



Travels with Partner Throughout Asia – Part 4

Travelogues

Today we had a nice western breakfast buffet in the hotel. There were lots of other folks in there too, but most were wealthier, older Chinese travellers. We were the only white folks that I could see.

I put together some laundry for the hotel's laundry service this morning. I told Chris that I made an error in the price of the hotel room, but it really is only about C\$43 per night, and my laundry bill might actually come close to that, believe it or not.

We went outside the lobby before 9am waiting to get picked up today by our driver and a local contact guy called Joe. Since we were early I went out to the street to videotape the morning traffic but immediately the lens fogged up. Then there was a message that there was dew forming inside the drive. That's how humid the weather is in the mornings.

We were scheduled to visit another factory today that made aerosol valves in a town about an hour away. All Chinese companies have two names. The Chinese name in Chinese script, and an English name that is usually translated very poorly. Actually, I'd say about 85% of everything translated into English has errors in it, usually lots, and often so bad that you don't know what they are trying to say. I think the Chinese that we meet learned English by reading the English on the backs of product labels ... that's how tough it is to get understood between us sometimes. Anyway, during the drive to the aerosol valve factory we saw several examples of humorous company names like "The Brainpower Welding Company" or "Pleasure Textile Company".

I just read a business book on China and, despite all the good advice within, there is a quote that sticks with me. "Every day in China you see something that you don't see every day". Actually, there are usually 3-4 things every day. This morning, as we were being driven to the Majesty plant, I was thinking that I wish the driver would have washed the car windows so I could have a cleaner-looking video if I film through the window. No sooner do my brainwaves reach out than the driver turns into a BP gas station for fuel. There are designated gas station attendants to pump gas. I waited, but didn't see the driver or the attendant reach for the window washer brush and squeegee, so I got out and reached for it. The attendant said something to me in Chinese so I backed away. Joe came over, and I asked him if the driver could please wipe the windows. Joe was confused. He conferred with the driver, and together they were confused. Richard and I were starting to chuckle because I don't think they knew about the window washing squeegee's purpose. I got the squeegee from the tub (water was clear, like it was unused) and the driver then took it from me, saying "aaaaahhhh". He then proceeded to wash all the side and rear windows with the sponge side, and in an up'n'down motion. He went from window to window leaving them wet, yet never doing the front window at all. Richard and I were starting to really laugh and had to move back from the scene. We asked our driver to use the other side to wipe the window dry. He then used the up'n'down motion on all windows, and looked pretty silly doing that on the rear window, especially since the handle was about 3 ft long and made this clumsy. The front window was never done. We got in, and drove on.

We came upon an "accident" where an 18-wheeler had driven over a 2 ft wide median with neatly planted bushes every 5 ft. The median separated a right lane that eventually veered right from the main lanes. The truck was stuck in the median's soil with a few wheels of the tractor and also the trailer. Richard and I think the driver missed the cut-off to get into that right lane, so decided on his own to go "cross-country" to get the right lane rather than miss the cut-off or have to go back and lose time. In traffic, they think differently here.

We arrived at the valve factory around 10:30am. Companies don't turn on the air conditioners in the offices until guests arrive, so it was 95% humidity in the room upon arrival. This factory makes the valves that go into aerosol cans. They are the biggest in China. In N. America I always try to get a feel for the size of a company by asking how big a company is, expecting to hear annual sales figures, number of employees, or sometimes market share percentage. In China I was expecting to disregard any employment figures since labour is so cheap that they use people where we'd use conveyors and automation. This factory employs and houses 1500 employees, and runs 24/7. There is such growth in industry here that the local power company can't keep up. Companies in this town are required to ration power by stopping production 3 times a week, during certain scheduled hours assigned to them. This is to continue until the end of June when more power is expected to come on-line. Like the aerosol can making factory we visited yesterday, this company is growing by a huge percentage year over year, expecting 40% growth this year over last. Wow! On the tour of their production facilities I saw a world-class operation. There were 140 injection moulding machines, lined up in 6 rows like polished soldiers pumping out little parts for aerosol valves for the world. Everyone was working at something; no one was slacking. There were no large groups of people doing manual labour except in a quality re-work area to sort some product, where I saw about 10 at a table. Very impressive.

