

## Shanghai Journal 2-21-15 (Trip to Beijing, , Great Wall, Xian and Terracotta Warriors)

Xixi (Happy New Year!) Just got back last night. So much to share – an altogether amazing trip! We saw so many fascinating sites. We also learned a lot about the challenges of living in a country with so many people.

The trip started with our adventure taking the metro to the airport. There is a Maglev fast train but it costs 100 yuan. Since we weren't in a hurry we figured why not take the metro that costs only 3 yuan. It wasn't crowded and we had seats. Then we got to a stop where everyone with suitcases got off to switch to a train across the track, moving down to the last few cars (like South Ferry for New Yorkers). All of a sudden there was a vast sea of people with suitcases jockeying to get on the train. We joined in and managed to get on but were packed in like sardines. For comparison – we took the Maglev last night coming home – comfy seats, very few people, and took literally 4 minutes to get to the transfer stop for the metro home.

When we were picked up at the airport in Beijing Monday night our driver greeted us and then took off with our suitcase at a dead run. If we hadn't been eagle-eyed and able to keep up the pace, I'm sure we would have lost him! Our hotel was a very nice place to stay for three nights, right in the center, and served huge breakfast every morning with Chinese, Japanese and European options. I finally had a chance to try congee (a rice porridge often cooked with fish or meat) but didn't really like it. The chef was willing to make noodle soup with a vegetarian broth so we had that the first morning. Interesting to have soup for breakfast but it was good. Most of the dumplings had meat in them so couldn't try them. There was lots of fresh fruit and good bread so we ate well every day before starting off.

Our guide, Cynthia, met us in the lobby at 9 a.m. each day. She was a great guide, knew a lot and also an interesting person as we got to know her. She is from the northeast near the Russian border, and told us a lot about their cuisine, climate, and life. She is Manchu while 90% of the Chinese people are Han. She is single, in her early 30s and likes to travel – has been all over Asia and her favorite place to visit is Tibet.

Day 1 (day of New Year's Eve): The first day we started at Tiananmen Square – a huge complex surrounded by government buildings, the national museum, and the tomb of Chairman Mao. Beyond is the Forbidden City, another huge complex and site of the imperial palace for the Ming and Qing dynasties. It was built in 1406 when the emperor moved the capital from Nanjing to Beijing and was the center of government for almost 500 years through the reign of 24 emperors. Grok that! It took 14 years and over a million workers to build, covers 180 acres and has almost a thousand buildings. The scale, like many things in China, is jaw dropping. Look at all the languages for guides to the Forbidden City – love this!



Cynthia talked a lot about Cixi, the empress dowager who controlled the government for almost 50 years after starting out as a concubine from a poor family. They called her the Dragon Lady because of her ruthlessness. Some historians apparently credit her with keeping the government together and resisting European domination. Cynthia told us Cixi was the first Chinese person to buy an automobile but only rode in it once because she didn't like the driver sitting in front of the empress dowager. She wanted him to kneel down and he said he didn't learn to drive that way. So she never rode in the car again. I'm interested to read more about her. These are middle school girls we met, dragon symbol for Cixi.





Following the Forbidden City, we walked through a hutong – a traditional neighborhood of Beijing formed by narrow alleys and residences with inner courtyards. Most of the hutongs have been destroyed to make way for high rises but the government has preserved about 25 of them and now they are becoming fashionable places to live. We stopped and talked to an old man who told stories about some of the wealthy folks who have taken over some of the complexes. The entrances look very similar but you can tell the wealth and status of the owners based on the number of steps, lion sculptures at the entrance, size of door and number of pegs over the doorway.



Next we went to the Yonghe Temple (Palace of Harmony and Peace) – the only Tibetan Buddhist temple and monastery in China. It has three temples, each one



Day 2: New Year's Day: The big event today was the Great Wall. It was about an hour's drive to Mutianyu, the section we hiked. It is one of the best-preserved sections with 22 watchtowers. It is also less crowded than the section nearer to Beijing. We lucked out because even though it was cold, the day was sunny and by the time we hit the second tower we were completely warmed up. It is quite an amazing thing to see and to imagine what it took to build it. On the hillside above us the script says, "Be faithful to Chairman Mao." We were there for three or four hours and then went to lunch at a place in the nearby village. The food was ok, but too oily for our taste. Though the beer tasted great after the long hike!



When we got back to Beijing we went to an area where factories have been turned into galleries for contemporary artists. Everything was closed though because of the holiday but we walked around anyway. Rosalyn had told us that Ai Wei Wei's studio

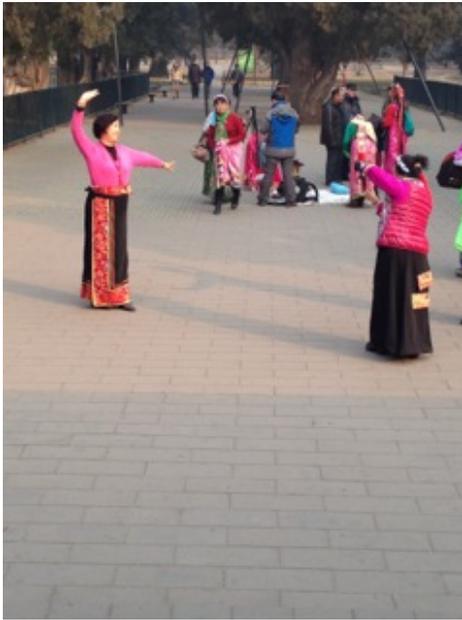
is nearby but Cynthia had never heard of him. She was interested when we told her what we knew about him and his work. Several times she said, “We Chinese don’t know anything about what is going on.” Different from our guide in Xian – described later on. We had a light dinner in the hotel and went to bed early.

