

Official trip to China was hassle-free

part one by Jim McCulloch

For some three week last September, several AES staff had the rare opportunity to sample the meteorological science, the culture and history, the cuisine and the hospitality of the People's Republic of China (PRC) where we spent 12 days and the rest of the time in Hong Kong. The trip was to comply with the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the AES and the State Meteorological Agency (SMA) of the PRC, which calls for reciprocal visits every second year of the Steering Committee and additional staff. The Chinese will visit Canada in 1989.

The official delegation consisted of

Howard Ferguson (ADMA) and this writer (CCDG) as the Steering Committee, Jean-Guy Côté (AIA) as the AES Coordinator for International Affairs, and Des O'Neill (MAED) and Barry Goodison (from CCAH) as leaders of two of the cooperative projects being carried out under the terms of the MOU. The delegation also included Janet Ferguson (Howard had to cover all of her expenses). We were joined by Al Lo (from the Air Quality Research Branch) part way through the trip because he was there giving lectures anyway, and besides, he can speak the language.

Over 1 billion people in China, and I feel that we may have seen almost half of them. It took almost 24 hours to get to Hong Kong, and we all felt a little like a boiled owl. It was an experience that none of us will forget, an experience of a lifetime.

The official part of the trip has been reported in a number of ways. I shall focus on the "personal" side, the part that I had never dreamed would happen to me. We were guests of the Government of China from the time we arrived in Guangzhou (Canton) until we left, and that meant that we did not have many of the hassles that the ordinary tourist might face. When the representatives of the SMA return in 1989, they will be our guests, and we shall be hard pressed to live up to the standard of hospitality that we were shown.

Although we had no choice of food (the meals were pre-arranged), hotel, transportation, or sight-seeing, in retrospect that was good. It was

our first visit, and except for Al we couldn't speak the language, so having those decisions made for us saved much wear and tear on nerves and digestion. We were accompanied everywhere except Beijing by Madame Chen, the Director for International Affairs of the SMA. This made our group large enough that there was always an excellent selection of dishes available from which to choose. We even preferred a Chinese style breakfast, although we had much trouble convincing the staff at the hotel in Beijing of that.

Our itinerary was busy. We took the train from Hong Kong to Guangzhou on September 10, flew to Hangzhou (Hangkew) on the 12th, train to Shanghai on the 14th, by air to Beijing on the 16th, air again to Guilin on the 20th, then air to Guangzhou and train to Hong Kong on the 22nd.

Our departure from Canada was Labour Day, arriving in Hong Kong late the next evening. The temperature was in the mid-thirties, and the humidity high, the contrast with the interior of the aircraft



Enjoying the shade on a hot day are Madame Chen, chief protocol officer for the State Meteorological Agency, Howard Ferguson and his wife Janet.

which had been our home for the over thirteen-hour flight from Vancouver was marked. The air-conditioned limo belonging to the hotel was very welcome.

Next morning, we had a chance to wander the colourful streets of Kowloon, a mainland part of the colony. Our entry into the PRC was not until the next day; we had been able to save \$1200. on the air fare by leaving the day early. In retrospect, I was glad to have that day to help get my body across all those time zones; Hong Kong is 12 hours ahead of Toronto. It also gave us a chance to scout some of the shopping and to take the STAR FERRY across the harbour to see a little of the island of Hong Kong. At about 12 cents (Canadian) for "first class", it is one of the best transit bargains around.

The train to Guangzhou is the only way to go! After clearing Hong Kong Immigration one finds the right car and seat. On the "fast train", all seats are reserved. It takes about one hour to pass through the New Territories (a part of the colony on the mainland) to the only stop between the main Hong Kong terminal and Guangzhou at the border, to pick up members of the Chinese army. The rest of the journey was through the countryside. The contrast of the scenery with the cities at both ends could not have been more marked. There were people working in the rice paddies, riding bicycles and driving primitive tractor-like vehicles along the roads, and watching the train pass the small villages, but the population density was clearly a small fraction of that in the cities. Where do they find the space for more than a billion?

