

## 7 – GUANGZHOU (CANTON) AND ZHUHAI



We were up earlier this morning and left our luggage outside our doors before breakfast at 7.30. We set off with all our guides and drove to the small airport, where we were seen off and checked in. Because of our VIP status, we were waved through, thus avoiding queues, but we ended up in the noisy and busy departure lounge. Fortunately we did not have to wait long for our flight to Guangzhou at 8.55.

We had a big plane this morning, but had been given economy-class seats. I was fortunate to have Mr Wang beside me. The flight was short and uneventful and soon we were approaching the large, modern city of glass boxes. For me this was the end of our journey, for I realized that for the next few days there would be little of interest to see.

We arrived at Guangzhou airport by about ten o'clock and were met by our local guides: an elderly and rather ashen-faced man named Mr Chen and a young lady who called herself Louisa. At first she seemed to be quite pleasant, but we soon changed our minds about her when we discovered that her manner was rather abrupt; she behaved like a schoolmistress, issuing orders to everyone.

We were now driven from the airport to the Chen family temple, which had belonged to a rich family for many generations. This was located in the city centre. On the way, Mr Wang told me that he had submitted a request of mine to visit a television station and so, instead of a planned visit to an ivory carving factory this morning, we would be taken to the television

tower. Although this did not sound particularly interesting, I did not complain. Fortunately the others did not seem to mind this change of plan.



*The Chen Family temple, Guangzhou*

The Chen family temple turned out to be a vulgar-looking building, decorated in the very fussy local style. I photographed the uninteresting courtyards and details of the gaudy roofs just to show how ugly everything was. Inside was a vaguely interesting museum of national clothing and other artefacts and then, in another part of the complex, a collection of tasteless modern porcelain.



*Our guide and the view from the television tower, Guangzhou*

Fortunately we did not spend long here. On leaving for the bus, Louisa asked Ercus and me what we thought of it. We covered up our disgust by praising the intricate wood carvings that decorated everything. We then drove off to the television tower (essentially a huge mast), which was situated in a park. I immediately realized that there were no studios here.

Here we were met by a lovely girl, presumably in her twenties, whom everybody took to immediately. She was very petite and pretty, and her eyes lit up when she spoke to us in excellent English, for which she kept apologizing. She covered up giggles and confusion by raising a dainty handkerchief to her mouth. This ray of sunshine conducted us to a lift and told us about the place as we quickly ascended to the top. From here we had an excellent bird's-eye view of the large, sprawling city: a sea of skyscrapers and modern buildings. It looked totally lacking in character. Nonetheless, I took a few photographs, including one of our delightful young guide.

Miss Liu then announced that we would now leave and visit one of the studios. I was delighted to hear this and followed the others into the lift. Down we went and stopped at a restaurant, which also served as a disco for the local young people. I wondered why we had been taken here. After a hurried consultation, Mr Wang apologized to me; owing to some strange misunderstanding it turned out that the television studios were not open to the public, and that nothing could be done at this stage. (Many years later I would discover that strict security surrounds all television and radio stations in China – no doubt because of fear of dissent being broadcast to the nation. The scripts for all news bulletins and programmes of a political nature must be checked by communist officials before being broadcast, and outside people involved in such programmes must be carefully vetted before being interviewed.) Here we had another example of how people here seemed to have a problem with saying 'no'. In similar circumstances, we would normally say something like, 'I'm sorry – it's not possible to visit the television station because of rules and regulations, and so we'll have to go ahead with our original itinerary.'

In the restaurant we whiled away some time sipping drinks and chatting to our lovely guide. While she did speak English well, her comprehension was not the best. She was young and new to the job; no doubt she would improve in time.

When we had finished, she came down with us in the lift, saw us off the premises, and shook hands with us. The place had not been very interesting; the ivory carving factory would probably have been better. However, most of us had enjoyed seeing the view of the city.

