

# **Traveldiary Brigitte & Heinz**

**China incl. Hong Kong, back to Thailand and Singapore**



## **Chapter 15**

**September 2006 - November 2006**

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## Singapore: Street Light Up Festivals in September

After we had left southern Africa, we arrived back in [Singapore](#) on Sept. 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006. Now we appreciated the lively streets even more than before, where nobody seemed to go home early and there was no worry about security. We enjoyed being surrounded by locals of all walks of life when we were eating in the food-stalls and restaurants. As common in Asian cities, most of the people eat out three times a day. In Singapore 70% of the population never eat at home and the other 30% cook at home on occasions only. Consequently, many rental apartments are not even equipped with a kitchen.



As the hotel we had stayed at the last two times, was now undergoing renovations, we found good lodging in the small Kerbau Hotel in Little India. Most days we were still busy writing our African travel story, but at night we enjoyed the three "festivals of light" that were all held just around this time.

The quarters of the different ethnic groups were decorated and illuminated for around a month. The Muslims celebrated "Hari Raya Puasa" mainly in the family. What was very obvious however, were the thousands of additional shops and markets under huge tents that sometimes covered entire streets. Many more food hawkers sold delicacies, but as this festival is held during the fasting month Ramadan, the Muslims took the food home to feast after prayers at sunset.



The streets of the Muslim quarter were illuminated nicely, but moderately in comparison to Little India. Here they celebrated the "Deepavali Festival" and the streets were decorated with impressive illuminated arches covering several kilometers of road in colourful animated lights. Here only a few small lanes were closed to traffic for 6 weeks and covered with tents to convert them into more shops. "More Shops" is anyway the most widely seen sign in this city!

The mid autumn festival, also called Moon festival celebrated by the Chinese, offered yet another picture. They had modelled big flowers and animals in iron frames covered in colourful satin cloths and illuminated from inside. The most impressive models were pagodas or temples or huge dragons. Some were up to 12m high and maybe twice as long. Various animals or fairies did move their wings. These ornaments decorated the flower beds in the middle of the road and pedestrian overpasses.

It was a wonderful sight by day and even more so at night. On the full moon night of Oct. 6, the festival peaked in a lantern parade.



## Hong Kong: the former crown colony

We left for [Hong Kong](#) on October 10<sup>th</sup> 2006 on a cheap Jet Star flight (€ 75). On the way from the modern airport into the city center, we saw how much the once untouched island of Lantau had been developed. The city itself hadn't changed much since the handover to China 1997. The main difference is that Hong Kong is now being flooded with tourists from mainland China. During the "Golden Week" holiday beginning of October, up to 5 million. Chinese crossed the border every day.



China gave Hong Kong the status of a "special administrative region (SAR)" and it was warranted to retain its free market economy, as well as its social and legal system for 50 years. Inflation which had been soaring above 10% annually during English times, could meanwhile be brought under control.

Surely; some more skyscrapers had been added to the outskirts and some of them looked really posh. The old apartments in the city center on the other hand, didn't seem to have been maintained well and many looked really old and dirty - something we hadn't seen anywhere in Singapore.

In many small side lanes we found cramped markets where fish and crabs were sold alive. The entire downtown area was very cramped, which was probably due to the times when Hong Kong was "owned" by the British as everybody wanted to do business and live on British land in those days and not on land leased from the Chinese.

We were delighted that Ivy, a travel-crazy teacher we had met 1 ½ years ago in Micronesia, took the time to meet us on two evenings. Meanwhile she had already visited 96 countries. She told us many things, which we otherwise wouldn't have noticed and she took us on a ride with Hong Kong's legendary two storey trams. Later, we got to taste some local food and then she showed us some scenic spots where we pictured the illuminated skyline.

We learned from Ivy that nowadays most women choose to work and as we noticed also in Singapore, they rather employ somebody to look after their children. "Today" she said, "they have Philippinas".

As Chinese embassies were closed for an entire week due to the Chinese National day on Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, we applied for the visa to enter mainland China here in Hong Kong. Meanwhile we went sight seeing and took the 100 years old Swiss cable car up to the peak for a fine view of the city before sunset. Because there was quite a bit of haze in the air, visibility was not at its best, but once it got dark, lights appeared brightly from the city of 7 Million. people below us. Also Singapore had had lots of haze due to fires laid in Indonesia, but we didn't know where this smog suddenly came from.



## China: a transforming country

Now we were preparing to visit [China](#). We had bought a big Lonely Planet guide book, 5 cm thick. First we read about the country's troubled history, which is hard to describe in short. Documented from as early as 4000 BC, millennia of various dynasties fought and succeeded each other, often changing social structures and philosophies of live dramatically. As everywhere, the emperors put much suffering on the people in their desire to remain in power and to enlarge their territories.

Well-established trading routes existed along the Silk Road to India, Persia and the Mediterranean as of the end of the 7th century. Initially, most emperors had a relatively open attitude towards visiting European traders that visited China from about the 11th century. This changed only in the early 18th century, when the

Portuguese and later the British engaged in the trade of opium that made several million of Chinese addicted to the drug.

Therefore, the Chinese Qialong, ruler from 1736-1795 banned trade with Opium. This resulted in two opium wars with British troops defending their big source of income. As the Chinese lost, they had to give away Hong Kong, Fujian and eastern Zhejiang and later parts of Shanghai. The British now happily continued trading opium until 1949, when the communist party "liberated" all the occupied mainland cities.

