



Random observations on life of the common Joe in Shun De, Guangdong Province, China – Part 1
Travelogues

It's Sunday afternoon, wet, hot and very humid. Just what I needed on what the locals call a Freedom Day. This is highly valued by the factory workers as they are expected to work 6 days a week, 8 to 10 hours per day in what we westerners consider in less than acceptable working conditions. Enough of this crap, what I find more interesting is the life of the everyday Joe in the city.



This morning I had an interesting experience in the lobby of the hotel. Since it was pouring cats and dogs, I could not go out and enjoy the scenery. Also I did not want to be cooped up in my room all day, so like many other times I go down to the lobby and sit to read one of the many books I brought with me on this trip. Every Sunday it appears that there is something special scheduled at the hotel that attracts many families with young children of school age. Today wasn't any different and so goes the story. In the lobby sitting area there were many young teens (12 – 14 I estimate) sitting, talking and giggling. As per normal I walk by them and say hello in Chinese and they respond back in English proudly in order to show their knowledge and respect. As I sat there one young female sat in the chair next to me and asked me my name. From this point on we were able to work through an intelligent discussion using her limited English and my limited Chinese. We had a very interesting conversation spanning her experiences at school, her interest in the book I was reading, Canada as a country and I also met her family which consisted of her parents and her younger brother. Together we were able to practice language skills in the languages that we were less familiar with.

After this episode, I decided to venture into the part of the city which is most representative of life in China. When you are away from the big business element in this vast and populace country, you get a different appreciation for the comforts of home and the struggles of the everyday people. As I walked



several miles of traditional China streets, homes and businesses, it is evident that these every day population leads a very different life. As factory workers make the equivalent of \$60 - \$75 per month, this is far greater than the remainder of the population in the city. As I walked through the city, and peer into the restaurants, shops and fruit stands, I can only feel that I am walking in a time warp that is reminiscent of the early 20th century. When one looks into the shops you immediately witness that many lost arts have disappeared in North America. Small machine shops which would be comparable to the wagon repair shop of the

Wild West era. These people work with primitive shop tools to create products or repair equipment. Most people here have parts made for their equipment as it is cheaper to make than to buy them from the factories.

You also encounter situations that you would want to scream and say "Don't do that". The reason I say this is that I watched a taxi cab that was pulled up at a used tire repair shop chat with the repair guy about his front tire. Looking at the front tire, it was a steel belted tire, and if you want to know why I know this, it isn't because of my excellent comprehension of the Chinese language; it is because the steel belt was sticking out of the side of the tire. In North America, this is a reason for calling the local constabulary if a vehicle owner is willingly driving the car with this type of tire on it. You must remember that this shop only sells used tires or it repairs tires, so it does what it does best – FIX THE TIRE. How may

you ask did the repair guy do this...? Well he went to his tool box, located a pair of side cutters and proceeded to cut the protruding steel belts from the side of the tire. Now that there were no more protruding steel wires sticking out of the tire, it was deemed safe and road worthy. The Taxi cab owner dutifully paid the repair guy and he was on his way.

Walking along every store front is a specialized business. You walk by shops that specialize in bearing, others in sinks, weird food stuffs, bicycle repair, household hardware and who knows what else. The restaurants tend to be 3 or 4 tables with stools, a propane tank with a blow torch attached to it, and a wok to cook in what whatever they have and call it something edible. To Caucasians like us, these foods look unappetizing and most importantly the sanitary conditions are less than perfect. Let's just say that 99.9% of these restaurant facilities would not PASS the Toronto Health Inspection program. They would be shut down at the blink of an eye. Here it is very popular, as they are much like the hot dog street vendors we have in the city, however I can eat a hot dog from a street vendor in the big Canadian city, I can't get myself to go in and eat in one of the local restaurants. Just think I could get a 5 or 6 course meal in one of these places for less than the equivalent value in Canadian dollars of 2 to 3 dollars. Just think that when you are on a Canadian per diem expense account you could make out like a bandit.



