

A scenic view of a traditional Chinese water town. A narrow canal flows through the center, reflecting the surrounding greenery and buildings. On the left, a large weeping willow tree hangs over the water. On the right, traditional Chinese houses with tiled roofs and wooden balconies line the canal. A small boat with a canopy is visible in the distance on the left side of the canal.

CHINA

May-June 2019

MICHAEL AND NORMA IN CHINA, MAY-JUNE 2019

Friday May 24 – Australia to Beijing

So, here we were off on our first guided tour after more than half a century's experience of independent world-wide travel.

We were picked up by the limo at 9:00 am – the driver was just in time, having had to stop and deal with a puncture in the Harbour tunnel on the way. Airport check in was very easy, with no queues, so we were quickly to the gate for a 12:30 take-off, a little late.

The Qantas A330-200 was cramped, but we had reserved a pair of seats near the front of economy. The crew were friendly and free with the wine, and the food was reasonable, despite plastic tools etc. But Qantas is still not a patch on Emirates. The choice of movies was not inspiring, either.

We landed in Beijing on time, but there was a right old shemozzle at the airport where, after clearing immigration and being identified by TripaDeal (the tour agency) as being on the 'blue' bus, we were then set aside for a long time waiting for the arrival of more of the tour group on a later plane. There was a total of about 150 people on the tour, to be divided into smaller groups of up to 15 or so individuals. The groups got muddled up during the wait, and we got on to the wrong bus and without our bags. Our guide brought them to the room an hour or so later.



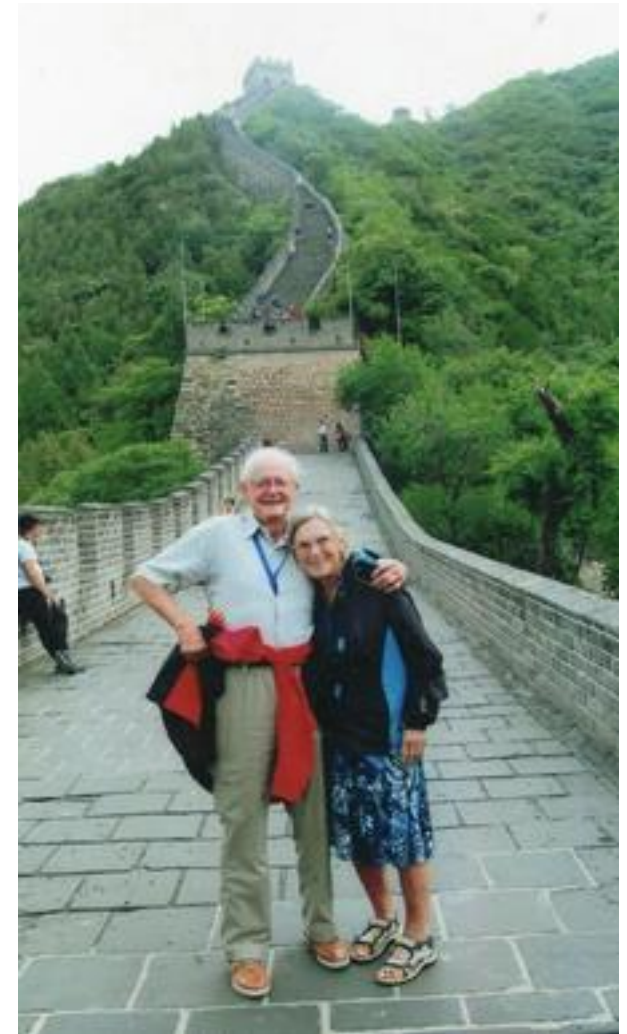
The room was at the Rosedale Hotel, which we found perfectly acceptable and very quiet, and had a pleasant outlook over the city's northern suburbs and skyscraper apartment blocks.

Saturday May 25 – Tiananmen Square and the Forbidden City



A rather trying and challenging day!

Late start away, and quite a long drive round one of the major ring roads circling the city. A dim view of the city skyscrapers was visible through the haze. Many of the big apartment blocks along the road were looking tired and disheveled, sitting next to identical blocks built only recently. On the way there in the bus our Beijing guide, the voluble (and self-styled 'funky') Jessica, told us that we could ask any questions we liked about China and Tiananmen Square, but please not to ask about the events of 1989, 30 years ago.





Mao's mausoleum, the Great Hall of the People, and the Heroes Monument; the entrance to the Forbidden City is off to the right

The bus stopped just outside Tiananmen Square and we walked with our group into its enormous expanse, following the flag flourished by our fast-moving and fast-talking guide. It was getting pretty hot and steamy by this time. The vastness of the space, together with the many people and the need to stay in touch with (and listen to) the guide, was a somewhat disorienting experience. On every lighting tower and on many other structures were affixed score of cameras and other surveillance devices. The entire complex, from the square to the other end of the Forbidden City, is aligned on a south-north axis of about 2.5 kilometres from one end to the other.

The square has a 38-metre cenotaph in its centre, the Monument to the People's Heroes. This is a memorial to those who lost their lives in the conflicts and revolutionary struggles of the 19th and early 20th centuries, from the first Opium War to the civil war that ended in 1949. Completed in 1958, construction of the mighty monument took just under six years. It is engraved with an epitaph composed by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, as well as an inscription in the Chairman's handwriting that proclaims: 'Eternal glory to the people's heroes!'. Behind us, the east side of the square was flanked by Soviet-style buildings including the National Museum of China – which Lonely Planet says is outstanding, but on these tours you don't get much time for lingering in that sort of place!



Having entered the square from the east, down to the south we could see a sloping array of statuary with the figure of Mao at its head. This fronts the pillared Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, wherein lies his mummified body. His statuary is supported by an enthusiastic band of comrades in communist-era heroic poses, just like the Soviet sculptures seen in many parts of eastern Europe. Looking across the square is the formidable Great Hall of the



People on the west side, and up to the right we could see the wall of the Tiananmen Gate, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, around the east side of which we would walk into the Forbidden City. Mao's picture hangs as a vast and prominent feature on the front of this gate, overlooking the square, and we – like everyone else – took several photos of his face. There are some lovely formal flower gardens ringed the square, which do something to relieve its intensity.



Gate of Heavenly Peace



Meridian Gate, north face; see relative size of people!

Then into the Forbidden City, or Palace Museum as it is best known here. This is China's biggest and best-preserved collection of ancient buildings, and the largest palace complex in the world. It is so named because it was forbidden to the general population for 500 years through the reclusive regal protocol demanded by the emperors of two dynasties, the Ming and Qing.

Having crossed the road that surrounds Tiananmen Square, we walked around the Gate of Heavenly Peace to its east side, past the smaller Duan Gate temple and thus to the Meridian Gate and through to the main entrance for tourists. This is the true entrance through the walled Forbidden City and, ironically, in bygone times this massive portal was reserved for the use of the emperor. Now thousands pour through every day.

Emerging from the short entrance tunnel we faced a large open courtyard. The outlook took in the five marble bridges over the Golden Stream just to the north of the gate, and then away to the other side of the square to the Gate of Supreme Harmony, which crosses right across the complex.

We climbed to a terrace on the north face of the Gate of Supreme Harmony and thus faced across an immense (one runs out of superlatives!) courtyard. Across this spectacular square lies largest of the palace halls, the Hall of Supreme Harmony. This is fronted by a pair of 'guardian lions', which represented the emperor's influence. The male lion has his right paw on a globe, representing the emperor's power over the world, and the female has her left paw on a lion cub, representing his fertility.



Looking north across to the Hall of Supreme Harmony



Around the square sit several large brass water vats, supposedly used for fighting fires – good luck, in these old wooden buildings, we thought. All the facades and roofs of the buildings round the square are marvelously carved and gorgeously decorated. On the corner of each roof an imperial dragon sits at the tail of a procession of imperial beasts led by a figure riding a phoenix right at the end. The more the beasts, the more important the building. Dragon-head spouts channel water from the roofs.



Jessica's descriptions of what we were seeing were given through an incessant – albeit well-intentioned - gabble through the headphones we wore, to an extent that we suffered information overload and an imperative to simply switch off and absorb the scene more personally. We would advise anyone intending this visit to take their guidebook with them!

We continued along to the northward along the terraces along the buildings on the west side of the complex and skirted the two further palace buildings, the Hall of Middle Harmony and the Hall of Preserving Harmony. Unfortunately, we did not see anything of the interiors, such was the pressure to keep moving. We therefore missed seeing the emperor's Dragon Throne, which is in the Hall of Supreme Harmony and reportedly one of the greatest sights of all in the complex. The only enclosure we entered was in the last-named and northern-most hall. This contained some decorative murals and lots of statues including two of the terracotta warriors of Xi'an and one of their horses.



It was packed, clearly because this was one place that was visited by all the tour groups. On the final approach to this place Norma decided that she had had enough walking (and listening to Jessica's fast-paced lecturing), and chose to sit and rest in a shady place that Jessica told us would be on our return route. But while Norma waited, the group was taken back south by a slightly different route and I did not see her. While looking, I lost contact with the group, to which Norma had been returned by Jessica's assistant (and group photographer).

So I set out to look for both the group and Norma, in blazing heat, becoming increasingly stressed and dehydrated. During my wanderings, I did see many of the entrances to several small museums that were virtually empty of tourists and did look very interesting, in accord with our pre-trip research. But no time to visit.