Hong Kong Island became British in 1841 after the first opium war, the peninsula of Kowloon 1860 after the second opium war and in 1898 a 99-year lease was granted to the British for the New Territories north of Kowloon. When that lease expired, the British handed back all of Hong Kong to the Chinese government.

Back to the 19th century: the increased presence of missionaries fuelled further hatred against the "foreign devils". At the same time, the leader of the "Taiping movement" believed that he was the brother of Jesus Christ, after being in contact with Missionaries. His supporters hoped therefore to install the Christian ideology in China. In 1850 the Taiping Rebellion supporting this aim erupted and cost tens of millions of people their lives, before being extinct 1864.

This was followed by the dark story of the last two emperors and the proclamation of the provisional republican government of China by Sun Yatsun in 1911. By 1920 the Kuomintang (KMT) Nationalist Party had emerged as the dominant political force in eastern China. The main opposition was the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). A year after Sun Yatsen's death in 1925 the KMT revealed that it favoured a capitalist state supported by a military dictatorship and massacred more than 5'000 communists in Shanghai. So the CCP started to fight back and the power struggle hadn't been solved before the Japanese invaded all of China in 1937, tolerated by the KMT government that was more worried about communist influence.



During Japanese occupation, hundred thousands if not millions of Chinese civilians were gruesomely murdered and massacred during their "burn all, loot all, kill all" campaign. Following the Japanese defeat and the end of WWII, the Americans attempted unsuccessfully to negotiate a settlement between CCP and KMT. Finally, on Oct. 1<sup>st</sup>, 1949 the CCP succeeded and Mao Zedong proclaimed the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The leaders of the KMT fled to the island of Formosa (Taiwan) taking with them the entire gold reserves of the country and what was left of Marine and Navy.

The PRC began its days as a bankrupt nation, but there was great enthusiasm among the people. Within 4 years they managed to turn around the legacy of economic mismanagement left by the KMT and improved production back to post-war levels. In the cities the communists eradicated the slums, rehabilitated millions of opium addicts and eliminated child- and slave labour.

Between 1958-60 China moved on the "Great Leap Forward". To drive success further, the communists tried to abolish money and all private property and all farmers had to produce steel in their back yards instead of concentrating on farming. This resulted in a massive food shortage that the government tried to cover up instead of seeking foreign assistance. An estimated 30-60 million Chinese starved to death, which forced Mao to resign as head of state, even though he remained chairman of the party. His extreme views isolated him within his party, the international community and finally even his Russian brothers left him alone. Mao desperately tried to grasp power again. A struggle which led to the dark chapter of the Cultural Revolution.



After Mao's death 1976 the party's official line soon surfaced that Mao was 70% right, 30% wrong in his leadership.

After his death the totalitarian practices of the communist government were significantly modified concentrating on a "4 modernisation programme: agriculture/industry/science and defence. Slowly they increased contact with the capitalist economies in the west. As the party began to lose its ideological grip, by 1978 demands for a 5<sup>th</sup> modernisation were heard: democracy. 1986 Hu Yaobang was sidelined for his support of these demands. The mass memorial, following Hu's death in 1989 turned into a popular peaceful rebellion as hundreds of thousands of students gathered on Tianamen square in Beijing. Deng Xiaoping sanctioned the forcible dispersal of the demonstrators that killed several hundreds. That was the death knell of socialist ideology in China. Since then, the party has relied mainly on patriotism for ideology.

In 1993 President Deng Xiaoping frankly proclaimed that "to get rich is glorious" and began to trim down state owned industries, leading to mass unemployment. The new doctrine is now "*the modern interpretation of communism/Marxism/Leninism and Maoism*" and we were wondering what this means and how much the country had changed since our last visit in 1991.

## Guilin

On Oct. 15<sup>th</sup> 2006, we took a speedboat from Hong Kong to Shenzhen where we boarded a plane to [Guilin](#). Here we got a first glimpse of modern China. It is quite a big city and to us the most striking feature was how wide the roads were! All mainroads were between 60-100 meters wide, with the center consisting of three lanes each direction for cars, buses and trucks. On both sides there was a 5-6 m wide road for bicycles and moto's, separated on each side and then the pedestrian area that could be between 5-10 m wide. Traffic was surprisingly quiet as probably 80% of scooters run on electric engines. Taxis and buses usually were running on natural gas instead of petrol and the fleet of town buses was amazingly modern and contrary to our previous visit 15 years ago (1991), the habit of using the horn constantly had become very rare, just as the unpleasant habit of people spitting. The roads were absolutely clean and constantly swept.

Endless shops lined the streets and the people were dressed more modern than those of Hong Kong. In the middle of down town, there was a big area for pedestrians only and as on the pavements, it didn't feel cramped at all even though there were many shoppers around.



Many buildings in town were brand new and there were lots of construction sites modernizing the city even more. There were still a few side alleys left, usually with older buildings, where small workshops and food stalls served their customers on the pavement. In a way, it's a pity that they are all disappearing, because that's where part of the social life is, where people stop to chat. The new buildings, of course have a clean and sterile shop front and nobody lingers in front of them. Also most of the street-markets disappeared and are now replaced by air-conditioned supermarkets.

Many of the remaining old buildings, shops or apartments looked as if their time would come soon. They will eventually disappear behind a wall that's put up around every construction site.

