

China Journal July 19 – August 3, 2005

We were a group of East Texas Baptist University administrators, professors, and family members who traveled to China in July 2005. We had planned for a year to co-sponsor and attend an international, interdisciplinary academic conference at the Lanzhou University of Technology in Lanzhou, Gansu Province. That event also meant we could tour other places. Lanzhou is in northwest central China, on the Silk Road and straddling the banks of the Huang He or Yellow River.

Another purpose was to develop a formal relationship established fourteen months earlier with a signed agreement between LUT and ETBU. The agreement involves the cultural and academic exchange of academic visitors and students between our two institutions. We hope the exchange will grow and last for a long time.

Our travel arrangements involved dividing our group for two trans-Pacific flights on July 19 and 20. About 20 of us departed from DFW Airport on July 19, on two different flights to Los Angeles International Airport where we took our flight via All Nippon Airways to Tokyo Narita Airport. From Tokyo Narita we continued to Beijing International, a large, new airport built to handle China's rapidly expanding air traffic caused by increases in tourism and business. China also needed an airport prepared to handle the traffic associated with the Olympic Games in 2008. Despite the number of hours we spent in the airplanes and airports, we were grateful for normal flights and that none of us had any baggage problems.

BEIJING

Our July 19 group had the advantage of an extra day to use as we pleased in Beijing, for resting, walking, visiting interesting shopping and historical sites in the city. Some of our members used the public transportation and walked many miles exploring parts of the central city, the markets and *hutongs*. Some of us bartered for inexpensive curling irons and blow-dryers, items most Chinese never worry about! Others rested or explored the neighborhood around the Presidential Plaza hotel, a well-appointed five-star hotel with a daily breakfast buffet that gave us a good start and opportunities for some great morning table conversation with members of our group and others from all around the world. Our hotel is "standard" for tourism through the CITS or China International Travel Service that took good care of us during our trip. We also benefited from the professional service and personal attention we got from our U.S. travel agents with AsiaConnect.

Beijing is an enormous city amounting actually to a special administrative region in China, with approximately 12 million people plus a "floating" population of about 1.5 million. The "floating" population (according to our tour guide) includes students and international professionals and business people from all around the world. But we wondered whether that figure included the numerous laborers who come to Beijing from other areas of China just to find a daily wage. If not, then perhaps the Beijing population would be greater than the 13.5 million we were told about.

Beijing will host the 2008 Olympic Games, which China actually has been preparing for since the early 1990s when they hoped to get a bid for the 2000 Olympics but lost out to the Australians. The additional eight years of preparation time, however, have allowed Beijing to expand its transportation infrastructure and to modernize large

sections of the city. Most of Beijing is new since 1990, and much of the rest has been renovated or replaced.

The grand sports complexes at various locations in and around Beijing will facilitate large crowds of spectators, hosting the world's Olympians with state-of-the-art facilities and more than enough lodging space. The Chinese have become ever more prepared to meet the physical needs of large numbers of tourists, just as they have improved their ability to host business and industry on a scale matching their increased commitment to compete globally for business and commerce. The modernized infrastructure, attention to the tastes and needs of tourists, and readiness to engage in business, education, and cultural exchange, are all features of China's preparation to become a global leader. More and more Chinese speak the common languages of globalization, chiefly English, but also Japanese, Russian, and French among others. We were impressed with the ability of our tour guides and hosts to communicate in English and that so many Chinese have an active interest to use English.

Our first full tour day followed the arrival of the rest of our group on July 21. Their first night was all too short to get a good rest, and then we were off the next morning to visit Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, and, late in the day, the Summer Palace, before we went to a government arts and crafts emporium to see traditional crafts in silk and jade. The day was capped off with a full Peking Duck dinner with far more food than we could handle, but with a lot of new flavors and strange dishes to sample. As always, Chinese table hospitality left us more than satisfied—overwhelmed, actually!