Shortly after departure, a lady came up the car with a little trolley, apparently selling plastic mugs with lids and small envelopes. She could speak no English, and we had not yet met our escort from the SMA. Fortunately, Jean-Guy had the right idea; we bought. Then several minutes later, she came back through the car with a huge tea kettle, and filled the mugs. As most of you will have guessed, we let the contents of the envelopes (Jasmine tea leaves) steep with the lid on until it was time to sip. The refills came two more times; it was a pleasant way to pass the time as one drank true Chinese tea while drinking in the scenery.



The official AES party and their hosts first row left to right: Zhou Xiuji, A.D.J. O'Neill, Zhang Jijia, H.L. Ferguson, Zou Jingmeng, J.A.W. McCulloch, L.T. Reissner, Chen Guofan. second row left to right: Chew Dejian, Chew Futao, B.E. Goodison, Wang Dingxin, J.G. Côté, Li Zechun, A.K. Lo, Zheng Yunjie, Zhang Shizhong.

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Rice paddies stretched in all directions; primitive, but effective, water distribution systems ensured adequate irrigation. Periodically there were larger ponds that were used for bathing by both children and adults. There was practically no mechanization visible except for the occasional truck along the roads. The villages were small and dotted the landscape. How different was Guangzhou!

We were met at the station by Madame Chen and officials of the Regional Office. One of those was a staff officer whose sole job was to ensure that all of our arrangements were covered. He could speak no English, but that didn't stop him from chattering to us frequently, always with a broad smile. (On our way back through Guangzhou, he was among the group that met us at the airport and took us to the train station. As he sat across from me, he pointed and said "Mr. Macaluchi". Howard taught him to pronounce my name, which apparently was somewhat difficult for many of the Chinese we met.)

Our hotel, the Dong Feng, was superb. Here we met for the first time the insulated container of



Riverboats like this photographed by Jim McCulloch are a very common sight on the waterways of China.

boiling hot water — you don't drink from the taps. We soon discovered that to drink the water from this container in a form other than tea, you had to pour some out into the mugs provided well ahead of time to cool. The problem at the Dong Feng was that the staff was too efficient by far; every time we left the hotel, they would go into the rooms to straighten up and provide fresh boiling water, pouring our cooling water out and replacing the mugs with clean ones.

It was in Guangzhou that we were introduced to two of the principal characteristics of the PRC; the bicycle is the "volkswagen" of the Chinese people, and visitors are expected to leave much of their excess travelling funds at the "Friendship Store", one of which exists in every city that we visited. The latter will accept only "Foreign Exchange Certificates", or FEC; this has the same value as the currency of the country, the Renminbi, but can only be obtained from the government in exchange for hard currency. There is no trouble obtaining FEC, and one must sell it all back to the state upon leaving. Needless to say, there were many offers on the street to exchange our money, but we had been warned that to do so, getting a higher rate than the official one, was viewed by the government the same as dealing in drugs. Because many imported amenities were available only in the Friendship Stores, citizens were eager to get some FEC.

There were bicycles everywhere, except on the sidewalks which were often not wide enough to accommodate the pedestrians. In the centre of the road there was a constant stream of lorries, busses, vans and the occasional car (often carrying a VIP). Between the vehicles and the sidewalk, there were as many as five lines of bicycles plus those pedestrians that could not fit on the sidewalk. The pace of the cyclists was not fast; slow and steady gets one there on time. The bicycles seemed to ignore the vehicles, and except for the occasional expletive from the driver, vice-versa. Our drivers were all excellent, even though they all learned at



Bicycles are the most prominent feature of this street scene in Guangzhou, China.

the Kamikaze School of Driving. The vehicles had three speeds, but only two were used much of the time — flat out and stopped. I quickly learned that my nerves would not stand looking out to the front; the near misses were very frequent, and I did not relish the thought of witnessing the total destruction of one or more bicycles and their riders. In all the time we were there, the vehicles which transported us did not get as much as a scratch.