I finally found a service office and book shop, where a helpful English-speaking visitor phoned Jessica, who sent her assistant to get me and, as it happened, another couple from the group who had also got disengaged. All in all, a rather traumatic experience, of the like we have never suffered when touring independently!

We all got into a taxi and caught up with our tour bus, which had been waiting at a pearl 'factory'. This was, as expected, was one of the visits included in the tour that were primarily sales pitches that followed a brief introductory lecture. In this case, we'd have preferred more emphasis on the pearl process, but do understand the economic imperatives for companies organising low-cost tours! In any event, more time in the Palace Museum would have been better spent.

We were then bussed to a large performance centre, the OCT, for a 'large-scale Chinese musical drama', as it was plugged. We had time for a quick meal, which we enjoyed at what Jessica had dismissed as a 'fast-food place', but where we got an excellent Peking-style duck leg and salad, with beer, very cheap, in retrospect one of the best meals of the tour.

The musical drama, 'The Golden Mask Dynasty', was essentially a Chinese version of the Cirque du Soleil, which has indeed been an adviser to this performance. There was a miraculous use of the trapeze, mobile backdrops and stage floor, along with amazing lighting effects. Spectacular, certainly – but traditional Chinese drama, with western music, not so much. Norma was also unimpressed by the employment of white peacocks strapped to the heads of dancers in one performance. ('They're live', I whispered to her. 'Umph', she replied.)



On the way back to the hotel Jessica revealed to the group that it was Norma's 80th birthday. She was greeted by the happy birthday song, and presented by Jessica with a nice little folding screen. We were getting quite well known to the group by then!

Beijing's reputation as a huge and still-expanding city is well justified. The roads are lined with high tower blocks, both commercial and residential, many looking on the run-down side. The traffic is pretty horrendous, even at the weekend, and the driving is very aggressive. The cars are generally modern and near-new, with lots of Jaguars, Range Rovers and Volvos (the last-named made under the Chinese Geely banner), plus Mercedes (a Geely partner) and BMW variants – not to speak of large numbers of Chinese-made cars looking very much like all of the above. The ubiquitous scooters zoomed around with dangerous abandon, especially at intersections. The Chinese



government decided to get people off their noisy and smoky two-stroke scooters and on to electric scooters for environmental reasons. As incentives for these vehicles they rescinded all regulations on two-wheel training, licensing and helmets, a successful ploy as intended for the local environment but with the unintended outcome of a very high crash and fatality rate.

Indeed, on our visit, while it was a bit misty the expected and notorious smog was very light, as already noted from the heights of our hotel; later, we learnt that the climatic conditions were exceptionally favourable at this time. We also noted the extraordinary attention being paid in the city to keeping the roads and their surroundings clean – cleaners, male and female, were everywhere, often meandering through the busy traffic at intersections scooping up little bits of rubbish as they went.

Sunday May 26 – Jade, and the Great Wall of China

After a jet-lag sleep and breakfast (a medium-standard buffet), we were away towards the day's main destination, the Great Wall. But first, we were taken for the day's inevitable commercial visit, to the jade 'museum'.



Jade is an ornamental mineral, best known for its green varieties. It can refer to either of two different minerals: nephrite, a silicate of calcium and magnesium, or jadeite, a silicate of sodium and aluminium. It can look like marble, but is different. Marble is crystalline limestone, and softer than jade. Jade lets the light through, but marble doesn't. We were given the expected talk about jade's properties for health, particularly for the renal and urinary systems.



We saw some apprentices cleverly working tourist pieces out of jade, balls within balls, and proceeded through to a series of vast showrooms. The best jade carvings and sculptures were truly outstanding, as were the eye-watering prices. Norma wore the real jade pendant that she has had since a child, just for show.

We were given lunch there, quite a good one too.

Then we were off again in the bus for a 60 km drive to the north through attractive countryside, becoming gradually quite mountainous. This took us to one of the main tourist centres for access to the Great Wall, at the Juyongguan Pass.

The Juyongguan Pass ranks as the first of the three impregnable passes along the Great Wall (the other two are Jiayuguan Pass and Shanhaiguan Pass). The wall that blocks the pass here is between two mountain ranges, and is built as a complete circle. The main road through the pass runs generally north to south, and the walls loop round it so that the road has a north gate and a south gate at its intersections with the wall. The public access to the wall is at the south gate, from where there is a choice: climbing the wall steeply to the west, or taking a gentler route round the eastern half of the loop.



Our tour itinerary blurb wrote that this is one of the more original sections of the wall as a whole, less touristy and crowded than others. Although the closest part of the wall to Beijing, the Lonely Planet agrees that it is typically quiet, with steep and strenuous climbs. True or not, there were a fair few

people there and most of them, including our group, attempted climbing at least part of the formidably steep stairs of the western wall. This is almost impossible for the ambitious to resist. The wall has obviously been virtually completely rebuilt here in modern times, primarily to make it as safe as practicable, but it is still very steep to walk and climb. It's a spectacular sight up from the start of the climb to the west, with beautiful views improving with every hard step up. Norma chose to watch from the south pass gate tower, from which it is a relatively easy walk to the first of the watchtowers, Fort 7. Here the walking slope becomes a very steep climb of tall stairs.

My first decision was to make the climb up to Fort 8 – which looked almost impossible from below – and finally, with some effort and plenty of stops, made it to Fort 9, which can only just be seen from the bottom. This was regarded as a good effort, and few of the group made it this far, but a handful of the younger ones did make it up to the highest of this part of the wall at Fort 12. My climb did help my self-esteem after yesterday!



We returned to Beijing in the afternoon and were bussed to the old part of the city, billed as a historic scenic area. There are three little interconnected lakes there, all looking lovely in the early evening sun and very popular with the locals, including the many folk out in little electric boats in most pleasant weather. Adjacent are the preserved (by government decree, as is everything else) enclaves of Hutong and Courtyard, kept more or less in the old style of urban dwelling. There are some pretty little shops selling tourist souvenirs ('typical Chinese tourist tat', as we all couldn't help joking).

Many of the shops had arrays of brightly-coloured packages. We have never come across such a concentration on packaging as we saw in China. Everything is plastic packaged: snack food of all kinds, household items, souvenirs and tools – often, packages within packages. For a nation supposedly trying to reduce its impact on the environment, it might be desirable to consider the impact of plastic more closely.



We were taken for a short ride in a convoy of tricycle rickshaws through the narrow lanes in the area, passing packed lines of dwellings and several public toilets – the dwellings don't have toilets and occupants share these public facilities. We went for an evening meal to a 'typical' home owned by a chef, but with typically bland food. This was followed by an old-timer famous, we were told, for his crickets. These unfortunate little creatures were supposed to do tricks. We got a long spiel from him before he was told his time was up – and not before time. Still, everyone has to make a living, and he got a good round of applause from the friendly group.

Monday May 27 – Chinese medicine, Beijing Zoo, train to Zhengzhou

We checked out of the Rosedale Hotel and were bussed to a centre for the practice of Traditional Chinese Medicine, or TCM as it is often referred to here. On arrival, we were given a passionate and rather heated polemic by Jessica on the wonders of the practice, which – unlike western medicine, that she claimed could only ever help at the last minute – could be used to prevent almost every malady. Relevant nostrums, we were told, have been





developed – with research, no less – over thousands of years. The near-magical powers of TCM could, for example, prevent infections such as SARS (recently a severe epidemic in Asia), and could go so far as reversing the sex of a foetus in the early stages of pregnancy.

We then went through to a more formal lecture room for a talk by one of the senior practitioners (er, ‘doctors’). He said much the same as Jessica, albeit less vehemently, and linked all the TCM concepts together in a pseudo-scientific chart depicting all the major human organs and their supposed connections. We were by this time friendly with another retired doctor and his wife, and his scepticism was more profound than my lightly amused tolerance. But we agreed that most of the precepts of TCM were consistent with the principles of sensible care of anyone’s health, which would include a good diet, plenty of exercise and a generally healthy lifestyle. We shared our scepticism for the pseudoscience and some other nonsense in the Chinese approach. Still, whatever seems to help . . .

Many of the group subjected themselves to an examination (only taking the pulse, all that is necessary, as the practitioners claim) and through answers to simple common-sense questions they were given a diagnosis of their potential health problems. Not surprisingly, all but one person in the group were discovered to be suffering some ailment or other, and many of them took the opportunity to purchase – at the cost of hundreds of Australian dollars – herb distillations and other nostrums that would resolve their problems.



Then on from the day’s commercial exercise to the Beijing Zoo to see the pandas (but no other animals). The panda enclosure was generally well done, and with good explanatory displays on the walls of the enclosed section. All the pandas were resting, as would be expected in the middle of the hot day, but one of us did by good luck shoot a short video of one of them turning over and taking a little climb.

The next stop was at the Beijing Railway Station. There was the usual wait and shemozzle, including doubts as to where the others’ big bags should be stowed (as usual, we were rolling carry-on bags only).



A mixed but super-friendly bunch!