Tiananmen Square was crowded due to a national school holiday and the fact a major international conference in the Great Hall of the People used part of the square to park tour buses. It was the occasion of the First Annual International Conference on English Education, something in which the Chinese have great official and popular interest. We got a full experience of Beijing in July, among the throngs of people, with the heat and humidity, the wonder of the world's largest public square, what is surely the largest palace complex in the world, and perhaps the largest mausoleum building.

The Forbidden City was, and is, only the latest, greatest example of the grandiose and enormous imperial style of palaces that the Chinese emperors had constructed during many dynasties. This started with the Qin emperor 2,200 years ago, and continued through the major dynasties—the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming, until the last dynasty, the Qing, that lasted from 1644 to 1912. Apart from the entrance to the Forbidden City on the North end of the square, the most prominent central monuments are the Revolutionary Heroes' Memorial and the Tomb of Mao Zedong. Many thousands of people were in the line winding around the square's periphery to the mausoleum entrance where they would get a few seconds to see the ultra-preserved body of the late Chairman.

We talk about how we “swam” the great wall on our last day in Beijing. We and all the other tourists braved torrential downpours on our ascent and descent of the wall. Most of us got pretty wet, but by the end of the day when we went to the airport for departure we were more than dry enough to get on a full Airbus bound for Lanzhou and a drier climate. Our flight included, and let's not be surprised, another meal—the requisite “rice or noodle” dinner including a roll, a “secret” sauce packet, and some fruit, plus coffee or tea—green tea or black, please?

LANZHOU

Our flight approach to Lanzhou reminded us that China is predominantly an agricultural land. The farms of Gansu province are neatly laid out in semi-rectangular patterns on the plains and in narrow valleys between the loess hills, with evidence of irrigation systems and footpaths for those who cultivate various grain and vegetable crops. Beans, greens, melons, and fruit are grown in abundance, and later from the highway we could see sheep, shepherds, and sheep folds here and there. In that part of China the fruit orchards are usually covered with a stone bed that serves to conserve both soil and moisture. The stones are rounded river stones and large gravel. The farmers pull back the stones section by section annually to cultivate and fertilize the ground underneath. Then they replace the stones. That is one of the more successful conservation strategies in a region of sometimes fierce weather. That same weather probably kills many fruit trees.

So we had arrived in Lanzhou at their small airport located one hour's drive from the city at the terminus of an ultra-modern four-lane expressway. Our hosts from the LUT International Office were ready to meet us. Wang Yuying (Cindy) and Mr. Tang Nian Yao were there. After we loaded our luggage and ourselves into a short-haul, rented bus, we set off for the city and enjoyed seeing the new sights in that boundary land between the loess plateau and the Gobi desert, only a few hours' drive northeast of the Tibetan frontier. We saw farms, sheep, brick kilns galore, and lots of arid land and hills. The hills showed terraces evidencing reforestation programs. Gansu Province gets comparatively little rainfall. It is the Chinese center for the aerospace and nuclear industries, especially in the western part of that elongated province. Heavy industry and petrochemicals are part of their commercial interests as well.

Surprisingly our bus driver took us into Lanzhou on the road a short distance north of the river, so that we traveled on a secondary, or at best tertiary, road and entered the city through the western outskirts, which were obviously not the center of commerce or business, yet we saw many people living on or outside the economic margins. Once we arrived in the city and passed into some high-density population and business areas, the living standards increased as we approached the central districts near the river. Why did the bus driver not take us into the city on the regular road? Was it to avoid a toll? The route did not qualify as a shortcut as it involved another half hour of driving, dodging other large vehicles, pedestrians, automobiles, and potholes of many sizes. But there was some serendipity to the experience, but mostly a reminder that, according to government statistics, approximately 60% of the Lanzhou population lives at the subsistence level. It is not an unusual statistic for many locations in China, though the percentages also vary greatly—some are much better, some are worse.

Eventually we got to Langongping Road and the entrance to our host campus. The Lanzhou University of Technology maintains an on-campus hotel—actually under separate management—which was our home for the next five nights. After getting unloaded and assigned to rooms, and after getting some instruction on the hot water schedule and the time for breakfast, we settled in for our first night. The next day, Sunday, was to be a day of orientation and preparation for the conference.