I also walked by many electric bicycle and scooter sales centers. Now this is an experience. As I price out the value of the electric bicycle I find that I have enough money on me to buy a new one from the cash



in my pocket. As I move on and walk into the scooter and small motorcycle (125 cc) shops, I find that I have enough cash in my safe in the room to buy a new scooter and 125 CC motorcycle. Think about the contrast. It takes a local factory worker 3 months of pay to buy an electric bicycle, 6 months pay to buy a scooter and 12 months pay to buy a 125 cc scooter, and here I am with enough cash to walk in an drive out without having to make any major decisions related to how I can make better use of my money, like put food on the table.

The city is active at all times. The local shops hardly ever close, that is the owner literally works 7 days, 24 hours per week. Being a factory worker looks good, as the work week is shorter and the pay is most likely better. What is strongly recognized is that everyone in China is an entrepreneur. Even though the conditions in operating one's business is less rewarding financially, it is more rewarding than working for someone else. Also, when you work for yourself, they can always find ways to generate additional income buy getting involved with neighbours in other businesses. It's a never ending circle of creating opportunity, an element that has been lost in North America.

In the morning my driver takes me to the office for my day meeting with the company personnel. The trip every day is a new experience. Just imagine the Burlington skyway bridge between Hamilton and Burlington. It is a multi lane Mecca of cars and trucks driving along in an orderly fashion to get to the other side. Everyone stays in their lanes and obeys drives obeying the rules of the highway. Well here, it's another story. Any laws or road signs, or lines in the road are mere suggestions (PK Saying). Driver passes into oncoming traffic to get ahead by one car length, driver stays in middle of lane to prevent anyone from passing him, red/green and amber lights are used only to appease foreigners as certainly

for locals I believe they think that these items are mere street decorations, and most important of all, the roadways are shared with bicycles, scooters, motorcycles, small cars, big cars, mini cars, mini trucks, pickup trucks, small vans, big vans, transport trucks, container trucks, etc... I'm sure you get the picture. Well now recall the vision of the skyway bridge and then put all of these different types of vehicle on it during rush hour. They aren't just standing still on the bridge they are all trying to zig zag their way to work. What chaos... that is for North Americans as we could not cope with this type of disorderly conduct. Here it is the norm.



The ritual in many restaurants is also very unique. Imagine being served tea, and to be informed that it is not being served for drinking. It is to be used to disinfect your utensils, dishes and cup. The process is simple. First you take your chop sticks and swirl them in your 4 Oz glass of VERY hot tea. When you finish this, you swirl your canoe spoon in the glass to disinfect it. Then you pour your tea from the glass into the bowl and swirl the tea using your chop sticks to disinfect it, then you take your tea glass and invert it into the bowl to disinfect the rim of the glass. Lastly you dump your bowl of tea into a larger bowl that is located on the lazy Susan located in the middle of the table. Now you are ready to receive today's multi selection of dishes, which consists of food, and vegetable that you recognize and others that you don't. From this point on, you are exposed to a broad range of dishes consisting of any animal, fish or bird that inhabits this planet.



A couple of blocks away, I have what is considered a grocery store – comparable to a Sobey's back home. Walking in does not project the same experience as most items are sold in bulk. Everything appears to have been played in by kids who are shopping with their mothers. I have yet to go in the store and see a male person walking around. My reason for going this store was to purchase basic foodstuffs (pop and candy bar) that I know can be used to offset some of the unusually bad food experiences that I may encounter. An occasional craving for a Coke, Chips or candy bar can be fulfilled in this store.

How much do things cost here.... Well I can try to give you examples in order that you can compare with the North American standard of living.

- 2.5 Litre Bottle of Coke = 6.0 Yuan = \$0.90
- 1 Bag Lays Chips = 4.8 Yuan or \$0.70 CDN
- 1 Snickers Bar = 4.8 Yuan or \$0.70 CDN
- 1 Tsin Tao Beer = 15 Yuan or \$2.00 CDN
- Complete 5 Country Buffet Dinner Bar = 166 Yuan = \$23.00 CDN
- 1.3 Mega pixel PC Mount Camera/Microphone = 85 Yuan = \$12.00 CDN
- 1 Electric Bicycle = \$1,200 Yuan = \$175 CDN
- 1 Scooter = 3,500 Yuan = \$500 CDN
- 125cc Motorbike = 8,000 Yuan = \$1,125 CDN