But then we were away for the three and a quarter hour run south on a high-speed train, our first experience of what is now the most important mode of medium and long-distance travel in China. Millions of Chinese travel by train every day. With no constraints on planning or civic disruption, the lines run across enormous expanses of agricultural land and through what were villages, and thus generally ‘tidying up’ the place. To clear more and more land for the growing of food to cope with the expanding population, farmers are bought out by the government to become paper millionaires by Chinese standards. To accommodate the farmers and what were the peasantry, the scenery is punctuated by large bunches of high-rise residential apartments where they now must live, with many of these new country towns accompanied by a new power station. The few remaining villages that we could see looked rather sad and run-down; and not a person to be seen.

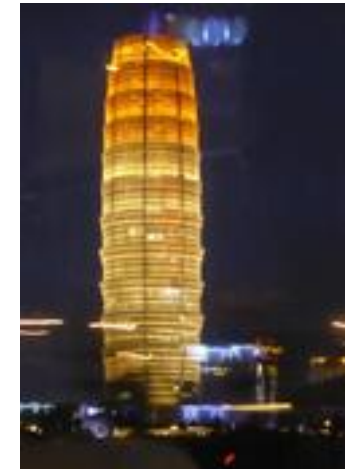


Views from the high-speed train, Henan Province

We pulled in to the immense station at Zhengzhou, which lies in the great central plain of China and is the capital of the province of Henan. Henan is a large province with a turbulent history, and in modern times it has become relatively poor. A massive dam collapse in 1975 caused the deaths of 230,000 people, and in the 1990s a scandal involving the sale of HIV-tainted blood led to a high incidence of AIDS in several Henan villages. An epidemic of African swine fever was centred here.



Our new local guide told us proudly that Zhengzhou is undergoing exceptionally rapid development, practically from nothing, and its sprawling metropolis makes it now one of the biggest cities in China. It is certainly an example of how the Chinese government is raising the general standard of living in the whole province.



On arrival we were transferred to the Glory Grand Hotel, another quite up-market place with comfortable rooms (once we had switched off the freezing air conditioning). On the way, within the greater city limits, we passed a brand-new power station and another that was being decommissioned. Every metropolis we have seen appears to have one or more such facilities. The lights of the cities stay on all night!

Tuesday May 28 - Zhengzhou

This morning we visited the Henan provincial museum – or, rather, to the annexe that is being used while the main building is being renovated. Our Lonely Planet said that it would be open in or about 2018. This delay rather strengthened our feeling that the development of China has slowed substantially in some regions. There are many, many high-rises and other developments that stand unfinished, notably seen from the train in passing through the outskirts of Beijing, where there is no apparent work being done on some forests of apartment towers. The hordes of cranes (the 'national bird') sit stationary. We wondered whether the baby bust that

followed the introduction of the one-child and, later, the two-child policy, is slowing the demand for new dwellings and infrastructure because the population is getting older and not replacing itself.



Decorated bronze wine vessel, early Shang Dynasty, 1600-1300 BC



Bronze vessel in wild goose shape, Western Zhan Dynasty, 1046-771 BC



Porcelain camels, Tang Dynasty, 7th-8th C

The temporarily compacted museum was excellent. Its emphasis is on pre-historic and early times, well-displayed and with good English explanations. Nominally, the museum was created “for the display of cultural relics in the hinterland of the Central Plain”. The exhibits ranged from a two-million-year old fossilized tooth of a stegodon along with a fossilized human tooth, through two thousand year old bronze vessels and containers, to pottery of the 7th and 9th century featuring, for example, the camels that were so important to this eastern end of the then new Silk Road. The craftsmanship of these ancient artefacts is extraordinary.

We were then driven into the city centre. As already noted, Zhengzhou is a huge city, now pretty much of all modern construction because it was heavily bombed by the Japanese in WW2. Remaining, however, are some parts of the old town seething with scooters and narrow lanes festooned with coils of cable. Also relevant to its disturbed history was the 14-level Erqi Memorial Tower in the central square, a pagoda-like building that commemorates the Erqi strike of 1923, when 20,000 soldiers and police massacred striking railway workers. Dissent seems always to have been heavily frowned upon in China.



Norma looked into a number of clothes shops to see if she could replace the skirt we left in the last hotel, but the available styles were for young women, with their much-favoured kooky frocks with frills and flounces. Small families (because of the limited-child policy) spend more on luxury goods. Chinese customers account for a full third of the world total. Prada is opening seven stores in one city, Xi'an. Starbucks is opening the equivalent of one new coffee shop every fifteen hours.



In the pagoda square there were some great examples of the lion statuary that is so popular here, and which Norma assiduously photographs.



After lunch we were taken to a scenic area and park on the Yellow River, just north of the city. It is dominated by an immense pair of sculptures of Emperors Yan and Huang, two of the earliest Chinese leaders and regarded as among the fathers

of the country. According to legend, some 5000 years ago the Yellow Emperor (Huang) and the Yan Emperor helped to teach the Chinese the basics of living. The Yellow Emperor taught the pre-dynastic Chinese how to tame animals and how to build shelters to protect themselves. The Yan Emperor, also known as Shennong, achieved equal acclaim and is considered the father of agriculture in China. Shennong taught the people how to plough the fields, and helped illuminate the wonders of early advances in agriculture.

The sculptures were carved out from a steep and high hillside, and the overall monument is 106 metres high. It was only finished in 2007, after 20 years of construction, and is supposed to celebrate politics and the economy. Surrounding the vast plaza below the monuments are more statues of various emperors, monks and dignitaries. Arranged within the plaza are giant reproductions of bronze vessels, such as the *ding*, or cooking pot. All are overlooked by a pagoda that tops another hill. In all, it's a very impressive complex, quiet on this day, and we enjoyed a peaceful walk around its Chinese-style expanse.

From there we walked down to the river itself. The Yellow River is about 2,460 km long and the second-longest in China after the Yangtze. It is regarded as the birthplace of Chinese civilization and fundamental to the development of Chinese society. The area it affects was the most prosperous region in early Chinese history, but it has always been prone to severe flooding. A flood in 1931 killed an estimated one to four million people, and is the worst natural disaster ever recorded (excluding famines and epidemics). An earlier flood in 1887 was nearly as cataclysmic. Other floods have been deliberately induced in times of war.



We were then taken out for an unexpected excursion on to the river in a hovercraft. We zoomed out of a narrow channel into the river's wide expanse, and along to a flat island sand bank. Waiting there were a small



collection of sand buggies and horses, maintained by villagers staying in tents on the sandy islet. I mounted a horse and had the most pleasant and fun ride, with the horse reaching a rudimentary trot under my incompetent hands. The horses looked very good and healthy, and happy with their light work, unlike those in other tourist places we have taken a horse ride.



Wednesday May 29 – Shaolin Temple

This was called a “free day” for the tour, but there was available a practically mandatory ‘optional’ full-day visit to the Shaolin Temple and kung fu complex and there's nothing much to see in Zhengzhou itself.



The temple complex is the birthplace of Kung Fu and Zen Buddhism. It was quite a long run out of town to the centre, with the countryside becoming more attractive and some hills relieving the flat land of the plains. There were some cliff-sided small mountains to be seen as we approached the site. From the car park we were taken up a winding narrow road through thick woodlands by buggy to the complex.



The first sight as we finally walked in was of a forest of pagodas, all being tombs of prominent monks. The temple itself was quite attractive, and after walking around it we were taken to a demonstration of kung fu. This featured some of its martial aspects and some extraordinary contortions by adolescent boys that drew an “ooh” from the audience. What will their joints be like when they age, we wondered. We were all lined up for a ‘lesson’ outside, but without such contortions required. The kung fu schools take students from about the age of five.



Walking down to the bus we saw a vast array of playing fields covered by men and boys in bright red costumes practising the various skills of the followers, including fighting with swords, poles, boxing, and other athletic activities. This is one of several large kung fu schools in the locality, altogether turning out thousands of graduates, mostly men but with a few women. Fully indoctrinated, their final aim is work in fields where their skills can be of value, such as the military, police, security and bodyguard duties.

On the way back to the city we visited a place making stuff featuring sesame. This included varieties of toffee-like sweetmeats as well as beer and a high-alcohol distilled liquor (which I thought was good, unlike some others on the group).



There was a fair way to drive on the way back, and on the bus the discussion among the group and the guide started with driving standards. It was agreed that the driving was appalling: see a gap, grab it! There’s no lane discipline on motorways or anywhere else, for that matter. The cities, as we noted from the start, are seething with electric motor scooters, zooming in and out of traffic, many of them carrying more than just the driver and a passenger. At night, silent as they are, they tend not to use their lights, to save battery power. Many wear black. The significance for pedestrians is obvious, as we experienced ourselves on an evening walk over a pedestrian square when an invisible scooter whizzed by us.

We’ve seen plenty of terrible driving standards in many poor and developing countries – but what seems incongruous in China is that the drivers are mostly in swish modern cars, well designed and with modern safety features and driving on well-designed and engineered roads. Just as well, I suppose – we saw many minor collisions in the cities being attended by police, and it’s easy to extrapolate this to faster roads in open country.