In contrast to the prolonged negotiations of May 2004 that began our cooperation with LUT, a Sunday morning meeting in July 2005 accomplished the purpose of discussing the cooperative relationship between LUT and Howard Payne University as

well. HPU Vice President for Academic Affairs Donnie G. Auvenshine was present to negotiate and to sign a letter of agreement.

The other negotiations involved primarily an update on the current LUT – ETBU cooperative relationship and discussions about the possibility of an ETBU band tour visit in Lanzhou. Subsequently the discussions have yielded the plan to include Lanzhou and a neighboring city in the band tour for three concerts.

The conference opened with the plenary session featuring President Hui of the Lanzhou University of Technology, President Riley of East Texas Baptist University, and Vice-President Auvenshine of Howard Payne University. This conference had all the earmarks of an event carefully planned and executed by an institution experienced with major meetings. The large conference hall had seating suitable for extending sitting and listening, and water bottles were provided to keep all conferees hydrated in the arid climate and 4,500 foot altitude. A well-coordinated public address system and two video cameras were coordinated to provide communication and to record the plenary session's progress. We have learned that the Chinese universities do a very thorough job with public relations, providing press releases and video footage for same-day broadcast of special events. Photographs and news reports are also posted to the World Wide Web each day, so that we were able to review the reports—at least the photographs—on our return to the U.S. We do not do so well with the Chinese-language news releases and narratives!

The disciplinary sessions were a challenge to organize because of the variety of sessions and the great number of Chinese presenters. We were surprised that in many sessions the Chinese professors' graduate students delivered the papers. So we had the opportunity to meet those students, but were disappointed not to meet more of the professors. With the university on summer break, however, it was understandable that many professors would be away from campus. Our hosts had the large book of proceedings ready for distribution before the conference started. Every participant's paper was included in the six-pound volume!

Our entire experience in Lanzhou was an adventure involving continuing adjustment to jet-lag, introductions to new, regional ethnic food dishes, two city touring experiences, many opportunities to make friends with members of the LUT community, and opportunities to visit and dine with ETBU students who were visiting LUT as part of another traveling group. Lanzhou lies on a parallel of latitude similar to that of Las Vegas, Nevada, or Tulsa, Oklahoma, but at an altitude closer to that of Denver, Colorado. We found that the heat, altitude, and drier air conspired in the afternoons to sap us of energy, but the July heat anywhere in China will do just that. Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Lanzhou during our stay was the clear sky. Usually one can expect industrial pollution to block the sky out; could it be the sky is generally clearer during the summer months?

Our visit to Lanzhou and LUT was capped by a large banquet at a prominent downtown restaurant where beef noodle soup is a specialty. For Lanzhou, “beef noodle” is much the same as “red beans and rice” is for New Orleans. But beef noodle with all its variations in the width and shape of noodles is just one of many dishes distinctive to Lanzhou and the region. Mutton dishes also abound. In western China sheep have been an economic mainstay for Chinese and the Hue Muslims, among other ethnic minority groups, for centuries. So there is plenty of mutton and wool: “grab mutton” is mutton

cooked to wonderful tenderness on the bone, which the diner grabs from a platter, and wool is a common fiber in clothing and tapestries. During our banquet we watched an expert demonstration of noodle-making by one of their chefs who must have apprenticed many years to perfect the technique of doubling and stretching the noodle dough and slapping in on the shaping board. It was culinary art to be sure.

THE NIGHT TRAIN TO XIAN

Our departure from Lanzhou was by overnight train bound for Xian. “Soft-sleeper.” Indeed! Certainly softer than the hard sleeper it was, and in an air-conditioned coach we were comfortable, though for a time overnight there was no cool air, and our compartments got hot. Train travel in China, at least for foreign visitors, is a comfortable and relatively inexpensive way to see the country. Of course our overnight train passed through many miles of terrain we could not see, but we did get some good views the next morning before our arrival at Xian. Our group traveled four persons to a cabin and enjoyed the opportunity to visit until sleepiness took over.