Once the government decided that an old building will be replaced or has to give way to a new road, the occupants get notice and have to move out. As not everybody is delighted about the news and the new dwelling offered (usually at the outskirts of town) some tenants take their time moving out. As soon as a party does so, workers make the flat uninhabitable immediately for fear that somebody else will occupy that apartment and as a visible sign to those that still live in the neighbouring flats. In front of such a half inhabited building, the towns stinky waste-trucks all parked overnight. We wonder whether this aimed at chasing the last die-hard's out or whether they've been there for long...

When we decided to visit "7 star park" as recommended by the tourist brochures, we didn't quite know what its main attraction was. Brigitte hoped to see some of the karst hills for which Guilin is famous. There was a hefty entrance fee and what we saw must be the quintessence of a Chinese tourist attraction - just the way the locals like it. Yes, there was nature: some rocks, ponds, a river and a cave. Everything was supplemented by manmade attractions like engravings on the rocks, monuments, fountains and waterfalls. The cave was

illuminated by all kinds of colours and on every spot there were platforms, so the tourists could get pictured in front of each scenic spot. Then there were some women dressed in hilltribe attire that wanted to pose with tourists for a fee. As this might not be enough, a small zoo was also added. Except for the big Panda, all animals were kept in depressingly small cages. At least all animals were very well fed, otherwise it wouldn't have been possible to sit on the big tiger, in order to get a more dramatic shot.

Well, we were more fascinated walking around the ordinary streets and parks of Guilin, which were more interesting to us. There was a small lake and two big pagodas on its shore. When we passed again at night (it got dark at 5 pm), they were illuminated in gold and silver. There was also a bridge and footpath along Li river that were illuminated colourfully. We passed by a mainroad again around 7 pm and the police was just closing traffic on 4 lanes, which meant half of the road had to be enough.

Within 20 minutes only, market-stalls were brought in, seemingly out of nowhere and hawkers were ready to sell. Now there was a stretch of 1 km of souvenir and food stalls, all properly illuminated with neon lights. They didn't need to wait long for shoppers browsing the souvenirs and also more useful items.

After two days filled with new impressions, we headed for the countryside. We took a bus that drove us through a scenic landscape with many small karst hills. For an hour we clutched to the window, trying to penetrate the mist that was hiding many rows of those narrow high rock hills that have inspired painters for centuries.

During this ride we realized how big the differences are between city and country side in China. Here everything is more simple and fewer people have their own transport and if they own something, it's more likely a bicycle or a stinky small kind of tractor, than an electric scooter or even a car.



## Yangshuo

65 km down the road, [Yangshuo](#), on a river between karst hills, that once started as a legendary Backpacker's hangout, has changed a lot in recent years. This was the only place in China, we had visited already 15 years ago, but we didn't recognize it anymore. Once upon a time (1990), there had been about 50-100 westerners staying there overnight and a few tour groups, western and Chinese came visiting during the day. We were lucky to have avoided the holiday of the Golden week starting Oct. 1, when all of China had a week off. Now things had gotten quiet again - so we were told. However, what we saw here, was anything else than "quiet"! Now a few hundred westerners, often tour groups stay in the hundreds of hotels. The big majority, however are Chinese tour groups. We can only estimate how many local tourists are flooding Yangshuo every day by counting about 200 tourist boats bringing up to 250 passengers each. This would result in 50'000 people every day but one local told us, we hadn't seen all the boats.



We read in the newspaper that Guilin received 12.5 million. Chinese and 1 million overseas tourists in 2005. To increase that capacity even more, the government decided to build more hotels and upgrade Guilin's airport even though it's been done already. Until 2010 the government wants to create an additional 250'000 jobs in tourism alone in Guilin. These figures seem unbelievable if we compare them with e.g. New Zealand's 2 million. visitors in 2004 - and NZ was packed with tourists throughout the country. But how can only 1 place digest so many visitors?

Once more LP travel guide got the point when stating: "China's tourism is in a state of SUPERNOVA!"

If you look beyond the endless shops and souvenir stalls, Yangshuo is not ugly. It still is a big village with real Chinese life - traditional as well as modern. Big battery driven golf-caddy-like vehicles were used as a means

of local transport and to herd around up to 20 tourists in the same vehicle. Even the police used such an environmentally friendly car. The touristiest streets are for pedestrians only and they still get extended as new buildings are added. Most are constructed in a modern style but most reflect traditional architecture.

We rented bicycles and after passing construction sites for dozens of big hotels and apartment blocks for several kilometers, we finally reached the unspoilt countryside. Out there we found rice paddies, where farmers harvested rice still the same way we had seen 15 years ago. Old women led their water-buffaloes to the river and fishermen used their bamboo rafts to catch dinner. All this was framed by idyllic karst formations all around us. It's so terribly beautiful, we really can't blame all these others wanting to see it too!



On this first trip out to the fields, the farmers were greeting us very friendly with "Ni Hau" (Hello (G'day Mate)). The second time, when we pedalled more along the river, most locals were greeting us with an enthusiastic "Hello Bamboo" (raft for rent) on the way out and with "Hello water" (water for sale) on the way back. We met many of their relatives also in town, calling out "Hello Banana", "Hello postcard", "Hello

Tour" or "Hello flute" - the latter one followed by a perfectly played melody of "Frère Chaque"...