More than 700 people are killed in road accidents across China *every day*, according to World Health Organisation 2018 figures. The WHO estimates that traffic accidents claim about 260,000 deaths on the mainland each year, of which 60% (156,000) are vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists and scooter riders. Taking into account the nation's vast population, the death rate per capita is about three times Australia's, and about 14 times as high per motor vehicle registrations. This is not as bad as most of Africa and other poorly-development nations, admittedly, and WHO reports that China has most of the generally accepted road safety practices defined in law. But practical enforcement is virtually nil: they have a crash helmet law, for example, but this is practically ignored and does not apply to the squillions of electric scooters anyway!



All the roads are monitored by cameras, which is how the police get to crashes so quickly. This 100% surveillance extends to drivers, who can be recognised – facial recognition is rapidly becoming nation-wide. Our driver had a camera on him all the time, with his driving being monitored in real time back at head office. Almost every sign and pole has an array of cameras on it. This led to a discussion on the shadows of Big Brother that lie across the land. Our guide gave us a lecture on how China was now the world's safest country because of this surveillance, because law-breakers will always be caught. Even so, the picture he drew gave us the creeps.



Both our guides, up to this time, had referred to Mao Zedong with implied approval. We had heard in passing only one mention of the current leader, Xi Jinping. (Perhaps they're worried about referring to him at all?) It is Mao's picture that is on all the banknotes, not his.

Back at the hotel we had a pleasant dinner at the hotel with a few of the group, after the dining room seemed to have opened up just for us.

Thursday May 30 – Zhengzhou to Suzhou



It was an early start for the train south-east to Suzhou, and a run of about four and a half hours. This was a superfast version of the fast train service, as we saw a maximum of 305 km/h on the carriage's speedo. The outlook of the passing scenery gradually changed as we sped over the Yangtze basin, from the dry north to the wet south-east, from winter wheat fields to acres of rice paddies.



All the way, however, what was consistent was the view of skyscrapers on nearly all horizons, mostly complete, with others yet to be finished and others 'resting'. It all looked like over-development, to us. Nearer the train track we still saw many little villages and small settlements, with several looking deserted but with others displaying the quite rare new development of single-level townhouses.

Adjacent to nearly all of the new skyscraper towns was one of the ubiquitous power stations, we assume mostly using coal. Norma counted 18 on the way (those visible from our side of the train), over a distance of about 800 km as the crow flies – maybe one every 45 kilometres! Overhanging many villages and towns were the ever-present transmission lines.

We arrived at Suzhou, which is about 100 km west of Shanghai, at around 5:15, with all of us getting off as rapidly as possible because of the two-minute stop allowed for exit. We were taken to the Berkesy Residence, a new high-rise development of posh little apartments waiting to be purchased, we guessed. We walked out for an evening meal at a nearby train station, with its many little eating places. They offered acceptable, simple, cheap food but not what you'd call street food these days, all of them being in modern surroundings in new developments. Nearby were the Burger King, KFC, McDonalds and Starbucks (of course!).

We returned to the room for a glass of the Chilean red wine that we'd bought at an excellent price from the bus driver! The drivers we had experienced all provided a supply of beer and wine, and many in our sociable group grabbed a can or two as they entered and re-entered the bus. It became quite a jolly party at times.

Friday May 31 – Suzhou to Hangzhou

Norma didn't like the building we were staying in because, probably because of earthquake-proof foundations, she could distinctly feel the building's sway in the wind. Fortunately, we were only there the one night.



We were bussed into the centre of Suzhou for a visit to one of the gardens for which it is famous. Historically, Suzhou was associated with high culture and elegance, attracting scholars and artists. It is one of the oldest towns in the Yangtze basin, and became a trading centre after the completion of the Grand Canal out of Shanghai in the 14th century. By then it had become China's leading producer of silk. The garden we were taken to, the Linger In Garden, is one of the largest. It was built in the Ming Dynasty by a doctor as a relaxing place for his recovering patients.



A cement path wanders through a series of rockeries, ponds, bridges and pagodas. There are lots of small bamboo and bonsai sections, and we walked through the original wooden dwelling of the garden's originator. This is supposedly a World Heritage site, but we found it rather sombre and hardly worthy of such status. It was also exceedingly hot, which made sitting where we could find a place more attractive than lingering.



China, and Suzhou in particular, is justifiably famed over centuries for its production of silk and its international trade. Inevitably, the next visit was to a silk so-called factory and museum. Not surprisingly, it's also a sales centre. First, we were entertained by an extraordinary presentation by another polemicist, who forcefully expounded the virtues of silk not only for clothes and bedding but also for the curing of arthritis and other chronic ailments through the marvels of Chinese medical theory and philosophy. (I did concede that silk sheets could be good for asthma.) We were shepherded through a small museum with a non-functioning silk loom before being taken up to a series of immense showrooms, reminiscent of Harvey Norman or Ikea. After a quick look we joined a small group of recalcitrants out at the bus for a beer. Others did buy quite a lot of silk products, including bedding, and then later had to buy more suitcases to hold these and many other souvenirs.



A cruise along part of the Grand Canal was scheduled, but the government had decreed, reportedly just the day before, that the canal was to be closed to diesel-powered vessels in at least this stretch of it. We were sorry not to have experienced a ride along even a short part of the canal, which has been such an important part of China's history. The Grand Canal, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the longest as well as the oldest canal or artificial waterway in the world. Starting at Beijing, it runs south through the central provinces to Hangzhou (our next destination), thus linking the Yellow River and Yangtze River. The oldest parts of the canal date back to

the 5th century BC, but the various sections were first connected during the Sui dynasty around 600 AD. Its total length is 1,776 km. The southern portion remains in heavy use to the present day.



Anyway, instead we drove to another set of waterways, about 80 km from the city, that meander through waterside villages and towns. The one we visited was Wuzhen water town, a typical ancient town in southern China. It has been preserved as much as possible in accordance with its thousand-year history. The waterside houses are mostly of wood, and behind them lie old villages. Stone bridges cross the narrow waterway. The part we visited, Dongzha, maintains the original layout. We walked through several little souvenir shops to a wharf where we boarded a small boat propelled by a traditional yuloh and were sculled along a reasonable stretch of the narrow river. The main part of the village lay on the other side from where we boarded, and a map showed that there were several museums and ancient houses to be visited, if we had had the time.

We drove on then south to Hangzhou, where at the Pujing Garden Hotel we had dinner in the restaurant; chosen from the photo menu the fish was chopped-up and bony, but the chili lamb was good although a bit too hot for Norma. Why no pork, we wondered? Later, we found out the reason.

We had already been wondering about the small amount of protein in most of the dishes, and specifically about the absence of any pork, a meat that we have experienced as ubiquitous world wide. What we found out later was that the devastating African swine fever hit the Henan province in August last year. Half of China's

pig population, which amounts to a quarter of the world's pig numbers, is now gone. This represents a huge and probably unprecedented loss in the world's supply of protein: good for Australia's beef exports, but really tough on China and much of the developing world.

Saturday June 1 – Hangzhou to Shanghai



Hangzhou, in Zhejiang province, is one of the centres for tea growing in China, and we were taken to the tea plantation at Meijiawu. This has become a major tourist centre and outing for local Chinese. The green tea plantations are worked by the local people. The fields are lovely, and are set



among lines of steep little hills and valleys, very picturesque. We enjoyed a short ramble among the waist-high tea trees.

The Tea House in the tea village holds presentations on the history and culture of tea, and especially the local Longjing (Dragon Well) green tea. Like most other Chinese green tea, Longjing tea leaves are roasted early in processing (after picking) to stop the natural oxidation process that is a part of creating black and oolong teas.

We were of course corralled into a lecture on the types of tea and the processes involved. This progressed inevitably into the mystical properties of tea in preventing and curing a wide variety of ailments. By then, we were feeling we had heard all this before. Inevitably the presentation segued into a heavy sales pitch, again along the lines of “ . . . not only do you get this, but also . . . “. It was expensive stuff, and we doubted it would be allowed into Australia, but several of the group purchased some.



Released, we drove along a pleasant country road that passed by several more tea plantations. There was heavy weekend traffic, and several large and posh hotels were hidden away within the woodlands.

We came then to the major tourist site in Hangzhou, West Lake, a renowned beauty spot. There was a misty haze hanging over it, in the windless humidity, but we thought it gave an air of mystery and romance to the lake and the islands in it, as well as the small tour boats, stone bridges and willow trees. The guide (Kevin, a good one for this part of the tour) suggested that there was a percentage of smoke in it, but we couldn't smell any and rejected the term 'smog' in this case, although it is often called this in China.

In our electric-driven boat we rode all around the lake, the islands and willow banked headlands. It was a fun trip, enjoyed along with many of the group who had become our friends.



Back ashore, we had a simple fish stew at the food court, an acceptable meal. As tourists mostly on the run and thus time-constrained, as noted above we had already found it hard to get a really good Chinese meal in China. And then back on the bus for a four-hour ride up to Shanghai.



The buildings got bigger and the traffic heavier, the nearer to the city we came. How people can afford the new cars they are driving, we can't imagine. It costs a fortune, tens of thousands of Australian dollars, simply to get a licence plate that allows purchase and registration, such are the government's efforts to reduce their number – or, more practically, to slow the growth of their numbers. There is also a ballot system, which has to be

overcome, simply to get into the purchase system. A vast inequality in income and wealth are obvious factors, along with a degree of corruption.