We now drove through the busy streets to our hotel, the Dong Fang (undoubtedly the first two words of *Dong Fang Hong* ('The East is Red'), the *de facto* national anthem based on a folk song, which had been sung back in the 1970s). Guangzhou still seemed to be under construction: buildings were springing up everywhere, flyovers were being built, and the roads were chaotic. The Dong Fang was a huge hotel in several sections; our rooms were up several storeys in the so-called Chinese wing. The bedrooms were

top class, with the usual air conditioning, all mod cons, and television sets that only received stations in Hong Kong.

In order to get to the restaurant for lunch, we had to be escorted from the lobby of our wing to the central section of the hotel, where we passed through a huge, noisy dining room to a pleasantly quiet private room. Here we got excellent service and had a tasty meal, though Eithne agreed with me that the variety of food given to us ten years previously was now not to be had.

We had a little time afterwards during which we settled ourselves into our rooms before setting off at three o'clock to Nan Hua Xi street. This so-called 'street' turned out to be quite a large residential area in the city centre. We were met by the man in charge: a small, lean chap who bowed low every time he shook hands with us. We were led down some narrow streets, where we passed houses and a tiny kindergarten where most of the children were whingeing. The people around here – mostly elderly folk sitting indoors or at their front doors – looked bored and listless. Nobody smiled at us. At first everything looked rather primitive, but as we plunged farther into the complex, conditions appeared to improve. Overhead was wire mesh from which greenery had been hung decoratively. Here the walls of the houses were tiled, and the place looked clean. We then entered a building on our right and, after passing some rooms, were brought upstairs to an ultra-modern reception room complete with two noisy air-conditioning machines. The coolness in here was refreshing after the sticky heat outside, but the contrast was too extreme. A tall girl appeared with a pot of tea and, while she poured it into our dark blue cups, our host launched into an animated welcoming speech in Cantonese, which Louisa translated with great difficulty. She had to keep asking the others for the words in English by translating what she had been told into Mandarin Chinese. I paid little attention for the speech, as usual, was peppered with endless figures and statistics. After all this, we were invited to ask questions, which some of us did. Louisa then translated our questions into Mandarin Chinese for our host, who replied in the same dialect. Why had he not used Mandarin in the first place?

Afterwards we were brought downstairs to see the achievements of the community: articles manufactured here, photographs of veteran members of the committee, and more tables of statistics. We then left, turned a corner or two, entered a house, and went upstairs to meet some elderly ladies who were living in very small but neat and clean rooms. On the stairs going down, I paused a little too long to look at a very run-down apartment block across the way. I was quickly steered onwards by Miss Liu, who said, 'This way, please!' At least she was polite; Louisa would have been more abrupt and would have pushed me onwards.

Back out in the narrow laneway, we paused to look in at some unfortunate people who were described as having 'light mental disorders'. It seemed to us that the disorders were anything but 'light'. A photographer, who had been following us and taking photos, now had to go into the building and take the people's photographs to make them happy. It seemed that these people were being well looked after, for they had been given simple jobs to do. We wondered how many people like these must have been in the country, for up until now we had seen none during our travels. So far we had never encountered any deformed people, or people in wheelchairs.

We now retraced our steps, making our way back to our bus. This time we stopped for a more leisurely look at the kindergarten. The children were better behaved this time and came to the door to have a good stare at us, but no smiles lit up their inquisitive faces. By now I had come to the conclusion that these southerners were quite different from the much gentler northerners. They certainly were not as good looking, for many had bony and haggard features.

Like the residential area that we had been shown in Beijing, I felt that this one here was not typical of its type, and was a showpiece for visitors like us. The place had made little or no impression on me, probably because I was not particularly interested in it, and also because of the energy-sapping heat and humidity.

Gratefully we clambered aboard our air-conditioned bus and drove back to our hotel. I freshened myself up and Ercus went off for a quick swim in the pool. At 6.30 p.m. we were escorted to a private dining room in the hotel for this evening's banquet, hosted by Mr Zhu Shaotian, Vice President (never President!) of Guangdong Provincial People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries. Mr Zhu was a good-humoured and energetic individual: a middle-aged man with thick black eyebrows, one of which was extra long and drooped downwards. We received the usual elaborate greetings and then came numerous toasts, most of them directed at Ercus, who readily accepted Mr Zhu's challenge of '*gān bēi!*' ('bottoms up!'). I was challenged a couple of times, but could only take a sip of the fiery rice wine. Our host was obviously determined to get us a little tipsy!