XIAN

Xian is one of the oldest capitals of China, being near several older kingdom capitals and, as Xianyang, the imperial capital under the First Emperor, Qin Shihuangdi, during the third century B.C. It was also the site of the Tang Dynasty capital called Chang’an, the world’s most populous city 800 years ago and perhaps the most sophisticated city in the world of its time. Its present population is approximately four million persons.

The primary site of interest is the tomb area of the First Emperor. Since 1974 when the ranks of the terra cotta soldiers were discovered about ten miles east of the city, the site has been built up to include several immense buildings that cover several excavation pits and allow viewing access for many thousands of people per day. Another major building of granite construction houses several collections of antiquities plus the bronze chariots and carts found in another pit. We were surprised that the former ban on photographs had been lifted at the excavations; a decade ago photography was strictly forbidden. Our tour guide made sure we had an opportunity to purchase a souvenir book personally autographed by one of the farmers who discovered the statue soldiers while digging a well in 1974. We visited the exhibits, watched an interesting reenactment of the creation and destruction of the terra cotta soldiers at a cinema-in-the-round, visited the large souvenir shop, and dined at the large tourist restaurant on the grounds. Among a great variety of other things, the shop had terra cotta soldier identical replicas, about six feet tall, on sale for shipment anywhere in the world. The price was tall, too, but let’s just say that for about \$6,000 we could have had our own soldier on the ETBU campus. Such replicas are available in full or smaller sizes at many places in China.

Nearby the tomb district is the Huaqing Spring, a favorite artesian well used to supply the imperial bath house constructed for the emperor’s favored concubine. The park around the spring has been added to over the years, and most of the buildings around the spring have been built only during the last 25 years, though they usually look much older, and of course some are. It is a beautiful site richly covered in trees, shrubs, and flowers, with small pavilions and many garden areas to delight the eye and invite rest. The spring was the site of the famous “Xian Incident” of 1936 when General Zhang

Xueliang captured Ch'iang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi), the “Generalissimo” of Nationalist China in a risky attempt to force him to agree to a “united front” involving the Guomindang and the Communists in an alliance to defeat the Japanese instead of fighting each other. Halfway up the mountain behind the Huaqing spring we could see the small building marking the location of the cave where Jiang had fled Zhang's troops in the winter cold and darkness, and where they found him shivering in his pajamas, so goes the story.

Our tour included a quick stop at the Banpo Village, a Neolithic site that has been acknowledged in recent history books. There has been some controversy over whether the site is legitimately Neolithic, or even legitimate at all. It seems that a renovation to the major exposition buildings was halted sometime recently. It seems China is not promoting Banpo as much now.

The very large exposition park around the Big Goose Pagoda provided us an interesting visit of historical exhibits on Tang Dynasty art and culture and shops where one could purchase Chinese art and other artifacts. Several members of our group engaged in some hard bargaining that day and came away with some “pretty good” deals, though the vendors must have had a “pretty good” idea of the actual selling prices from the start. Both sides did well. The pagoda got its name from the monks' story about a flock of geese that appeared just in time to keep the Buddhist monks from starving during the period when Buddhism had recently entered that region of China. The monk Tripitaka had brought Buddhism to China. His large bronze statue graces the square outside the gates of the walled Big Goose Pagoda Park.

Our evening at the splendid Tang Dynasty Dinner Theater was a treat for everyone and left a strong impression on the first-time visitors to Xian. The show itself blends ancient and modern music and display—ancient because of the traditional instruments superbly played, and modern because the performers, particularly the dancers, are interpreting themes echoing from the Tang period almost 1,000 years past, and we have seen some of the dance moves before! But the rich, overwhelming colors, the performers' skill on traditional instruments, and the singing belong purely to Xian and its traditions. How many societies can present such a rich and varied cultural performance, and so well, drawing on the sounds, movements, and impressions already a millennium old? Beyond being a wonderful, purely relaxing end to a long day of touring, the show was in some sense a highlight of our trip to the Middle Kingdom.

There are stories of our group members' bargaining exploits in the Muslim market at Xian, but you will not find them here.