The highlight of Guangzhou for me, apart from the official visits, was the food. In Canada, there are many places which serve "Cantonese" food, but I have never tasted anything like the original. The wide variety of delicate flavours complemented each other in a very enjoyable way, and the service was impeccable. I had little difficulty avoiding wheat (one of my allergies), especially with the help of Madame Chen. (and Al Lo once he joined us in Hangzhou). For most of the group, the beverage during the meal was local beer, which they assured me was quite good (remember, one did not drink the water). Since beer is one of the things I must avoid, I drank "orange juice". For any of you old enough to remember, it was a lot like the old orange pop (Wishing Well or Orange Crush). What a come down from my usual dinner beverage, wine.

Crowds were enormous but people were polite

Our first ride on CAAC, the people's airline, was also quite an experience. We had been warned that the authorities insisted on only one appropriately sized piece of carry-on luggage. So much for our source of information. There was luggage in the aisles and underfoot, as well as "in the overhead storage bins or under the seat in front of you". There was no harangue about seat belts (at least I don't think so; there were announcements in a variety of English that I really didn't understand, but none of the words resembled "seatbelt"). Because of weather at Hangzhou, we sat on the plane for quite a while before departing, even the cabin staff got off to stretch their legs on the tarmac.



Home of the Last Emperor and of several before him, the Forbidden City in Beijing displays an ornate symbol of longevity.

It was still raining with fog when we arrived at Hangzhou, and it was well after dark. By the time we had finished an unfashionably late dinner, I was ready for bed. Some of the others went for a stroll through the neighbourhood which was near West Lake, one of the more famous features of the city. The next day, we were taken on a boat ride around the lake, which was in a mild flood stage because of the rain that had fallen over the previous two days (a typhoon had passed by offshore to the east and had caused considerable rainfall over coastal regions). Part of the trip was to be a walk-about on one of the islands in the lake, but every dry square centimetre was already occupied. We saw a wide variety of boats on the lake, some powered by very small motors, some by human power. Our "skipper" was a beautiful young lady who didn't look older than sixteen, but sure knew how to manoeuvre the vessel.

We were dropped off across the lake from our embarkation point for a walk through a botanical garden, then taken by minibus (or maxivan) to a pagoda with many levels that dated back into the last millennium. Unfortunately, it was being renovated so we could not go in. Another of our

visits was to a nursery garden with many "bonsai"-type trees. These caught our interest, as did the souvenir shop with the artists' display attached. It was here that I acquired my oriental cousin. I was trying to find out enough information about the work to decide whether or not it qualified as "fine art", and was thus duty free. Clearly, I wasn't communicating (or vice-versa), so I told the artist that I would bring back my cousin to help. He was a little taken aback when I returned with AI (who bears no family resemblance), especially when AI started to bargain the price once my questions were answered. The lesson in haggling I got there served me well once I went shopping on my own in Hong Kong on the way back home. The four wall hangings, representing the seasons, are now in the family room of our home; needless to say, framing done here after my return was some ten times the cost of the art itself.

The train ride to Shanghai was after dark, so there wasn't much to see. On the platform at arrival, we got a taste of what the city was like. We had to go in one direction to meet the SMA people and pick up our checked luggage, and what seemed like the combined population of the ten largest cities in North America were heading toward the main exit in the opposite direction. Have you ever been claustrophobic on a train platform? It was awesome, in the literal sense of the word. We found out why the next day; in 230 square kilometers there live over six million people, and in greater Shanghai there are over 12 million. By contrast, Metropolitan Toronto covers about 400 square kilometers and has a population of less than 3 million.

One of the highlights of Shanghai from the tourist point of view was the Bund, the centre of the city, at the part of the harbour where the large cruise ships dock. The legacy of the west, from the time that Shanghai was the financial capital of the orient, was everywhere, particularly in the old buildings that once housed western banks, embassies and the like. There were crowds there too, most of them oriental (it makes one wonder about full employment there). One interesting encounter was with a Chinese person, initially attracted by Howard's height (he was a head taller than most of the crowd) who then noticed the maple-leaf lapel buttons that we were sporting. He said, partly to us and partly to his companions, "Chanada, zed!" (the "c" is usually pronounced "ch"). We didn't understand until he showed us from his English-Chinese phrase book the people from the USA pronounce the last letter of the alphabet "zee", while Canadians pronounce it "zed". He then had a brief conversation in French with Jean-Guy Coté.