The meal was excellent. It began with soup and continued with numerous dishes served to us individually by the waitresses, who put new helpings on clean plates. They must have used an enormous amount of crockery, or else they washed the plates in between courses.

At the end of the meal we had more toasts, then gifts were exchanged. Ercus quietly remarked to me that all the gifts presented to Paddy should have been the common property of our Society, but whether we would ever see them again was another matter altogether!

As I felt very full after the meal, I was happy to go out with Ercus for a walk. We merely walked around the block. There was little or nothing to see except lots of traffic, people, shops, and stalls on the pavements. The city looked very grim and unwelcoming. We returned along a muddy road where a flyover was under construction and finally came to the park in front of our hotel. We decided to cut through it and avoid the road.

We sauntered inside, noting the many courting couples in dark corners. We skirted a lake and turned a corner, whereupon the heavens suddenly opened. We tried to find shelter, but found ourselves stranded under a tree, where we stood for some time, getting wetter and wetter until we were finally soaked. Everybody had been caught by surprise; couples darted about in the torrent, in search of shelter. Feeling like drowned rats, we left the tree and trudged across the mud to the side of a building where dozens of couples were sheltering under an overhanging roof. We joined them for a while, but as we were obviously an embarrassment to them and as the rain began to ease off, we decided to retrace our steps to the gate through which we had entered, in case there was no other gate near the hotel. Jumping over puddles and hurrying to avoid any more rain, we scampered back to our hotel, which was not far away. One of the porters laughed when he saw the state that we were in: our hair was sopping wet and our clothes were stuck to us.

Upstairs in our room we laughed, stripped off, and dried ourselves. I washed my tee-shirt, which had become quite muddy. My trousers were in a dreadful state. Soon afterwards we retired to bed. Quite a dramatic finish to an otherwise unexciting day!



We were up early this morning, for we were to leave Guangzhou for Zhuhai, a city on the coast. I was glad to leave Guangzhou, but was dreading what might be in store for us now, for here everything was modern,

industrial, and westernized. The reason why we were being brought around this area, Mr Wang told me, was because Paddy Brennan had given no clear indication to the authorities of what we wanted to see.

At eight o'clock we clambered aboard our minibus. Louisa was about to sit down beside me but changed her mind and joined her pals up at the front, where she could chat to them in Chinese.



*Dr Sun Yat-sen's birthplace in Cuiheng village, Xiangshan County*

Because of heavy traffic in Guangzhou, we made slow progress. We eventually left the city and drove through what remained of the countryside. We gazed out of the windows at a few traditional dwellings and, dotted in the hills, unusual horse-shoe shaped structures. Mr Wang told us that these were tombs. We stopped briefly to visit the house in which Dr Sun Yat-sen had been born. Situated in a small park, the house looked a little like the ones that we had seen from the bus, although it was more imposing. In the entrance hall was a huge carved wooden screen with a niche near the top. The rest of the rooms were small and sparsely furnished; the kitchen and the old-fashioned beds with mosquito nets were interesting. Back at the entrance, Mr Wang stayed with Ercus and me while we took photographs. The other guides wanted us back in the bus immediately, but we pretended to be very interested and stayed put. As Ercus remarked, why drive all the way out here and only give us fifteen minutes to see the house? The reason for the hurry was that this morning's heavy traffic had delayed us by an hour and our lunch had been booked for a certain time at our hotel in Zhuhai.

We now set off again and drove at a good speed towards the seaside port of Zhuhai, which we finally reached at about two o'clock. After a little confusion at the hotel, we followed our guides to a smart private dining room. On entering it, a waitress switched on a television set. We found this a strange – and, of course, distracting – convention, for it remained switched

on, showing a Hong Kong channel, for the duration of our meal. The waitresses here were glamour girls, wearing tight *qípáo* dresses, split partway up the side. I had no objection to them standing beside me when serving the food! The meal, or rather banquet, was delicious, and each dish was served on a clean plate.

