had nothing to do except look pretty, stand at the doors and welcome the guests. Their English seemed to be limited to phrases like, 'I hope you will enjoy your stay' and other pleasantries.

At 8.30 we met in the hotel lobby and set off in the minibus. As I was feeling quite groggy, I soon dozed off as we bumped along the streets of Xi'an towards Banpo Neolithic Village. I woke when the bus stopped and we clambered out. Because the weather was dull and as most of the exhibits that we would see would be indoors, I left my camera in the bus. I soon discovered that there was nothing very spectacular to see here. We were brought through a couple of exhibition halls where an outline of Neolithic life was illustrated, along with many artefacts that had been unearthed here some years ago when a road was being constructed. I recognized some fish motifs depicted on pottery, photographs of which I had seen in a book at home. There were also pickaxes and arrowheads on display. We then entered a large building where we could walk around the excavated site. Here were illustrated, both in paintings and represented by models, the type of simple dwellings in which the people had lived. One type of dwelling

looked very much like a North American wigwam; no doubt there was some type of connection as oriental people had crossed into America from Siberia via the Bering Strait and the Aleutian Islands in the distant past.

Having seen everything of interest, we returned to the bus and drove to our next stop: the Huaqing Hot Spring. This was a large, still lake surrounded by old-style buildings and pavilions, all of which looked rather false. The scene was dominated by a tall green mountain. I was quite unimpressed by this as the scene looked so grim under the leaden sky. I strolled listlessly around the place while the others did likewise or bought trinkets in the gift shop. I found my way around the bath houses and discovered more pavilions, little gardens and grottoes. I then crossed the lake by a series of bridges and sat in a pavilion for a few minutes. Nearby was a place where I observed two youths stop at a mirror in order to examine their faces for either real or imaginary spots. I had noticed many other Chinese – and Japanese – lads doing this in exactly the same manner.



*Tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di, Xi'an*

Shortly afterwards we set off again, this time to the famous tomb of Qin Shi Huang Di, the great Qin dynasty emperor (259–210 B.C.) My father had seen this mound from a distance seven years previously; now steps, lined with tourist stalls, led to the top. As I felt that there was little to be gained by climbing to the top of the mound, I hung around the stalls, out of sight of our guides, where I managed to get some money changed. The goods on sale here were extremely gaudy: mostly clothes and toys for young children.

I was glad to get away from the place, board the bus (a fellow shouted 'change money!' within earshot of our guides) and be driven to a nearby hotel for lunch. There were even souvenir stalls around the hotel. We entered a dining hall filled with lots of tourists; although it was rather noisy,

the food was good. As soon as we had finished eating, we spruced ourselves up, then drove off to see the famous Terracotta Army.

This was housed in the huge low building that was familiar to me from seeing so many photographs of it. Although it was misty, the scenery was good around here, despite the many modern buildings to be seen. We were now out in the countryside, with fields nearby and mountains in the distance.

We drove into the complex of buildings around the site and entered an exhibition hall. Here we were able to see photographs of the excavation work and examine a wonderful reproduction of the four-horse chariot that had been used by the emperor. I had seen this illustrated in a book at home. However, the real thing, in a glass case, was far more impressive. Fortunately we were given plenty of time to see this in detail.

After this, we went into the huge building to see the excavations. Our guides had chosen a good time, as most people were at lunch and the place was not too busy. I was very happy about this, for I had heard that the place could be so crowded that it was almost impossible to see anything. We could now see the rows and rows of warriors, albeit from a height, very clearly. It was amazing to realize that what we could see was only a fraction of what had been buried underground. We walked around slowly while everything was explained to us. Unfortunately only one section of the statues was exposed for viewing – the rest had been reburied for preservation. Although we could only see about one quarter of all the statues in this building, it was enough to be very impressive. (Many years later I learned that the style of these very lifelike statues, which had been unprecedented in China until the Qin dynasty, might have been based on the Classical Greek statues of that period.)

We walked around this section once and then, when we were free to do some shopping afterwards, Eric and I went round again to have another look. We then entered the exhibition hall opposite, where we viewed more artefacts that had been discovered here, such as bows, arrows, and other weapons. This too proved to be very interesting indeed.