We went across the street to a modern strip mall that had a restaurant. As is usual, we got a private room in the back with a large round table. Our host, Mr. Wu asked if I like pigeon. I've never eaten it, so I agreed. He asked "Do you have religious restrictions?" "You mean for food?" I replied. "Yes" came his answer. I said "No religious restrictions, but I don't want to eat dog". "OK" he said. I bobbed my head thoughtfully for a few seconds and then asked him "Is there dog on the menu?" "Yes, sure" came his blunt reply. "What about cat?" I asked "Is there cat on the menu?" "Yes, sure" came his quick reply again. "I'll have 2 servings of those" I grinned. The pigeon came, and was delicious, except for the 2 pigeon heads (with holes for the eyes) that were served with the plate.



It was at this meal that I experienced another custom that I didn't encounter before -cleaning the chopsticks and dishes before the meal. The waitress will pour green tea into your bowl (which I almost drank, as I did at every previous restaurant but in a smaller cup), but Richard stopped me and showed me how to swirl the tips of my chopsticks in the cup. Then take the Chinese spoon and swirl it in the hot green tea, and finally the rim of my glass. This "dishwater tea" then gets poured into a bigger bowl and removed from the table. This whole exercise is to make you comfortable about hygiene of your utensils in smaller restaurants.

Another custom is to simply tap your first two fingers on the table to pass along a "thank you" to the waitress instead of interrupting your conversation with someone. I've been saying "Shee-shay" instead, and getting pretty good at it.



Joe took us out to dinner that same evening. Linda, a sales order clerk that handles our orders, also came along. Joe took us to a small restaurant, not very fancy, that serves snakes. "Do you like snake, Peter?" as if I eat snake for a snack instead of popcorn. The snakes were in square cages, in the parking lot outside the restaurant, along with a row of aquarium tanks with shrimp, fish, eel, etc. We were greeted by a waitress and you then pick your food before you go in. While I was checking out the snakes, Joe was haggling over price with the waitress and fish selection. There was a fella in charge of catching the snakes that you order. He'd take them out, stuff

them into a bag, and then weigh them on a primitive balance scale, and record the weight. He'd then take a pair of dirty scissors, cut off their heads and drain the blood into a bowl of water. Then he'd make a 2" incision in the belly and extract a certain organ, looking like a black chick pea. This would then get placed in a glass of alcohol, and we didn't see it again but speculated that it would go to an herbal medicine shop or somewhere similar.

Anyway, we again had a private room with 3 servers. Green tea is the common drink at meals and at business meetings. The meal started with appetizers brought out in small bowls and one bowl looked like raw ginger. No such luck. It was a bowl of chicken feet, and they were ugly. No one twisted my arm to try it, and it took me about 2 minutes of wondering if I should try it, but I did. There is very little meat on chicken feet, and one essentially pops one in the mouth and uses the tongue and teeth to peel off the skin while leaving the knuckles to be spit out (quite acceptable!) I felt like I was on the television program "Survivor." The chicken foot's skin tasted like, well, cold cooked chicken skin.



The snake was served on two plates later in the meal. I peeled the skin off, as did Richard, although Joe ate that too. One then peels off the skin with your teeth from one end and strip it off the section. There wasn't too much meat since it was a smaller snake, but it actually tasted pretty good. I had thirds of the snake. I also had 5 helpings of jumbo shrimp that was so messy that my place setting was a disaster and my shirt was covered in stains. Usually, with smaller shrimp the locals just pop the whole thing in their mouths, shell, antennae, flippers and all, and work it so that they spit out the remnants.

We got dropped off at the hotel rather early; about 8 pm. Richard and I made arrangements to meet to walk around the neighbourhood to see what was happening in the 'hood. Our hotel fronts onto one nice, main road, and the other is more minor with small storefronts, etc. We started down the smaller road, passing all sorts of Chinese locals of the less wealthy sort. It was dark and poorly lit, but then the main streets themselves aren't too well lit either. At any rate, I felt very safe. There were kids playing on the sidewalks, women and girls everywhere in conversation or walking along the sidewalk en route somewhere, plenty of motorcycles and scooters weaving along the streets. There were no groups of people on the sidewalks with nothing better to do, like one can see in Mexico or on some bad streets in the USA or Canada. People looked at us once, but not twice. We were harmless. Richard is a very intelligent guy, but he also happened to be a NHL-drafted hockey brawler in his youth. This was comforting to me on the back streets of China.