After the meal we were escorted back to our bus and driven to our rooms in a separate part of the hotel: Block I. Remembering the prison during the troubles in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, one of my companions expressed her relief on realizing that we weren't going to be put in the H-Block! Our rooms turned out to be fine, though the air-conditioning machines were rather noisy. We were given some time to settle in and freshen up, and then we were off again in the bus, driving towards a nearby Special Economic Zone. This did not sound at all interesting. We were now told that we would be visiting an audio tape factory.

Leaving Zhuhai, we headed southwards, along by the sea. We then swung to the west and the island of Macao was pointed out to us ahead. It looked ghastly; all I could see were modern high-rise buildings. The fact that it was a Portuguese colony was confirmed by the radio in the bus, which had been tuned into a local station that was broadcasting a lesson in Portuguese. We skirted the border to the north of the island, stopped briefly at a checkpoint, and drove on to the Special Economic Zone, which did not look at all promising.

We eventually stopped in the courtyard of the Galin Tape Factory, where we were greeted by the vice manager and some of his colleagues. We were then escorted into a reception room where, over glasses of tea, we were greeted cordially and given a long introductory talk that included lots of tedious facts and figures. As nobody was particularly interested in this particular business (the manufacturing of cassette tapes), they all looked to me as somebody who could ask relevant questions and, as I had worked in the sound department in our national television station, this I did.

Afterwards we were brought around the factory, where we saw women assembling the plastic cassette cases, and lengths of blank or recorded tape being placed in them. We then were shown machines, made in Italy, that assembled the plastic cases automatically. Once again I was puzzled as to why they had both manual and automatic assembly units.

In another part of the factory we were shown how pre-recorded tapes were made: master tapes on large professional machines were being copied at high speed on to cassette tapes. I raised the question of high frequencies being lost when playing the master tapes at such a high speed, but I was assured that all was in order. I was not convinced. After this we saw tapes being tested aurally, and special tapes designed for testing hi-fi equipment being made.

Following our tour around the factory, we were brought to another building to see the workers' facilities. In one room we were invited to watch some young people practising a pop dance routine. We sensed that they felt rather awkward about performing in front of us. We watched, flicked through some Chinese 'girlie' magazines, and applauded when they finished. After this we were shown a ping-pong room and the canteen; everything was basic but clean.

Finally we were walked back to our bus, where we shook hands and thanked our hosts. As I enquired about buying some of the tapes, we were directed to a shop beside the gate. I walked over, followed by the others, in order to see what was on offer. I discovered that there were several different types of blank tape, and found it difficult to discover the difference between them. Eventually Mr Liang came along, asked the lady behind the counter for two tapes, and gave them to me as a present. As the others bought nothing, for all they had were recordings of Chinese pop music, Mr Liang organized a box of tapes for us all. (When I returned home to Dublin, I tried the tapes and found them to be of rather poor quality.)

The journey back to Zhuhai was uneventful and uninteresting; on arrival, Ercus and Paddy went off to the pool for a swim. I took a refreshing shower, put on fresh clothes, and joined the others at six o'clock for a banquet in the restaurant. Our host this evening was Mr Zeng Xianqiang, Deputy Director of the Foreign Affairs Office of Zhuhai Municipal Government, a pleasant and good-looking young chap who spoke English excellently. Our meal was pleasant, though once again it was marred by the television being turned on again. At one stage during the meal, somebody got up and turned down the volume. We could not understand why they kept turning the television on, for nobody was watching it; it seemed as though silence was unacceptable.

After our meal came the usual speeches and presentations, and then we all wandered out to the road for a walk. Ercus and I went off on our own round the block and returned via a large shopping emporium designed like a temple, where some young people were letting off fireworks. After looking at another hotel, we returned to our own. Up in our room we packed our bags, ready for the following morning, and went to bed. Although nobody thought much of the place, the day had been pleasant enough.