From here we drifted out and towards the market area, where we were pounced on by traders vigorously dangling teeshirts or whatever they had on offer before our eyes and shouting, 'Hallo, hallo, hallo, hallo!' I ignored them all and walked around quickly in search of some Chinese umbrellas, which I had seen outside the hotel at lunchtime, but did not have time to buy. I scoured the place but found none. All I purchased was a carton of refreshing orange juice and then a roll of Fujichrome film (the first I had seen here) for ¥35 – about £5.

After this we returned to the bus and were brought to an embroidery factory. This was not very impressive as much of the work was indifferent and made on machines – just a few items were handmade. There were silk

scarves for sale, but I did not care for the crude designs. Off we went again and I dozed until we reached our hotel, where I washed and relaxed while Ercus and Pauline went off on rented bicycles. I felt very tired and in no mood to do anything – perhaps all the pills that I had to take were making me drowsy.

At six o'clock I joined the others for dinner. As I felt hungry, I ate well, but did not eat too many vegetables. A dance drama had been arranged for this evening, but Eithne and I decided to opt out. I spent the rest of the evening in my sitting room writing my diary, and refused an invitation to join the others in another room for a drink. My aim was to bring the diary up to date, but once again I failed to do this as I became too sleepy.

This morning I woke at 7.30 thinking that we were late, only to discover that it was 6.30 as the clocks had been put back an hour. I rested a little longer and then got up. After breakfast we were taken through the city to an old Confucian temple, now converted into a museum. Although pleasant, the architecture had been spoiled by being restored using modern bricks, and the paint looked too fresh and garish. However, it housed a fine collection of historical artefacts, starting with very early bronze ware (ornate ritual vessels and so forth), and including beautiful Song dynasty celadon, Yuan, Ming and Qing ware. Some of the exhibits were exquisite; both we and our guides were enchanted by everything. In another building we saw the famous 'forest of steles': a large collection of tall stone slabs bearing inscriptions and designs. Some of them recorded the presence of the earliest Christians in China during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907). This was fascinating, but because we could not read the Chinese calligraphy, it was a little wasted on us. We wandered around from hall to hall, stopping to admire the exhibits, then headed back to the entrance of the temple along a central pathway. We had all enjoyed the visit; it was the first time that we had all been so taken with objects displayed in glass cases.

Outside the temple were a couple of stalls. I glanced at the more restrained women's jackets for sale, but found nothing that I really liked. Anyway, we were now whisked off in the bus to our next destination: the Great Mosque, which Mr Wang so much wanted us to see. This was situated beside the city's main bell tower and in a small market area that was mostly full of souvenir stalls.

The mosque was thoroughly Chinese in style, with the minaret shaped like a pagoda. Inside, it was a haven of peace. Near the entrance we saw a couple of Moslem women and several men wearing white caps. The architecture was good here: some of the buildings had been built in the Ming dynasty and some in the Qing. It was lovely to just amble through the series of courtyards, containing beautiful gardens and ornate gateways, with

the sound of cicadas in the air. This was the first complex that I had seen in China that could be favourably compared to one of the splendid Chinese temples that I had seen in Japan three years previously. The only visible clue that this was a mosque were the Arabic inscriptions over the doorways leading to the main prayer hall, which was now being restored.



### *The Great Mosque, Xi'an*

We stood at the doorways of this prayer hall – there were railings to stop us entering – and Mr Wang told us about the place. It was the oldest mosque in Xi'an and was thought to have been founded in A.D. 742, during the Tang dynasty. I was very glad that we had been brought here. On our way out, we drifted into another building, probably the former residence of the imam, where we saw small rooms containing beautiful examples of Arabic calligraphy, some of which I photographed.

Outside I examined what was on offer in the souvenir stalls and selected a silk jacket for a friend, which I bought for ¥40 RMB after a little bit of haggling. ErCUS bought a similar one at the next stall for ¥30 FEC, which was

about the same amount that I had paid – around £6. It turned out that the quality was average, for our local guide told us that it was a ‘type of silk’. Ercus and I then bought tablecloths made of white linen with blue designs, together with eight napkins. The woman wanted ¥160 FEC but, with the help of our guides, we beat her down to ¥110. At £11 each, the cloths were good value, though after I had paid for mine I really did not know why I had bought it!