We barely managed to learn a few words of Chinese, but couldn't remember any of their approx. 47'000 characters.

Most restaurants catering for overseas tourists are located along what was now named "West(ern) Street" and that's where also most young Chinese go to get a taste of western food and western life. Today, there are certainly more Chinese than western tourists ordering typical backpacker's breakfast consisting of 'Banana Pancake' or 'Yoghurt and Müesli'. As traditional Chinese fare is freshly prepared but served real quickly, some restaurant owners got complaints from Chinese customers, because the ordered western style meal was not served quick enough. One owner explains to them that the preparation of western food does take more time and if they want to get a quick western feed, they shall go to KfC and so his customers usually get suddenly more patient.

Western food is "in" but they haven't heard of our habit of eating one course after another. In many restaurants everything is served at the same time and from the soup to the ice-cream onwards to the salad, to the Spaghetti and back to ice-cream, it's eaten all across the courses.

We were amused by the Chinese tourists who loved to mingle with westerners. Some liked to secretly picture us, others asked straight forward (with or without English words), whether we would pose with them. In some cases they wanted to be arm in arm - Brigitte with the man, Heinz with the woman. This happened quite a few times also in other places later and we must be in several photo albums now. Well; 95% of the cameras used were digital cameras!



With the opening of China, the tourist money F.E.C. had been abolished together with inflated tourist prices for train- and bus-transport. Today, everybody pays the same; i.e. Chinese pay the foreigners price as well, not vice versa!

Therefore, flying is now often possible at the same price or even cheaper than taking the train and a 20 hour train journey can be reduced to about one hour by plane.

So, we took a taxi back through the karst hills to Guilin airport. The driver chose a new road that was almost like a freeway, bypassing Guilin city. Suddenly, he almost stopped because there was a farmer who dried his

wheat on the road's left lane. Unbelievable, but he probably felt it was his right, because that's what he had always done before they converted the old rattly road into a highway.

After a couple of kilometers, about 30 junior high school students came cycling towards us. There would have been a special cycling path for each direction but as the entrance (anyway to the wrong direction for them), was blocked by a parked car, they simply entered the freeway head on.

## Xiamen

The check-in for the flight with one of the state owned airlines was very speedy. Our destination was [Xiamen](#)



on the east coast facing Taiwan. It's a big modern city and divided into various "sections". In some sections most buildings were a few years old, in others most buildings were brand new. Other sections again were just before completion. In others again, construction of new buildings was well under way, in others it had just started and in other areas again, old buildings were being prepared for demolition. In a few remaining areas there was still traditional Chinese life and the buildings there had a reprieve until whenever.

Especially along the water, there were many modern high rise buildings with plenty of space for pavement and separate lanes for bicycles and scooters, cars and buses. Also this town had very wide streets. This is probably the advantage of a one party system that coordinates and builds the necessary infrastructure projects without too many unnecessary compromises and delays.

It seemed the long pedestrian zone had only recently been introduced, as that road was closed to traffic with temporary barriers only and road marks were still in place.

At night many apartment- or office buildings had their edges illuminated with animated changing colours. Entire skyscrapers had their façades projected with changing geometrical forms or pictures, similar to a giant PC screen saver. We wonder how they were generated.

There were many large parks around the city, one even had some canoe's on an artificial lake. Another night, we passed a park with a giant fountain "dancing" as a "water ballet" to classical music and illuminated by changing mellow light.



With the help of the word "ditu" and five very nice employees that didn't speak any English, we managed to buy a map and locate ourselves. Even though this map was of 2006 and all streets were nicely marked in Latin characters as well, it was not always easy to find the way. As the entire town is being newly built at lightening speed, maps seem to be out of date by the time they leave the print shop. Sometimes a road was blocked or didn't exist anymore due to a construction site and sometimes we found brand new roads that weren't in the map yet. Such was the one built on pillars standing in the shore water with several exits built on a concrete platform. The lanes were bending out over the sea and back inland. This way it connected the "fly-over" with the road on the ground level like a freeway exit. They had a smart system of leading roads above each other to create more space for the ever growing traffic. We had seen junctions with up to five levels criss-crossing each other.



Xiamen's top tourist attraction was the island called "**Gulang Yu**", only 5 minutes away by ferry. It was mainly popular with Chinese tour groups that typically followed their guide who held up a flag. The most pleasant thing was that the island of about 1,5x2,5km was completely free of

traffic - except for a few electric 'golf caddy-buses'. There were no high rise buildings but a few left-over's of European colonial villas, some of them restored, others crumbling away. Most buildings on the island hosted

tourist shops and restaurants and a few monuments, rocks and manmade tourist attractions were positioned in a way allowing tourists to picture themselves in front of it.

As in the rest of Asia, we had seen couples here on "photo-safari" for their wedding in order to get a nice photo album and video. Together with a photographer, a camera man and maybe some technical assistants, they roam around various scenic places without wedding-guests. The bride wears a lot of make-up and a white wedding gown but today even for such an occasion thongs are acceptable also in China. The groom sometimes wore rather casual dress.

For us it was time to go on. Contrary to earlier times, city- and intercity buses leave on schedule even if half empty. They don't wait until they have loaded about twice their capacity until leaving as they did in earlier times. In a pleasant air conditioned bus, we drove north for three hours on a freeway. We passed many smaller and bigger towns that all offered the same picture: lots of construction sites. Between them were many rice paddies and vegetable fields. Only very few houses were made of adobe bricks with old type saddle roofs of stone tiles, all the others looked modern.