The Chinese, we were told by Kevin, are very status conscious, and the aim is to buy only a new car. Second-hand cars are sold out to 'farmers', essentially the peasantry, many of whom have become millionaires through selling off land for development. Land ownership and rights, we learnt later, are extremely complicated in terms of what kind of land is held, where it is, and whether it is under government or personal ownership. There has been 'land reform' over several centuries just about every time the system of government has changed. In 2017 Premier Li Keqiang made a remarkable—and remarkably unheralded—announcement: full private ownership of land was to be restored in China's cities, but not in the countryside. Apparently, the situation is still confused and fluid.

Arriving in Shanghai we were released for a while to take a walk along the famous Bund. The old colonial buildings are in splendid condition, and looking pretty much like they are in photos of the period. But the old photos obviously don't show that the original buildings are now overshadowed by the new, even on this side of the river; the 'new' Shanghai, Pudong, is on the opposite side, where the exceptionally high buildings are. Some of the group took a special trip up the tallest, but you wouldn't have been able to get Norma up there in a fit.

Finally, we reached the Holiday Inn where we'd be staying, and checked in via a shambolic process including taking our pictures at the desk. More data for the authorities to squirrel away. In the room we drank some of the excellent 2014 Bordeaux we'd bought from the bus driver, then walked out for food. On the way we stopped at a general store that had a section for handbags, and Norma bought a smart replacement for the one she had brought with her, which was literally disintegrating. We also bought a couple of barbecued chicken legs and a few dumplings from a roadside vendor, and took them back to the room to eat with the rest of the wine.

Sunday June 2 - Shanghai

After breakfast in the crowded dining room, we embarked on a rather mixed-up day.



First, we were taken back to the famous Bund, once the city's centre for commerce and trade. There is a splendid outlook across the Huangpu River. This runs through the commercial and residential centre of the city on its way to the Yangtze and the sea, and separates the 'old' part from the new city region of Pudong. The word Bund means 'muddy waterfront', and it was originally a towpath for hauling barges of rice. We had a pleasant walk along the strand – with its beautiful flower bedecked walls – between the river and the Bund's line-up of colonial buildings.



The next stop was notionally at the Shanghai Museum – but this being a Sunday, hordes of locals were out for the bright and sunny day and the queue to get in through security procedures for the museum would have taken about 20 minutes. As only an hour was allocated for the whole visit, we all agreed to give the museum a miss and went for a walk around the adjacent very attractive formal gardens. These were immaculately tended, as have practically all community centres been in our experience. In the park we watched pretty little Chinese kids dressed like dolls feeding the masses of white pigeons. With multiple cleaners

disposed everywhere, scooping up little bits of rubbish as soon as they are dropped, the urban China we have seen must be one of the tidiest places on earth. This even extends to the railways – where else in the world can you see expanses of railway lines and sidings without a scrap of litter lying around?



We had a snack of biscuits and tasty crisps (a bad mistake, stomach-wise, the only such event on the trip but soon settled), then set out on an optional (that is, being pretty much fee-paying mandatory because you couldn't leave the tour in the middle of the city) tour of Shanghai. In practice, this was just a bus trip to the old part of town, very Chinese and, again, thronged. On the way we visited the Yu garden, another mixture of rock art, bonsai tree, water features and small pavilions. Crowded, with few places to sit, but much nicer than the garden we visited in Suzhou.

View from the hotel – note the immaculate railway lines!



Yu Garden

The Old City is the area inside the ancient walled city of Shanghai; it is one of the most picturesque parts of the city, with many buildings in traditional Chinese style. We had a light lunch at a Mexican (!) restaurant there, octopus and excellent draft Mexican cerveza.

We went strolling and people-watching thereafter until it was time to get back to the bus for the ride to the ferry landing for an evening cruise on the Yangtze as the city came alight on both sides of the river.



This was absolutely outstanding, and a great finale to this part of our touring. The Bund and all the high-rises on both sides of the river were brilliantly lit by moving colour patterns as the sky darkened from grey to black. We paid a small premium for the “VIP” part of the ship, with a splendidly unobstructed outlook and free beer, an excellent choice. A good time was had by all.



Back at the hotel, we had to bid very fond farewells with some very good new friends in our group of 14. We really enjoyed their company and, as I told them all on the final bus ride, they really made the trip for us. Our guide, Kevin, confirmed that we had been an exceptionally friendly and enjoyable group to lead.



Monday June 3 - Shanghai to Yichang

Breakfast at 6:00 and on to the bus to the main train station next to the airport. Checking in was problem free, and we had a pair of seats to ourselves for the six and a half hour high-speed train trip out over 1,000 kilometres to the west and to Yichang, at the Three Gorges Dam.

There was some interesting scenery on the way, including a stretch of heavily wooded hills



north-east of Wushan, the foothills of a mountain range that is clear on Google Earth (an application you can't access in mainland China!). And of course, behind every biggish village there are new sprouts of tall, tall residential and commercial high-rises, into which the villagers will inevitably be relocated. Some old villages we saw were already in the process of being demolished. What disruption! We certainly didn't envy those villagers who had left their homes and neighbours to live on the 30th floor of an apartment building set among several others, but that's a typically western reaction to the way the government is dragging thousands of its citizens out of poverty.

The train line – quite new – basically runs along parallel to the south bank of the Yangtze. So, the plains are wet and fertile. The Yangtze valley contributes about 30% of China's total GDP, with primary contributions from commercial development and food supply.

The train was a multi-stopper and only got up to about 195 km/h, averaging around 150 km/h for the trip. But very comfortable the whole way, and we shared a good plate of food for lunch along the route.



We de-trained at Yichang, where we were taken by bus for dinner at a hotel – as usual for these places, it was bland and unappetising. By this time, we were gradually getting to know the group that we had newly joined for this part of the trip. We had been disappointed to learn that no-one else from our previous group were joining us for the Yangtze cruise, although some said they would have come if they had known about it. The 14 people we were joining already knew each other well and made their own friendships, having all been on the same group up to this point. So, we felt a bit like fish out of water for a while, and we never formed the close relationships we had enjoyed over the previous couple of weeks.



Then in the same bus we were taken across the river and along a little way upstream of the dam to a new commercial, residential and tourist development, typical of those developments created up and away from the new waterfront in the now flooded valley.

We rode down the long slope from the car park to the water on a bumpy old cable car on rails to the floating wharf where our ship, of the Victoria Cruises line, was lying alongside – along with three larger and apparently posher cruise ships. But ours

seemed to be comfortable enough and the cabin was fine too, with two beds and a bathroom (complete with bath). We got settled in, unpacked, and went to bed.

Tuesday June 4 – Yangtze River cruise, Three Gorges Dam

The ship did not move that night, and we were a bit disturbed by an adjacent ship's running of its generator. Early breakfast was a noisy shemozzle, but once most of the Chinese passengers had moved out of the dining room we started to get to know our cruising companions a bit better, now we could hear ourselves speak.

This day was the 30th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square (and adjacent Beijing) massacre of students protesting over anxieties about the country's future. The concerns included a market economy that benefited some people but seriously disaffected others, and the one-party political system also faced a challenge of legitimacy. Common grievances at the time included inflation, corruption, limited preparedness of graduates for the new economy, and restrictions on political participation. The students called for greater accountability, constitutional due process, democracy, freedom of the press, and freedom of speech, although they were highly disorganised and their goals varied. At the height of the protests, about a million people were assembled in the Square.



The protests started on 15 April and were forcibly suppressed on 4 June when the government declared martial law and sent in the military to occupy central parts of Beijing. In what became known as the Tiananmen Square Massacre, troops with assault rifles and tanks fired at the demonstrators and those trying to block the military's advance into Tiananmen Square. Estimates of the death toll vary from several hundreds to several thousands, with thousands more wounded. The photograph of a single young man with a carrier bag standing in front of a tank to stop it became iconic.

The protests set the limits on political expression in China up to the present day. Its memory is widely associated with questioning the legitimacy of

Communist Party rule and remains one of the most sensitive and most widely censored topics in China. Indeed, on that day we were not aware of a single mention of the event, and even the tourists referred to it in whispers. The China Daily, a local English-language paper, studiously ignored it. The square was reported by The Australian newspaper (which we could still access on line) to have been in lockdown, with troops in the surrounding streets, but no serious disruption seemed to have occurred. We were to be exposed to some of these memories only a few days later, in Hong Kong and later again once home.

Back to the river. The Yangtze River is the longest river in Asia, the third-longest in the world (after the Nile and the Amazon) and the longest in the world to flow entirely within one country. It rises in the northern part of the Tibetan Plateau, where it is fed by melting snow and ice, and flows over 6,300 km east to the East China Sea near Shanghai. Its drainage basin comprises one-fifth of the land area of China, and is home to nearly one-third of the country's population. We would be cruising from Yichang to Chongqing through the Three Gorges, a distance of about 600 kilometres.

The main excursion for the day was to the Three Gorges Dam Site and its Visitor Centre on the northern



side of the river at Yichang. This enormous project, one of the biggest in the history of mankind, created a vast reservoir in upstream Yangtze. Plans for the dam date back to 1919, under proposals by Sun Yat-sen, with the primary aims being to limit devastating flooding downstream and to generate electricity. It has succeeded in both, but resulted in the disruption of the lives of over a million people who had to be relocated to higher ground as the gigantic river reservoir filled. Many of these people did not accept relocation to new little boxes in urban developments on the upper hillsides, but chose to relocate themselves to the already crowded coastal cities of the east.