Anyway, the city block was about 1 km long before we could turn left onto another street. We stopped in a few shops to look around. All storefronts have hours that extend to the point where the last family member rolls down the metal door and goes upstairs to sleep. We never encountered any problems and really appreciated the chance to see the workings of real, back street China. The third and fourth legs of the journey were down modern Chinese streets, with higher prices, professional sales staff, etc. There were ATMs on several stretches of these streets and there's always someone standing at the ATM with their scooter helmet still on. That's their version of a drive-through.

Its Saturday night now, and Saturday morning for you guys back home. I got up this morning to a heavy rain. I was sitting at the desk working on my computer at 7 am, waiting for Omi to call but she was out with Eva at this time. No problem. I stood and stared out the window when suddenly a lightning bolt and thunder clap hit very close to the hotel. I was staring right at it. Five cars had their car alarms triggered by the lightning hit, and their alarms wailed and lights flashed for a few minutes.

The rain continued all day. Heavy rain. Many parts of the city have poor drainage and significant flooding results. Not just in the older parts of town, but also on newly built highways, modern neighbourhoods, and in new sections of the main stretch of the hot new shopping strip. The scooter drivers wear ponchos with a clear section in front that drapes over the headlight, license plate and turn signals. Often a passenger is sitting on the back, tucked under the driver's rain poncho, and you can't see them. They can't see either. They have no idea the risk the driver is dodging as they weave to and fro.

We had planned to use today as a day to take in some cultural sites. Our Laya driver and Tina (our translator and tour guide) were to take us to the mountaintop to see an immense Buddha, but it would have been futile. Instead we drove through some rich neighbourhoods and past some spectacular new government buildings, parks, stadiums, and schools. Tina comes from an interior province and wanted to take us to a local restaurant that featured her province's dishes. This was my best meal in China.

We were taken in the afternoon about an hour away to see what's nicknamed Furniture City. Here is a 30 km strip of furniture showrooms and factories where the world comes to buy home/office/restaurant furniture. Yes 30 km! Packed close together. No typo.



In the late afternoon, Tina also took us to a restored ancient Chinese home from the Ming dynasty. This was the home of a high-ranking government official way back when, and the architecture and landscape was what we've experienced in less exotic spots, such as the Chinese gardens in Montreal's Botanical Gardens. Tina, as all Chinese, is extremely proud of China's history, culture and present boom, and is always asking us "what do you think?" Yet, she also unwittingly regurgitates the Chinese doctrine that she's been exposed to at university.

We were asked to join a Vice President of a company that Richard works with for dinner. He had guests from another Province from within China and a South Vietnamese delegation, so as a result we couldn't refuse, but this was also bad news. Many guests mean many toasts with a very bad alcohol called Mou Tai. Richard had warned me about it. It's served in a fancy little shot glass. Someone around the table calls your name, raises their glass, and you are expected to stand and return the toast. "Gum-bay" is



said, meaning "bottoms up". Mou Tai is the vilest booze I have ever tasted and was ruining the nice food we were having. After about 30 minutes of spontaneous toasts that occurred around the table (we tried to keep our heads down and not make eye contact) we endured about 7-8 shots of Mou Tai. Awful, awful stuff. Fortunately, it is clear and looks like water. After a shot is consumed, a waiter or waitress will come and fill your shot glass from a small, 4 oz pitcher keep in the region of 2-3 people. We asked Tina (on my left) to ask the waiter to bring us a tall glass of water. We kept it under the table and Richard (on my right) and I refilled the 4 oz pitcher regularly. Our waiter staff was an accomplice and kept the secret

that Richard, Tina and I shared. Otherwise we would have thrown up long before. Mou Tai is so nasty that the glass retained the taste of it even after about another 10-12 toasts with water.

Tina chuckled regularly at Richard and me as we acted along and winced after every shot. We were favourite targets for toasts because we weren't Asian. The Vietnamese delegation was friendly, but getting wobbly. The government officials from another Chinese province and their wives (in town to shop for furniture for their new home) were also very nice to us, toasting our health, a safe trip, and our new friendship. Our local hosts just enjoyed taking us to the point of being drunk. The few ounces of Mou Tai that we did consume made our stomachs bubble and we were burping up the brutal taste of that stuff. That damn drink ruined our dinner and our evening. Even as I sit here at the computer I still burp that nasty jet fuel.

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