## Fuzhou

Now we arrived in [Fuzhou](#) (say Foo-zow), a 6 million. city that was not on the tourist trail at all. Maybe because of this, we encountered neither beggars nor touts.

In most big Chinese cities, there was no real budget accommodation available anymore. However, quite often 2-5 star hotels offered discounts of up to 70% for last minute bookings through tourist offices and on top of that cheap rate, the 15% service charge that applied to the full rate, was also waived. This time we ended up in a 4 star hotel, paying 318 Yuan (€ 32) per night including breakfast; instead of 820+15% (=€ 95). In comparison; Youth Hostels charged sometimes € 45 in a plain double room and they never gave discounts, because they always filled up, as people think they must be cheap. In the Fuzhou 4 star hotel we were of course surrounded by rather wealthy people. The vast majority of them was Chinese who tend not to show off their wealth as obvious as rich westerners or Indians would. It was interesting what the hotel served for breakfast. There were a few western items like toast, cereal, bacon and eggs, but the Chinese guests were digging into Dumplings, Wonton, noodles, vegetables, meat and lots of things we didn't know what they were.



Of course we enjoyed the posh room with a view from the 18th floor, but we admit we felt a bit out of place when the porter handled our backpacks with white gloves on the golden trolley and the waitress in uniform pampered us on the breakfast buffet. As soon as the slightest sign of a question mark appeared on our faces, some English speaking staff member immediately appeared on our side, ready to help (and sneak in our a..). In future we made sure we stuck to 2 star places that still cost between 180-300 Yuan (€ 18-30), even if that meant we had to come by with staff that spoke Chinese only. To overcome this obstacle gave us much more satisfaction and was fun anyway.

The very same that we've said about the process of re-building the entire city in the previous places, also applies to Fuzhou!

A few things were special about this place though:

- Around the pedestrian area was an intact quarter of 16th century Ming Dynasty style wooden buildings. These looked still beautiful with bended roofs and painted woodwork along a bustling street with many hawkers complimented by the almost compulsory Mc Donalds. Just behind this old quarter, big and modern apartment buildings appeared.
- Here was the only statue of Mao we have seen on this trip. 15 years ago, every village and every town was adorned with at least one Mao statue but not anymore! They all seem to have silently vanished, just as the huge propaganda paroles for the communist party. Nowadays, each square meter of party propaganda has

been replaced with 100 square meters of commercial advertisements, promoting electronics, credit cards, fast-food chains, designer ware etc. Everything a consumer oriented society (should) desire.

- There were many Christian churches in Fuzhou and even one very big monastery (like in Melk/Austria).
- The conversion from ordinary roads into wide alleys was not yet completed and therefore, traffic was more chaotic and hectic here.

## Shanghai

We continued our trip to [Shanghai](#) on a very efficient flight with the state owned carrier "China Eastern". They managed to serve two rounds of drinks and a full meal on a flight that took 70 minutes only and cost 500 Yuan (€ 50).

Surely, the very same that we've said about the process of re-building the entire city in the previous places, also applies to Shanghai, but they build with even more speed, even bigger construction sites. It's certainly a good place to catch the pace and contradictions of modern China. Shanghai is the place with most extremes; positive and negative! So enormously big, so new and beautiful, so clean and shiny day and night, so many flamboyant high rise buildings, but also: so hectic, so much noisy traffic with horns being used constantly and so many undisciplined road users that don't show any respect towards each other, towards road rules and not even towards the police!



The main pedestrian street "Nanjing Lu" is more than one kilometer long and lined with (real) designer ware stores, those expensive ones. As everywhere in the country, shops were open 7 days a week until 10pm. It was very pleasant to stroll along by day and also by night, when many neonlights illuminated the buildings. The only annoyance were a few beggars near tourist attractions that were insistently doing their job, plus the many touts that constantly approached us, trying to lure everyone into their overpriced shops. But the west has introduced its own revenge: the poor Chinese are now also being bothered with Amway and Tupperware parties.

All the other people were extremely friendly and extremely helpful, even though it was often hard to communicate. They went out of their way to assist us if we tried to ask for something and with sign-language, pen and paper we usually managed together. Some would even accompany us to some shops or offices, once they understood what we wanted, explaining the personnel our wish.

You have probably seen pictures of Shanghai with the TV tower that has two round baubles surrounded by skyscrapers of modern architecture on the Pudong side of Huangpu river. The TV tower called "Oriental Pearl" measures 468m. Nearby Jinmao building with 420.5m currently the tallest office building, will soon be overlooked by its neighbour which shall become 70m higher.

Facing this skyline from the opposite side of the river is a front row of what they call "old buildings" consisting of an assortment of neoclassical 1930's European style buildings, formerly used as courts, banks and hotels. That area is called the Bund and stands in stark contrast to

the neon lit skyscrapers that start to spread out just behind them. Everything was of course well lit at night which ever direction you looked.





Many boats offered harbour cruises but some only drove up and down the river showing advertisements on an oversized TV screen of about 10x25m. In Shanghai some skyscrapers didn't waste their façade just for windows and illumination. Even if the building was 150m high, the entire façade was used to project pictures on and quite often also advertisements. That way we got completely puzzled, as we didn't know whether we shall follow the ads on the bypassing boat or on any of those buildings...