Mao Zedong supported the original plans, but began the adjacent but lower Gezhouba Dam project first, and economic problems resulting from the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution slowed progress. With Mao gone, the National People's Congress finally approved the dam in 1992, and construction started on December 14, 1994. The dam was expected to be fully operational in 2009, but additional projects, such as an underground power plant with six additional generators, delayed full operation until May 2012.

The dam itself, as it spans the Yangtze generally from south to north, includes two power stations each with several turbine generators, separated by a central spillway. Shipping is diverted through cuttings to the north of the dam: one leads to a giant ship lift at the north end of the dam wall, and a longer channel just inland cuts the curve of the river and leads to a two-way set of five-stage locks. It's now the world's largest single generator of electric power from a renewable source, but it is not maintaining the percentage of power once hoped for because of China's insatiable demand for on-demand electricity. The dam was originally expected to provide 10% of China's power. However, electricity demand has increased more quickly than previously projected, and the dam is reportedly now providing a much lower percentage than that.



We had a good view of the dam's immensity from a high viewing platform, and also from down near water level. All very impressive, albeit overwhelming. A detailed evaluation of the costs and benefits of the present and projected projects is almost impossible because the Chinese government is not exactly free with the data that would allow such analysis. The whole project was and remains extremely controversial. In 1992, when the dam came up for a vote in the National People's Congress, an unprecedented one-third of the delegates voted against the plan. But it's not realistically wise or even possible for a Chinese person to publicly question its benefits these days.



Above, the locks; to the right, a view of the upstream side of the dam wall and the ship lift



Nevertheless, more dams – at least three, and maybe a further four – are planned for reaches of the river well upstream. Plans also exist for the channelling of water from upstream and north to the Yellow River for the purpose of irrigation, which will of course cut further into the dam's generating capacity. Whether these plans will ever come into fruition is anyone's guess. Its negative local environmental and social impacts are well known, as is the corruption associated with its original construction and enforced population movements.

After a hot and tiring morning, and having to walk down the long range of steps down to the ship because the cable car was not operating, we did nothing much for the rest of the day. However, we did come across a small library holding a collection of English-language Chinese newspapers and magazines. We, and especially Norma, read these avidly during the rest of the cruise, as they offered further interesting insights into the (official) Chinese view of the world.

There was an evening entertainment, a dance display of colourful traditional clothing from different dynasties and regions. The ship did at last get going in the early evening, and we viewed a lovely sunset ahead of us as we steamed into the Xiling Gorge, the first (eastern-most) of the Three Gorges. This is the longest and supposedly the least scenic; but in any case, we were only able to see the first bit because it got too dark further on.



Wednesday June 5 – Yangtze River cruise, the Three Gorges

We woke as the ship docked at the brutal-looking resettlement town of Badong. After breakfast we walked across to a smaller ferry which was to take us up the Shennong Stream which, along with the Daning River that runs through the Lesser Three Gorges, joins the Yangtze from the north through steep sided flooded gorges. It was an impressive and in part beautiful trip, very photogenic. The demarcation line between the high watermark of the springtime and the dense vegetation immediately above is truly striking, as is the patterning of the limestone gorge wall down to the present water level from the high watermark. Lines in the rock face are a jumble of slopes, crumbling and twisting shapes.



Up in the cliffs we saw several little caves, some of which contained what are known as 'hanging coffins'. These are supposed to be relics left over from the Ba people who inhabited the gorges region 3,500 to 1,800 years ago. At one time hundreds of these coffins could be seen throughout the Three Gorges and the Daning River, suspended from seemingly inaccessible positions on the cliff-side. There are several bigger caves in the vertical cliffs, homes for bats and birds, and at one point the gorge between the cliffs is only four metres wide.



This, then, was a very pleasant two-hour run up and back, then almost immediately we were off and away to continue up the great river. The many interesting sights included tightly-packed high-rise new settlements built above the 'new' waterline, lots of river traffic, and a few ship repair yards where vessels lay high and dry until the river would rise again.



We came then to the Wu Gorge, the second of the three. This is supposed to be the most spectacular and scenic of the three, and warranted a special commentary in the ship's bar/lounge, but the 'ethereal mist' that the Lonely Planet calls the haze here soon consolidated into heavy overcast and rain. Indeed, just as we approached the narrowest, steepest and deepest part of the gorge we were welcomed by a Wagnerian flash of lightning and clap of thunder. Certainly spectacular, but not that scenic!

The heavy rain continued for a while, until we emerged from the gorge and continued on in improving weather to the Qutan Gorge, the third of the three. This one was short, sweet and dramatic. Looking back at it after emerging, the view to be seen is the one depicted on the 10 yuan banknote. Strings of low cloud hovered across the western gateway to the vertical sides of the gorge, a lovely sight.

Immediately afterwards, we rafted up to a similar cruise boat to let people off for an optional tour to a nearby temple, but we decided to stay aboard for a peaceful afternoon nearly on our own. The ship moved away from the wharf to anchor for a while, lying off the ancient town of Fengjie in a wide section of the river where



many ships and barges moor or anchor. The large number of freight-carrying barges and container vessels did surprise us; the river is clearly a very important commercial route between Shanghai and the interior, reminiscent of the great European rivers.

We made way again in the early evening, after dinner. Again we found the incredible noise generated by hundreds of happy Chinese shouting across big circular tables under a low ceiling made conversation round our table of westerners essentially impossible, and I was losing my voice trying to make myself heard. We chose not to attend the evening entertainment, again put on by cheerful crew members, involving passengers dressing up as emperors and empresses. Audience participation is not our thing, being the antisocial couple we are!

An evening optional outing – a bus trip back to the gorges – was cancelled because of thunderstorms in the region, but we had decided not to go in any event.

Thursday June 6 – Yangtze River cruise, the Three Gorges

Fog came in heavily overnight, and the ship was anchored because of poor visibility when we awoke. We got under way again after breakfast.



Upstream of the gorges the slopes of land between the current (low) water level and the peak level are being 'greened' by terraces of what looked like a kind of grass. The occasional cow could be seen enjoying it. Silting is a real problem for the upper reaches of the river, and we knew the silt was a problem for the dams and turbines downstream (not to speak of safer water generally – tap water was not potable anywhere we went in China, however posh the location). The planting of the watersides is presumably an attempt to stabilise the soil and silt to prevent it being washed away in flood times.



We were soon past the major river city of Wangzhou, which is rapidly developing but still displaying some signs of its ancient past – including the washing of their clothes in the water by the local people. Gradually we

progressed into more formal agricultural land, with smallholdings extending down to the river high-water mark. Crops included bananas and sweet corn, and there were more cattle browsing on the green silt terraces. We stopped for a couple of hours at the port of Fengdou, but once again we sat out the included tour, which was up a nearby hill to a temple, and most of the afternoon sat out on the upper deck. It did get very hot and humid in the still air.

Further again upstream the river, by now flowing much faster than in the lower reaches, became very twisting and turbulent, which made ship handling interesting to watch when we got going again.

Friday June 7 – Chongqing, and to Hong Kong by air

We had to get up early, because we would soon arrive at our destination, the important river port of Chongqing, and we would have to be checked out and taken off for a tour by a new guide. We docked at 8:15 to see the city, the centre of which sits on a peninsula jutting into the Yangtze from the north.

Chongqing is immense. Where it sits in the scale of size in China depends on the area, including suburbs, taken into account in defining it. In any event, it is undoubtedly in the top four, along with Guangzhou (ex-Canton), Shanghai and Beijing. At a minimum, the population of the city itself is about 15 million, and when including the surrounding suburbs, about double that. And it's all pretty new, having been heavily bombed by the Japanese in WW2. There are some dramatic brand-new high rises, as well as the ubiquitous skyscraping packs of apartment blocks. Shipyards were prominent along the riverside as we approached.

From 1938 to 1945, Chongqing city became the Nationalist Kuomintang's wartime capital. It was here that representatives of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), including Zhou Enlai, acted as liaison between the Kuomintang and the communist headquarters.



We were taken to see one of the only old buildings remaining more or less as they were originally, albeit restored, in an attractive museum complex, the Huguang Guild Hall. It once served as community headquarters for immigrants from the Hu and Guang (central) provinces, who arrived at the city several hundred years ago. There are several beautifully carved rooms, with furniture that's also artistic, a temple, a teahouse, and a theatre in the middle with a stage for Chinese opera. And a souvenir shop, probably the best we encountered.

After that, we were taken to the airport for a long wait for the plane to Hong Kong at 3:15. A China Air aircraft, in near-new condition, it actually left a bit early, but arrived in Hong Kong on time some two and a quarter hours later, having circled round to *lose* time.

The pair of us – as usual travelling very light – had no bags to collect, so we were quickly at the airport shuttle service desk. But we then had to wait for the rest of the group, heavily laden with huge suitcases, with whom we then shared the shuttle bus to the Harbour Plaza 8 Degrees in Kowloon. The airport is quite new, set out on reclaimed land on the western side of Lantau Island, so it's a fairly long run in.

We were first to check in to the hotel, luckily, as it was a slow process, and we ordered a simple meal that we ate in the room. Afterwards, we took a short walk to see where we were and how to get to the ferry terminal for Hong Kong island.