We were then summoned back to the bus and were whizzed off to another part of the city where we got off and walked a short distance to a Moslem restaurant. This was not up to the posh standard that we had been used to so far; it was the type of place that I had frequented when travelling alone. We were brought up to the third floor where it was quieter (and more expensive), and invited to sit at a table that had been specially booked for us. An air conditioning machine nearby provided a welcome cool breeze. On either side we could see Chinese people sitting at circular tables, all enjoying themselves hugely by proposing toasts and, later, playing a game with their fingers in which the challenged person had to guess the number of fingers his challenger would display. If the answer was wrong, the challenged person had to drain his glass. We had an excellent meal consisting of various courses, including soup, and finishing with tasty dumplings, both steamed and boiled. Plates and plates of these arrived at our table; in the end we had to admit defeat as we could not eat them all.

The meal finished, we left the restaurant and, saying goodbye to Xi’an, we drove to the airport. Our three days here had been quite interesting; this morning’s visit to the museum and mosque had certainly been enjoyed by everyone. Now we were about to fly to Guilin to see its famous mountains.

At the airport we said goodbye to our local hosts and checked in. We were not given special treatment here, for we had to share the noisy general departure lounge with everyone else. As if the place were not noisy enough, televisions had been switched on and were showing a film about a child being abandoned and brought up as a monk in a Buddhist monastery – something that would have been unheard of ten years previously! Needless to say, the volume was turned up full.

We had to wait some time, during which I managed to doze off, before being called to our flight. We made our way to a small propeller-driven plane, where we were shown to the first-class area at the back and joined a group of Japanese men accompanying the Lord Mayor of Kyoto on a tour around China. I sat beside Mr Wang, who sat beside the group’s interpreter, a pleasant lady who spoke fluent Chinese. Mr Wang kindly explained to me what she was saying. I had a long conversation with Mr Wang about many different topics all through the flight as I found him so interesting and informative. His criticism of the Cultural Revolution convinced me of his

sensibility and sincerity. He told me about his travels; he had seen quite a lot of Europe and had worked in England. His views on the characteristics of various different European people were perceptive and interesting; by now he seemed to have a good impression about us Irish people!

The flight was uneventful except for a glimpse of mountainous scenery, and presents of a fan, some drinks and sweets. We stopped at Chongqing (Chungking) to take on extra passengers and to refuel.

We finally arrived in Guilin some three hours later. The approach was spectacular as we swooped down over the famous tall and jagged mountains, though the weather was rather dull. Everywhere was green except for exposed patches of red earth. Mr Wang explained that the land was not very fertile because of the soil. Dotted about the extraordinary landscape, most of which was flat, were featureless concrete buildings which, like the extraordinary mountains, looked totally out of place. The mountains looked as though they had popped out from under the ground and solidified.

Slowly we lost altitude and finally approached the small, provincial airport. Mr Wang smiled at me when the Japanese men began straightening their ties and wiping imagined dust from their jackets. When we left the plane and entered the little airport, we were met by two local guides, who conducted us to a Japanese minibus identical to the one we had used in Beijing. Without waiting for our luggage we were driven through the scruffy town of Guilin to a lake named Rong Hu. Nearby was our hotel, an extensive complex of eight buildings, also named Rong Hu. Our building was pleasant enough, though the automatic doors at the entrance did not work. Our bedroom was fine, though the fridge did not work and the bath looked a little the worse for wear.

We arrived here at 5.30 p.m. and were given half an hour to prepare for a banquet at six. This proved to be a problem for some of us, as our luggage had not arrived by the appointed time. We were conducted upstairs to a private dining room and introduced to Mr Xu Yihua, Vice-Chairman of the Guilin People's Friendship Association with Foreign Countries. Officials here certainly love long titles! After the usual speeches and toasts (not so formal here, thankfully) we were served an excellent meal of local dishes, finishing with fruit and ice cream, which I refused this time. I did not want any more stomach trouble!

After the meal we parted, for we now had the rest of the evening free. By this time our luggage had finally arrived. ErCUS went off for a walk, but I stayed in my room relaxing and writing my diary. I finally went to bed early.