Only in 1990 modernisation of Shanghai and the development of the large Pudong area started. Today Pudong is 350 sq km big, even larger than

the original part of the 14 million. city. The reconstruction was explained in detail in the 'Urban Planning Exhibition Mall' that outlined how the government planned to build everything according to a new master plan.

A huge architecture model, about 20x30m showed an area of 20x30km, complete with river and bridges. Different colours outlined which buildings existed already and which ones were to be built. Many special shapes were in the making, often following architectural principles of Feng Shui. The infrastructure and some other projects were being built by the government itself but for others they sought private investors.

As all over China, in this model it was very obvious how it can also bear advantages if a one-party government without too much opposition has the power to decide. For example if a mainroad has to be widened to, let's say: 50-100 m or space for a new railway line is needed; there is no arguing with the tenants of the houses "in the way". They just get notice to move out and a proposition for a new place and compensation. After that, the construction will start swiftly not like in Switzerland, where it would take 15 years of arguing before they even get started and then another 10 to complete! In China, huge projects will be completed within just 2-4 years after their announcement.

During our visit to Shanghai it was announced that the metro network that is currently about 120km long, shall be extended to 400km by 2010 when the [World Expo](#) will be held in the city. As the chosen Expo site is very near the city center, about 18'000 families and 270 businesses have to move. We have seen a picture in the paper that showed how a 16 storey building, 60m high that was only 19 years old, was levelled by a controlled explosion because it had to give way for the Expo.



During the 6 days we stayed, we could witness how quick things change. Every work that was not hidden behind these big advertisement clad walls that usually enclosed construction sites, was normally carried out at night. During the day, we hardly ever saw any trucks on the road because construction material was delivered at night. That's when they also dug open the road to lay cables and canalisation. By the time we passed the site again in the morning, it was usually sealed again with tar or cobble stones. One shop, where we bought some water before going back to the hotel after dinner, didn't exist anymore two days later. By then, the entire 50m long building was flattened.

In the beginning, we didn't find many restaurants in Shanghai, but soon we learned that most just cannot afford prime sites in the basement and therefore are located on the upper floors. After a while, we found that entire shopping centers consisted of six floors with restaurants only. Still, we couldn't choose just any restaurant, because either they didn't have an English menu or their portions were meant to serve 10 people. Eating out in China traditionally is a social event around these typical round tables. Our salvation were those eateries that had a picture-menu and were meant for singles, couples or small groups. Often, they were a bit westernized with Spaghetti, Pizza and Steak on their menu and that's what young Chinese people preferred also here.



Somewhat it was unbelievable: we got the impression the more western and the more expensive a restaurant was, the more it was favoured by young folks. In "normal" places, drinks were being served for around 3-15 Yuan (€ 0.30-1.50). Coffee lounges with cosy sofas and mellow music were very widespread and popular, but they were really overpriced with drinks costing around 25-80 Yuan. At least they usually served (western) food at moderate prices. These coffee lounges were always bustling with young Chinese and even if there were 150 guests, it was an exception to see a westerner in there.

As a stark contrast, the traditional teahouses where old men used to gather, seemed to have disappeared at least in the cities. A few upmarket "boutique tea houses" were now available for those who could afford it. Their main business was to sell luxury tea mix presented in noble tins and most also had one or two beautiful tables, usually made of carved tree trunks. Those who decided to sit down, paid 80 Yuan or more for a pot of tea!

That's one of the contradictions in the Communist People's Republic, where many farmers in the countryside still live on subsistence farming and some earn hardly more than one Yuan an hour.

In a country with such an economic growth that is mainly home-made, even those on the lower end of the salary scale are doing much better than before and most Chinese are excited about the rapid modernisation taking place. Old people less and young people much more, that's normal we guess. The few people we could talk to were all quite happy with the central government, but rather unhappy with the local government because they feel there is much corruption and mismanagement.



We were quite surprised how open and critical the English language newspapers of the central government: "China Daily" and even more the Shanghai government's "Shanghai Daily" were! Surely, there must be some censorship, but it doesn't appear very obvious. In other provinces there is more censorship they said. Even critical reader's letters were being published and there were lots of reports about the growing gap between poor and rich, about executives that were found not guilty too late, about pollution and recycling. Also reports about world news didn't feel censored. Maybe you have already come across CCTV9, the Chinese equivalent to CNN. We cannot judge whether news in Chinese language are just as open, but some people think they are.

## Suzhou

As we continued our trip, we reached our next destination after one hour by train. [Suzhou](#) (say Soo chow) who's population exploded from 50'000 to over 6 million within only 20 years. Never the less, it was a very pleasant city and became Brigitte's favorite - Heinz's favorite remained Xiamen and Shanghai. There was a lot of water in the area around Suzhou, which could be used for cultivation. Numerous canals had been built and many houses stood right on the water. The older town was surrounded by a large rectangular outer canal and many small ones crossed the city center. As it also has many bridges and beautiful gardens, it became known as "Venice of the East" long ago. There were many new buildings in the inner city, but there were not many higher than 4-5 storeys, exceptionwise 12. All the tall new buildings, of which they had many too, had been placed on the outskirts. Almost an exception for China, was that along the oldest part of town,

houses remained small and were renovated and fitted with new technology as air conditioners and solar panels or they even built new houses in the old style. Those standing along the big pedestrianized area housed boutiques which sold the same luxury brands as anywhere else in the country or in the western world. Almost all Chinese dressed modern and especially young ones loved to dress hip and style their hair that was often coloured. The blue Mao-dress is almost extinct and even school-uniforms, if worn at all, represent the spirit of today's modern China and are a far cry away from the Victorian style checkered ones we had seen Down Under. The only traditional thing remaining, were open cut trousers over young children's bums in order to facilitate certain businesses for them...