Saturday June 8 – Hong Kong



There were many, many local families as well as tourists up there, out on a sunny weekend day. We walked a bit further up through green-tinged woodlands (which are often up in the clouds that shroud the hilltop), much like a rain forest. There are splendid views down to the northern waterfront of Hong

We had a good night after switching off the typically glacial air-conditioning! We took a bus down to the ferry wharves, having missed the hotel shuttle. It was a pleasant short trip across the harbour to the city, and we embarked on a long walk across the downtown area, mostly on the elevated walkways. We were surrounded, even enclosed, by Hong Kong's tower-flanked waterside, totally different from what we remembered of our only visit some decades ago. Down on street level we started a walk up to the lower stop for the old tram to the Peak – but once nearly all the way there we saw a notice to tell us that the tram was closed for renovation. So, we took a taxi to the end of the road at the top instead. Taxis, we found, were about the only things that are cheap in Hong Kong.



Kong island and across the busy harbour to the Kowloon peninsula. We had an excellent light sushi lunch at a Japanese restaurant, then shared a taxi with three Brits back down to the ferry. In Kowloon, we took another taxi back to the hotel rather than continuing to look for the hotel shuttle stop.

We ate in the room again after a beer in the small, but only, hotel bar overlooking the swimming pool. Intermittent showers had started.

Sunday June 9 – Hong Kong to Australia

The breakfast buffet was not bad, and then we got packed ready for leaving later. We got the shuttle to the ferry this time, took the ferry over, and walked east to the next wharf along to visit the Hong Kong Maritime Museum.



The largest junks in the fleet were some of the biggest all-wood ships ever built. Had the Chinese persisted with this trading empire, they could easily have pre-empted the Portuguese, who had not yet reached the Indian Ocean, but Zheng He's death in 1434 brought the great age of Chinese maritime expansion to an end – for over 500 years, anyway.

The museum has just recently been renovated and rearranged, and it was excellent. Galleries described differing aspects of Hong Kong and China's maritime history. There were displays of developments in Asian maritime and naval architecture, with a particular focus on the craft generically known as junks. Their extensive voyaging was well described and illustrated, and was something of a surprise to us. We were particularly impressed by the voyaging between 1405 and 1433 of Admiral Zheng He, who at about the time of Christopher Columbus made seven voyages to and through the Indian Ocean, reaching as far as Jeddah in the Red Sea and Mombasa in East Africa. Returning with goods from India, Ceylon, East Africa and Java these expeditions reached a total of 62 ships, manned by some 28,000 sailors.



Despite the fact that its renovation was recent, we were glad to find that the presentations were both highly informative and interesting, well understandable and free from the immersive feeling-oriented and interactive emphasis of many modern museums.

We took a short walk along the waterside promenade between the wharves and the city buildings. By this time we knew that there was to be a demonstration centred along to the east in Causeway Bay. Mostly young people were wanting to show their determined opposition to the promised acceptance by the Hong Kong administration of immigration laws applying in mainland China. These would allow extradition of alleged offenders from Hong Kong to the mainland, and were seen as an existential threat to liberty and free speech in this part of China, supposedly under a different 'system' to the mainland. That morning we saw little evidence in the central city of the demonstrations, except for fleets of fishing boats passing by with flags flying, and had no idea how the protests would develop and spread throughout the downtown city over the following days.



As has been reported all over the world since then, each weekend the determination of the protestors has increased, to the point (when this is written) that the Beijing-appointed Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, has been forced to indefinitely suspend debate and the demonstrations have descended into anarchic rioting.



We took the Kowloon shuttle back to the hotel after I was photographed in a replica "silver Spitfire" display sponsored by the IWC watch company and in aid of an extraordinary expedition. Leaving Goodwood in August this year, a restored Spitfire boasting a unique silver-chrome finish was to embark on a round-the-world flight. The aircraft, built in 1943, will cover more than 43,000 kilometres over several months, visiting some 30 countries on its way. The circumnavigation is intended to honour the design and engineering of the iconic British plane.

Took a taxi back out to the airport, no more expensive for us two than the shuttle, and rested in 'priority seats' for the over-65s. We were in the departure gates by 5:30, having spent the last few HK dollars on a couple of books.

The flight home, overnight, was in a Qantas Boeing 787 Dreamliner, a horribly claustrophobic plane with as many seats crammed in as physically possible. It was also claimed to be short-staffed for the flight, which did not excuse the uneatable food. So it was very good to get back to Sydney and met by our limo driver Ali for the drive home after one of the most interesting and sometimes challenging short trips of our life.

AFTERWORD AND REFLECTIONS

A few short weeks of a packed, immersive experience is not the best way to come to any sensible understanding of the peoples, culture, history, development and politics of a great nation. A TripaDeal tour, of course, does not claim to do any such thing, but does promise to offer a few glimpses of a country and, through its local guides, some insight into how the local people live. It is not a Martin Randall or Odyssey market. The firm states that travel is an experience that should be enjoyed by everyone and that they make it an affordable and hassle-free option for all. The plane over was nearly full of TripaDeal clients, but on arrival we were assigned to groups not exceeding 15 or so, which was fine. Norma and I knew all this beforehand, of course, and had made some effort through reading and research over the eight months we had to prepare. But nothing like that can really prepare you for China, and so we have been back to the books and the internet since our return, in order to make sense and come to a better understanding of what we saw and learnt while there.

We are appending this note in order to put more flesh on the bones of the above account of our travels, and remind ourselves in later years what we thought about it all. What may come across as mere assertions on our part are based on respectable literature and media, and notably historian Professor Peter Frankopan's magisterial books on the Silk Roads, in which he takes the global view. There has also been much recent public analysis resulting from the China-US trade debates, the ongoing disruption in Hong Kong, and local high-level forums.

Frankopan points out that we are already living in the Asian century, when there is an astonishing scale and speed of movement of gross domestic product from the west to the east. China's plans for the future capitalise and build on these changing patterns of economic and political power, chiefly through President Xi's signature 'Belt and Road Initiative'. The amount of money to be ploughed into China's neighbours and other countries over sea and land will multiply several times over, to create an interlinked world of train lines, highways, airports, ports and shipping lanes that will enable the rapid growth of trade links.

Xi Jinping has presented his vision of a brave new world, inspired by connections that bound people together in the past. People of countries along the ancient Silk Road, Xi said in a keynote speech, are cemented by friendships and share aspirations for peace and development. This was a model that would be replicated by building an economic belt of overland connections along the Silk Road, and a maritime sea road linking waterways as far as the Indian Ocean, the Gulf and the Red Sea. President Clinton expressed his support but provided no money. Xi followed up by concrete proposals and the commitment of buckets of hard cash, claiming (in retrospect, correctly) that the initiative could change the world.

There were three main motivations behind Xi's policy. First, the supply of clean natural resources including energy, food, water, and air; second, the transition of the economy from manufacturing to services; and third, the upgrading of infrastructure in neighbouring countries as well as in China. Investment in transport, water conservancy, power generation and communications has led to a vast improvement in living standards and the reduction of poverty for millions, especially in western China.

Much more controversial has been the militarisation of the South China Sea and beyond. World-wide condemnation, initiated by the Philippines and supported by the Permanent Court of Arbitration of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, has been ignored. Beijing protests that this is simply part of a defensive network. The waterway's immense proportion of the world's commercial fleet that sails through it makes it a crossroads of the global economy, and thus fundamental to China's future. But while it's also vital for world-wide commerce, the South China Sea is now effectively under Chinese control.

Further to actions under the Belt and Road Initiative are China's efforts to open up new routes, with heavy investment in freight and high-speed rail lines. Access to the oceans is intended through a network of port building, with land, grants and long-term leases under Chinese control being established in the Pacific and Indian

oceans including Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Djibouti (at the narrow and strategically vital entrance to the Persian Gulf). Chinese naval patrols extend as far as the Baltic. Defence issues are clearly intertwined with all this.

One might also include Darwin, where the port was leased in 2013 to a subsidiary of the Shandong Landbridge Group, which has interests in port logistics, petrochemicals, timber and real estate development in China. Its billionaire owner Ye Cheng has been named by the Chinese Government as one of the top 10 'individuals caring about the development of national defence' and the company was later found to have extensive links to the Chinese Communist Party and the People's Liberation Army. In an interview in Beijing in 2016, Mr Ye said the Darwin Port investment fit the company's strategy to expand its shipping and energy interests and served China's foreign policy goal known as One Belt, One Road (now the BRI).

The new Silk Roads are now all over the world – not only in Central Asia but across all of Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas. Nearly a trillion dollars have been promised by China to projects, although far less has yet been committed. The initiative enables Chinese companies to do well, not necessarily alongside others but at their expense. China's approach, as seen by the US, encourages dependency using opaque contracts, predatory loan practices and corrupt deals that mire nations in unpayable debt. The capacity of many countries to meet their obligations and manage repayments is often questionable. Tajikistan was forced to cede a large swag of land to China for forgiveness of debts, and others (particularly in Central America) have been pressured to support China's efforts to bring Hong Kong and Taiwan into the arms of the CCP. Angolans effectively owe China \$754 each, and in Krygyzstan it is \$703 per person.