HONG KONG

From Xian we flew to Hong Kong, there to disembark at the new international airport on Lantau Island—actually mostly on an extensive landfill on the island's north side. Our CITS guide and coach were present to transport us to the BP International House hotel on the north boundary of Kowloon Park. We finally recognized the association of the hotel with international Boy Scouting. The thirteenth floor scouting shop, the large portrait of Lord Baden-Powell (thus the “BP” in the hotel name), and the wonderful scouting symbol and compass rose in the main lobby flooring identified the hotel as both a center and a memorial to the memory of the founder of the Boy Scouts in Britain just over a century ago. Scouting is popular in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong is a great place to finish a trip to China. It's very Chinese, but it's also still very British and western, though the "western" seems dominant. The status of Hong Kong as a Special Administrative Region means the central government of the People's Republic of China allows Hong Kong its liberty within certain limits for the fifty years after 1997. The old fears of Hong Kong losing its character, though well-founded, fall away to the understanding that by 2047 Hong Kong and China will have evolved in ways none of us can predict or comprehend. But Hong Kong promises to be an intense, thriving, humming emporium linking numerous distant places and influences together. What an exciting city! The weekend evening laser and fireworks shows in the harbor attest to Hong Kong's claim to be an economic powerhouse and a captivating place to visit. The visiting millions would be evidence enough, though.

We followed our travel agent's advice to have a morning coach tour of Hong Kong Island. It was good advice. Our guide gave us a taste of local color and legend in her travelogue, and we got to visit Victoria Peak, the Stanley Markets, and Aberdeen Harbor in the course of an impressive driving tour up the northern side of HK Island, down the other, and back through the tunnel to City Center.

There are stories of our group members' amazing bargaining exploits on return trips to the Stanley Markets, but you will not find them here.

Guangzhou

Most of our tour members returned to the United States on August 1, while nine of us continued to Guangzhou for a visit with our partner college, the Guangdong Teacher's College of Foreign Languages and Arts. Guangzhou and Guangdong Province have been among the leaders of China's economic modernization and rise to global prominence as a developing nation. It is tempting to overstate China's development, but the unchangeable fact of the size of the country, its population, and its global economic influence demand grand statements. And while millions of people remain poor, millions have also raised themselves out of poverty to join the urban working and middle classes. One can see this no better than in a city like Guangzhou. Like Shanghai and other eastern and southern coastal cities, Guangzhou has made enormous changes in its urban infrastructure. It looks modern. The city has new boulevards, freeways, and many new buildings. A lot of the older sections of the inner city have been replaced. The impression of overwhelming numbers of bicycles and congested urban thoroughfares twenty years ago has been replaced by that of an aggressive, fast-paced, progressive automobile culture. More people, businesses, and institutions can afford the automobiles and the fuel to operate them. But it is still nowhere close to that of the U. S.

Due to increasing enrollments and even without a merger with an arts teaching institution, the teacher's college outgrew its campus several years ago. The arts school has its own campus. The GDTCFLA administration is planning for a new campus as part of a grand-scale university relocation and reorganization project involving the colleges and universities in Guangzhou. To the east a huge tract has been devoted to constructing university sites for a combined 100,000 or more students. Our friends provided a tour of the massive campus, and we were impressed.

Our visit to Guangzhou allowed us to reaffirm our long-term relationship and friendship with a valuable academic partner school. We enjoyed visiting with over a

dozen teachers who had come to ETBU for a semester or a year since 1990 and with the senior administrators. Our president and vice-president for academic affairs discussed the continuing relationship and the prospects for a return visit in 2006 with the ETBU symphonic band. As part of a band tour to China, that visit has been postponed until 2007, but the opportunity to come with such a large group of talented students excited a lot of people. We will look forward to that trip another year.

The Guangzhou visit proved fruitful and encouraged our administrators and faculty to continue nurturing our friendship with the Guangdong Teacher's College of Foreign Languages and Arts. Our Guangzhou visiting group departed Guangzhou by train, and after another night in Hong Kong, returned to the U.S. on August 3, 2005.