Apparently, there are close to 20 gardens that can be visited for an entrance fee. Their hallmark was not flowers, but usually big old trees, rocks, water, bridges and pagodas. A few were even listed as 'world cultural heritage' with Unesco. A replica of the "Garden of the net's" the first one we visited, shall be built by a Chinese company in Dunedin/New Zealand shortly. It consisted mainly of buildings and covered walk ways around a pond, whereas the second we visited, called "humble Administrator's garden" appealed more to us. It was much bigger with many big ponds, more what we imagine a park to be.

Another thing that was different to what we imagined, was the internet; going 'on-line' in China was not easy for us! Internet-Bar's were plentiful and large but because they were usually located in the upper floors and didn't have any English sign outside, we hardly ever found one. Near our hotel in Suzhou, we saw into one as it was situated in the basement. It was big, but after we'd entered, they brought us upstairs. We have seen big internet-café's before, but never something like this: it was very spacious with leather armchairs and screens of about 1.2m diagonal. So we had to take a little distance and started the fast machine that cost only 2.5 Yuan an hour. It was obvious that Chinese language websites were censored; BBC's website could be downloaded in English, but not in Chinese. After we logged in to the Chinese Yahoo site, because we realized that the German site was temporarily down, a message from Yahoo popped up and proposed an automatic re-direction to one of its overseas servers, as this would be faster because "sensitive content" would not be verified.

On the other hand, the government's iron grip that held tight control over the people is loosening. Whereas 15 years ago, common Chinese citizens needed a permit to travel from one city to another, today's government motivates its people to travel and see their country - quite successfully, as we noticed. Not only bus- and train-stations, also the airports were bustling with locals. One hundred and fifty airports had just been upgraded or newly built and already they decided to extend another 150, including some that only had been upgraded in the last few years.



Already now, China has a big shortage on pilots, as the aviation industry grows much faster than new pilots can be trained. Meanwhile, the pilots or the new employers respectively, have to pay compensation sums up to 260'000 USD if they want to change from one government owned airline to another government owned airline. Wonder what they earn?

By now, the government agreed with 85 countries to grant Chinese citizens visa for group tourism. Officially they are also allowed to travel independently but as China started to generously handing out passports, western countries have been much more reserved in granting visa. In 2005 already 10 million Chinese travelled abroad. With tendency on a sharp rise. Favorite destinations were Europe and North America.

After 3 days, we left Suzhou by bus to our last destination about two hours away on a modern freeway. During the entire journey, we didn't see anything that reminded us of old China - if it wasn't for the rice fields, we could just as well have been in the west. Here it looked certainly more modern though and there was an incessant forest of oversized advertisement boards along the highway. Many additional freeways and railway lines were also under construction.

## Hangzhou

As we approached [Hangzhou](#), we noticed that they had an architectural spleen of erecting little turrets on new apartment blocks. The rivers and canals were heavily used for cargo transportation. The city of Hangzhou was like all other cities we had seen in China: (do we still need to mention it?) a huge construction site, inhabited

by presently 6 million people. It stood at the shore of little 'West Lake' which functioned as China's most visited tourist magnet. Currently it receives 20 million (twenty!) Chinese tourists, plus a handful of foreigners annually. Apparently there is a tourist blurb: "in heaven there is paradise, on earth Suzhou and Hangzhou". In fact, West Lake is now a National Park, probably the only one in the world where everything is manmade, including the lake itself! The information board explains the details. Here an excerpt: "...covering an area of 60km<sup>2</sup> including sceneries as sweet-scented Osmanthus in autumn, 6 bridges in misty Willows Pine trees extending 9 Li (miles) in clouds and 10 Li of blooming lotus flowers as well as the famous 'top ten scenes of West Lake', 'New top ten scenes' and numerous new scenic attractions completed and opened to the public in recent years..."



Lots more was mentioned: the causeway and small islets plus the wide boulevards that were all reserved for pedestrians and electric 'golf-caddy-buses' only. In one part of the shore park, mellow (western) music was played from hundreds of loudspeakers. In one area, a big fountain played "water ballet" after classical music and at night everything was joyfully illuminated. Busloads of tourists were brought in for every fountain-performance and on the weekend, the park was crowded with people. That's how it looked like in the middle of November. This was off-season and we wouldn't want to know how many people show up here during the summer holiday.

We didn't mention yet, that we were not very impressed by this lake at all, of which the other shore (3km away) was hardly visible through fog or smoke most days. For our taste even the smallest lake in Switzerland has more natural beauty, but probably Chinese tourists would miss all the artificial attractions, in front of which they can get their picture. Different culture – different taste!

We've been very lucky with the weather. When we were in the southern part four weeks ago, it's been almost tropical warm still, whereas here, almost 1'000km further north, we could enjoy an exceptionally warm and dry autumn with day temperatures ranging between 17-25°C. Strangely, some stores switched from cooling to heating on November 1, maybe as a principle rather than by common sense.