The IMF has pointed out that if a large number of indebted countries default, there are consequences for the world economy. Borrowing money from a lender that may have an interest in use of the asset on which the loan is secured is a risky proposition. It is not always a 'win-win' situation, as Xi Jinping claims. At the recent APEC summit in PNG, there were tough words from the USA about Beijing's 'pernicious debt diplomacy', and many projects emerged from that meeting that would be funded by the West instead, in partnership with Pacific nations.

Frankopan quotes a prominent Chinese intellectual, Jiang Shigong, in an essay that has been described as an authoritative statement of the new political orthodoxy under President Xi Jinping. Jiang divides modern history into eras of Mao Zedong (China 'standing up'), Deng Xiaoping ('becoming rich'), and Xi Jinping ('becoming strong'). Jiang writes that what is happening under Xi, both domestically and internationally, is the natural and logical culmination of a long process that can be traced back to 1921 and the foundation of the Communist Party. The implications are clear: Chinese civilization is spreading and extending to every corner of the world. "As far as visions go", he writes, "It is hard to think of one that is more expansive and ambitious".

Throughout history China has played the long game – which, incidentally, may be its approach to the current Hong Kong debacle. In the imperial eras, states were obligated to follow Chinese rules, and now Xi's concept (explained in his New Year address in 2017) is Chinese rejuvenation with a united world 'under heaven' (*tianxia*). Henry Kissinger has pointed out that the Chinese have "been dominant in 1,800 of the last 2,000 years".

Xi Jinping's ambition is nothing less than to reshape the way the world now works. He is gambling all in his climb back to global dominance. The signs became more widely recognised when the National People's Congress in March last year agreed to abolish term limits on the presidency. The previous limit of two five-year terms was introduced by Deng Xiaoping to restrain the power of leaders after the Chinese Communist Party faced devastation following the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Xi's self-esteem is reflected in his public presence, as shown nightly on Chinese television: he has a Buddha-like self-containment and displays an apparent disinterest in what's going on around him. Foreign leaders have to walk a long red carpet to meet him, and most seem to defer to the point of awe. Some bow – he never does.

Deng's era of reform, which delivered the nation its present prosperity, is over after 40 years, and Xi's 'thoughts on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era' have been written into the country's constitutions. It's the new Little Red Book.

Power has been centralised, and a huge new Supervisory Commission established with the aim of shutting down disloyalty and corruption. Xi is seen as utterly sincere, a true believer in the verities of the party. He told a mass meeting of party officials last December that the party's leadership was paramount and must be strengthened. He said: "It was precisely because we've adhered to the centralised and united leadership of the party that we were able to achieve this great historic transition." Further, noting that the party's socialist path had been "totally correct", he declared: "Let contemporary Chinese Marxism shine even more brilliant rays of truth". He told Chinese journalists their "surname is Party".

China is far too large, and its population is far too diverse and well educated, for opposition not to emerge and for all people to accept Xi's thoughts uncritically. Xi has therefore applied vast state resources to hi-tech surveillance, facial recognition and citizen control. And much of this control can be low tech and brutally applied. Our tour guides, especially in the buses (all of which were equipped with at least one camera and in some cases several) stuck rigidly to the party line, just as the bus drivers stuck to the speed limits because their driving was monitored in real time back at their bases and who knows where else. Our guide in Beijing on the way to Tiananmen Square pleaded with us: "please don't ask me about 1989". At our Shanghai Holiday Inn our photographs were unobtrusively taken at check-in, and at all hotels our passports were surrendered for at least a day "for safe keeping".

We accept that many other totalitarian states monitor and control their media, but none with the international influence of China. The three biggest telecom companies are state owned. The government is trying to block VPNs, and access to sites like Google, Facebook and Twitter is severely limited or blocked. We could certainly not use our gmail account, and access to the web via the Chrome browser was blocked. Simply an inconvenience for us, of course, but not one that encouraged our enthusiasm for the way the country goes about its affairs.

In the media generally, producers are being 'requested' to show 'people's happiness'. Crime stories need approval. Gay characters and violation of 'mainstream values' are all forbidden. In all educational institutions students are urged to nurture the socialist cause – and one can only guess the consequences if they don't. Many universities have opened Xi Jinping Thought Centres. Churches must all have CCTV.

At street level, groups of 200 Chinese households are all monitored by a security manager. Even more wide-reaching is the new, compulsory and rapidly developing 'social credit' system. Citizens are assigned a score based on their civic virtue. Like private credit scores, a person's social score can move up and down depending on their behaviour. The exact methodology is a secret, but the Chinese premier, Li Keqiang, has just announced that patterns of behaviour will increasingly be monitored by the sharing of the kind of information we would regard as private among all government agencies and departments. Big data, indeed.

Examples of infractions include bad driving, smoking in non-smoking zones, buying too many or the wrong video games, liking the wrong media post and posting fake news online. Similar negative scores will apply to those who jay-walk or smoke on trains, and will be spotted by CCTV and identified by facial recognition software. Citizens who act 'worthily' will gain easier access to jobs, good schools, travel and leisure. They will get extra points for donating blood or volunteering at a homeless shelter. Miscreants will be open to sanctions such as being banned from travelling, cut out from state jobs or denied promotion.

Such measures, to us, expose a sense of insecurity within the Chinese administration, as if insufficient surveillance of the citizenry risks loss of government control altogether.

China might also be feeling insecure as a result of its burgeoning pile of debt. Most of China's expansion has been fuelled by debt. The IMF has recently warned that debt levels were not so much a concern as "dangerous". As the Economist has very recently pointed out, while government debt might seem to be under control, local governments – responsible for about 85% of public expenditures – have long relied on off-balance-sheet debt, and when these local government financing vehicles are factored in, government debt rises to about 70% of GDP. The central government has been trying to limit local government borrowing, but the impact is obvious (as we observed) in the slowdown in local government spending on building and other big infrastructure.

Commentators such as Bloomberg believe that China cannot permit a full-blown recession; however, through simply directing that no more credit be allowed and restricting capital outflows, the situation could evolve into a stagnation similar to that in Japan.

A similar sense of insecurity has been displayed by China's response to the protests and riots in Hong Kong, which have presented an embarrassing, serious and high profile challenge to Xi's authority. Beijing's state media accuse "foreign forces" of trying to create havoc in Hong Kong. Carrie Lam's abject apologies and willingness to step back suggest that Beijing did not want this problem and that it hurts their prospects in bigger issues, such as trade with the USA. Xi will be worried that similar unrest could extend to parts of the mainland, especially Xinjiang, and that his determination to bring back Taiwan into the fold has suffered a blow.

The larger question has always been, would Hong Kong influence Beijing to become more liberal, or would Beijing gradually clamp down on the freedom and autonomy that has made Hong Kong such a successful place, with the result that it evolves simply into another rich Chinese city under the kind of repression discussed above. Under the totalitarian Xi, the latter is far more likely. It is therefore the case that China's iron determination will probably prevail in the end.

But Xi is also changing China in ways that are less contentious. He is taking steps to reverse China's heavy degradation of air, soil and waterways. In at least in the urban places we visited the air was much clearer than we had expected, and the haze seemed more to be a result of heat and still air rather than what the locals were calling smog. The high percentage of electric and hybrid plug-in cars, together with a virtual elimination of two-stroke scooters, have made the cities more attractive places to live in that regard. Xi accepts, it is reported, that reducing financial risks, reducing poverty and inequality and tackling pollution are China's "three tough battles".

But to us, the means employed to combat these problems is troubling: clamping down on democratic principles and a free media, on economic liberalism, and on any questioning of the nature of socialism China style. There must be uncritical acceptance of the party's official narrative, says Xi Jinping. In any case the narrative is often contradicted by the action; for example, China's *actual* position on coal-derived CO2 emissions leans much further towards responding to the country's expanding demands for power than it does to actually reducing them. This indicates a certain scepticism on the part of the CCP on the importance of such reduction. In its review of the government's five-year-plan, the China Electricity Council (CEC) – the influential industry body representing China's power industry – has recommended adopting a 'cap' for coal power capacity by 2030. However, the 1300GW limit proposed is 290GW higher than current capacity. The Paris Agreement-approved target is for the country's coal-fired capacity to continue to grow until peaking in 2030, and the CEC cap would enable China to build two large coal power stations each month for the next 12 years. In recent news it appears that the 2030 'peak' is to be pushed out to 2040.

China is trying hard to present a face to the world that can be accepted by all of the earth's people: generosity to other countries in relation to trade and infrastructure, a clean, green and progressive image, and sponsoring tours like the one we have just been on and enjoyed handsomely. But much of this face is a mask. Becoming clear is the subjugation and worse of minority populations, particularly in the vast north-west province of Xinjiang. Currently in the spotlight are the 11 million ethnic Uighurs and a million Kazakhs, huge numbers of whom are now in 'education' camps. As discussed above there is also the generally totalitarian supervision of its own people, and a dangerously belligerent approach to international rules of law and military defence on land and sea.

But the realpolitik is that the west has to deal with China as it is, not how we would like it to be. A difference in values need not be an inevitable block to dialogue and cooperative trade. The Xi dynasty is well under way, and its importance to Australia is beyond argument. How our governments manage our relationship with this massively influential nation will in part define our future prosperity and the maintenance of our freedom-loving values.

Michael and Norma, June 2019