The other highlight was a visit to a Buddhist Temple. We were dropped from our minibus, and

walked through an area of souvenir shops. Then, at the entrance to the temple grounds, we were faced with a wide sidewalk that was bounded on one side by a rushing mountain stream and a sheer rock wall in which were carved many Buddhas (some sitting, some standing, some glowering accusingly, others smiling) and on the other side by another sheer rock wall. At the top of the climb was the temple and its ancillary buildings. One hears that the government of the PRC is anti-religion, but we saw no evidence of that. People were freely worshipping according to the traditions which were described in brochures that were available to us.

Beijing was a sharp contrast to anything that we had seen before. It seemed far less crowded, with wider avenues and less vehicular traffic. While our work occupied much of the time we were in the city, we did squeeze out a two-hour escape from SMA headquarters to visit the Forbidden City. We also saw a little of the summer palace because the banquet in our honour was held there. On Saturday morning, after a scientific lecture by each side, we were taken to the Ming Tombs and the Great Wall; that was a very memorable day, given that I was selected to give the Canadian lecture on the train into China, and the visit to two of the most famous archaeological sites in the world. The story around the finding of the tombs and the restoration of the one for the Emperor Ding Ling (I think I would have changed my name; Ding Ling Ming?) is fascinating. Moreover, the sculptures of real and imaginary animals and warriors that line the



The steep climb up the Great Wall of China.

approaches to the tomb area must rival the Xian terra-cotta army for visual impact (we were not able to include Xian in our itinerary, except for Barry Goodison who had to give a series of lectures at institutes of the *Academia Sinica* after we left).

Sunday morning we had the ceremony which included the signing of that final report, then flew in the afternoon to Guilin. For any of you who saw the Peter Ustinov documentary on China (it was



Entrance to precious Ming tombs, pays tribute to Emperor Dingling. Left to right, facing camera Al Lo, Howard Ferguson, Barry Goodison, Jean-Guy Cote.

broadcast in North America while we were in China), you will recognize how difficult it is to describe the particular land forms along the River Li near Guilin; these make the area very famous. Our visit to that city included a boat trip down the river, past the spectacular scenery. The trip lasted for several hours, and included dinner cooked in large woks at the back of the boat. We could watch the meals being prepared on other excursion boats because a large fleet made the trip. The river is shallow and the channel narrow; watching the various pilots jockey for position was always interesting if the scenery became momentarily less spectacular. Also of interest was the variety of smaller junks, sampans and other boats, some of them home for a family, that we passed on the journey. At the other end, we were picked up by our minibus, and faced another harrowing (I could say hair-raising, but those of you who know me would laugh) ride back into the city.

Looking back on the trip, I have many impressions that will stick with me for the rest of my life. I recognize that I saw only a small portion of a large country, so one can't generalize too far. Large cities, separated by extensive agricultural areas dotted with small villages. Crowded cities. Crowded streets with traffic conditions that would turn my hair even more grey. Only the vehicles seemed to be in a hurry; the pedestrians and the ubiquitous bicycles moved along at a calm, almost sedate, speed. Super cuisine of an amazing variety of styles. Spectacular scenery. Historical artifacts

that predate North American history by millennia. A polite, yet curious people that respect you, and expect the same in return. People that have a sense of their own culture and history.

There are some striking differences in expectations. The staff of the SMA are as loyal and as proud of their profession as the staff of AES. The organization there is much larger (over 67,000 staff compared with our 2,400) and many of them live on the grounds in small apartments provided by the organization. The hours are long, but there is a long lunch break which allows for a brief siesta. Because most people buy the groceries for the next meal only, perhaps on their way home from work at noon or in the evening, a refrigerator is not an appliance to yearn for (a television is a much more desirable goal). The situation in Hong Kong, at least the part I saw, is much closer to that here in Canada than in the PRC. That perhaps explains the undercurrent in the colony about 1997, when title reverts to the PRC.

I shall not likely get back to China. Nevertheless, I do have many memories that I shall always cherish.

Mr. McCulloch is director general of the Canadian Climate Centre.



Striking example of a Chinese pagoda, nearly 1000 years old.