Day 3: When we got up the AQI was over 400 (hazardous) so we wore masks most of the day. It was also much colder and overcast so no sun to mitigate the cold. (I know, I know, no sympathy from you all in the Northeast and Cleveland). We went to the Temple of Heaven – where the emperors prayed for good harvests and sacrificed animals to the gods. There is a seven-day performance each year at this time where they reenact this whole story – and we were there (along with thousands of Chinese folks) just in time to see it. It was quite majestic – with drums, beautiful costumes, dancing by the emperor’s civil servants and military, the emperor offering wine to the gods, really an exciting spectacle to see.



Cynthia told us people are always out in this park, especially older people, doing tai chi, playing cards and dominoes, talking and hanging out. We saw some women in costumes dancing – she said the government encourages dance groups for older

people to join and this was one example. I wish I could have photographed the people playing cards and dominoes – surrounded by watchers, but it felt too intrusive.



We were frozen to the core after watching the performance and were glad to get to a warm restaurant. It was packed with families, many having the specialty duck. We had a mu shu pancake sort of dish, a tomato soup with a kind of dumpling, and some greens. Very tasty.

On our way to the Summer Palace we drove by the Olympic stadium which has a high-rise complex built in the shape of a dragon. The Summer Palace was packed with Chinese people out to enjoy the New Year, though it was so cold we had a hard time fully enjoying the view. It is on a lake and the wind off the lake was like Chicago!



Then it was time to catch our train to Xian. Here we encountered the first glitch of a so far perfect trip. We discovered our seats were not together, in fact were in

separate cars! Cynthia said there was nothing she could do about it so she wrote a note in Chinese for us to show people to ask if anyone would switch tickets with us and said she didn't think we would have a problem. As it turned out, many people were switching seats but of course it helps to be able to communicate. We managed to sit together but at every stop we had to re-jockey to continue. People were very nice to us though and mostly it was ok. We were picked up at the station and taken to our hotel. This one was very doo-dah though we didn't get there until almost midnight and left at 9 a.m. the next morning, so did not get to take full advantage.

Our guide, Michael, was really sweet and like Cynthia extremely knowledgeable. Unfortunately, it was bitter cold and rainy – even snowed at some points. Xian is one of the oldest cities in China – one of the four ancient capitals, and where the Silk Road begins. We started in the Muslim area – one of the oldest parts of the city and an area lined with food stalls with all kinds of interesting looking items. Michael explained that the Muslims in Xian are descendants of traders along the Silk Road who married Chinese women and settled in the area.



All kinds of breads;  
women making  
noodles;  
man making  
ginger candy;  
famous  
for persimmons,  
dates,  
walnuts and  
pomegranates.



At the end of the street is the Drum Tower that is the symbol of the city. Xian is a walled city surrounded by a moat and the drum was struck in the morning when the drawbridge opened and at dusk when it closed. Today people can walk or bike along the wall all the way around the old city. It reminded us of Lucca in Italy, though much bigger. We were too cold to walk along the wall but could imagine what it must be like in the summer. Michael explained that there are over 100 colleges and universities in Xian. Apparently, at the beginning of the Cold War Mao moved colleges, as well as manufacturing and military bases, inland to Xian where they would be more protected than Beijing and Shanghai on the coast.



Then we got in the car to drive to the Museum of the Terra Cotta Warriors, typically a 30-40 minutes drive. Unfortunately, thousands of others decided to visit that day as well and we ended up in the mother of all traffic jams. We could not believe how people handled that – driving on the sidewalks (even big buses), U-turns in the middle of traffic, going the wrong way. Incredible. I thought we would never get out of there. Eventually we did but it took 3 hours! So we ended up seeing the terra cotta warriors at a dead run through the museum. Still it is so impressive and to think they have just begun the excavation of the site. The temple of the Emperor they are thought to be guarding is still buried under a huge mound and protected from excavation for fear of theft of the valuable artifacts. The site is immense and they have only excavated about 10% of the warriors they think are still beneath the ground. The faces of each one are unique and you can tell from the clothing, hair style, etc. what class or group they were from. For example, the simply dressed figures in the front were essentially cannon fodder and did not even have weapons. Then there are horses and armed soldiers in the back. They think they have found chariots in one of the yet to be excavated places. We had thought at one point about giving up trying to get there because of the traffic. I'm so glad Michael persisted.



With all the time in the car, we got to know Michael pretty well. He was really an interesting guy – very knowledgeable and proud of Chinese history. I asked him how people today regard Mao. He said people through his generation (he is in his early 30s) venerate Mao and appreciate what he tried to do especially for the poor and rural people. He acknowledges that Mao made terrible mistakes but that ending the feudal farming system was a real accomplishment – like Lincoln ending slavery he said. He also said he thinks that the opening of markets is ok but the corruption and

individualism of today are a regression and laments the selfishness of this generation. Here we are saying goodbye at the airport.



Glad to be back in Shanghai. Ravi had a raging fever last night but is feeling somewhat better today. He is back in bed though. I'm doing laundry and writing this! Sorry it is so long but hope you enjoy the stories and photos.

Love, Lee

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