## Final thoughts

So here, our trip through modern China ended and now we have a clue what the government means, when they talk about "*the modern interpretation of communism/Marxism/Leninism and Maoism*". Those three guys would probably sue today's government for misusing their name. In our eyes, it's the pure form of capitalism and an almost perfect copy of the life in the west.

This "*modern interpretation of communism/./././.*" resulted in the fact that people who live in a town earn several times more than those living in the countryside. That only those living in a city get social security and free health care. Although China's 'one-child policy' that had been enforced for 25 years now, was successful in slowing population growth, it also results in some problems. There is now a generation of spoiled and egoistic people and because they prefer boys (at 1.12 ultrasonic) it resulted in an imbalance of gender with 118 boys to 100 girls (census 2005). The future problem will be over-aging with the lack of pension systems in the countryside, where 58% of people live. Nursing homes for elderly only start appearing now that two young working people soon have to care for four ageing parents. There are already talks about relaxing the one-child policy, as meanwhile some couples choose not to have a child.



The "*modern interpretation of communism/./././.*" has helped [China's economy](#) to rise its GDP by an average of 10% annually for the last 25 years. That GDP was at abt. 6'000 USD for the year 2005. China's foreign currency reserves have just climbed over the 1 trillion USD mark - the biggest in the world and the trade surplus was at record levels in Oct. 2006. All this helped the people to get wealthier including people on the lowest salary level, where some might earn next to nothing - but still had an annual 25% pay increase in the last few years, as we read in the "Bangkok Post".

According to Chinese media, the average pay increase is currently around 11% annually and this with an inflation rate that is negligible. The World Bank stated that China managed to lift 70 million people up above the poverty-line during the last three years. Never the less, there is still a lot of poverty, mainly in the country side of this 9.5 million sq km big land.

On the top end of the salary scale, China counted 320'000 USD-Millionaires in 2005 owning together about 80% of private assets. They represent only 1/4 % of the 1,3 Billion people!

We have never seen a country with that much advertising. Big bill boards and oversized LCD screens covered buildings and big walls of construction sites or as road side ads. Also above shelves in supermarkets, in places where people had to wait i.e. on bus stops and in front of elevators, flat screens were throwing



advertisements at people trying to stimulate their taste for consumer goods.

The "modern interpretation of communism/.../..." means also, that new luxurious housing developments advertise these dwellings with slogans like "the new world of wealth & worship" or "life style for the new City Elite".

Even people that can afford to live in such expensive apartments do not necessarily own a car. Unlike in other developing countries, we hadn't seen anybody living in a shack with a brand new Mercedes parked in front of it. Never the less, almost half a million cars are currently being sold and registered every month.

As Chinese are very undisciplined in traffic, be it as pedestrians, cyclists or with motorised vehicles, we had seen minor accidents almost daily throughout the country.

On one hand, the government expects every new facility to be built according to the newest safety- and environment standards. More and more is being recycled and more environment friendly technologies are being introduced. The population is being bombarded with 'green paroles' on TV.

On the other hand the local governments are constantly haggling with the central government to get more time to upgrade or replace old polluting or unsafe industries to today's standard. In the meantime the media reports weekly about fatal mining accidents, poisonous pollution of water, topsoil or air and of violations of ethnic practices, copyright and lots of corruption.



Despite all these impressive numbers, even in comparison to other developing countries like Thailand, China is still a poor country if you divide it's wealth by 1,3 billion people. China has a long way to go but on the newly built surface China already appears to be far ahead of many western countries.

As long as no recession hits the country, the "communists" have a good chance to remain in power. If the astronomic growth continues for another 10-20 years, we all better start learning Chinese now. 1, 2, 3 means: yi, er, san...



From a distance it looks like China is re-building the entire country after a new masterplan, at least where we had been, but most probably it's the same all around China.

The different cities and provinces seem to compete who creates the most extravagant city. Shanghai is certainly aiming at replacing Hong Kong as Chinas signature trade city and financial hub and on the surface this has obviously already taken place. Below the surface, they work hard to gain trust, adapt the laws and establish relations.

## Short notice: Thailand , after the military coup 2006

On November 12, 2006 we left China on a Bangkok Air flight from Hangzhou to **Thailand's** capital Bangkok. This airline is normally quite well booked with western tourists, but not on flights connecting China it seemed! Here, apart from two more European and some Thai, about 80% of our fellow passengers were Chinese tourists on the way to Thailand. So we got a last impression of this rapidly changing country. As the airline already knows that Chinese people prefer western food, there was not even a choice for an Asian breakfast. Everybody got a western one with croissant.

In Bangkok we had a connecting flight to Koh Samui, where we caught the last ferry to **Koh Phangan**. Although there had been a military coup in Thailand 2 months ago, we didn't feel nor see anything that had changed on this holiday island. The Burmese workers; many illegally immigrated men and women, were still very busy with the construction of new bungalows and shops.

Seeing the uncontrolled growth here, where everyone builds without thinking on the necessary infrastructure, it was quite obvious to us, that the Chinese model, where tourism grows on an even faster pace, but coordinated and controlled by the government who makes sure that also water and power supply, roads and pedestrian areas are built as well, is by far the better option. As long as bribes are being accepted, coordinated town-planning seems to have no chance in Thailand...



Brigitte & Heinz



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