



Random observations on life of the common Joe in Shun De, Guangdong Province, China – Part 2
Travelogues

This week was another in record setting rainfall. Other than the new major thoroughfares, the streets do not have storm sewers and as a result major flooding occurs. Stores, homes and factories have water enter entering into their premises up to 24 inches. On the roads you have people walking, riding bicycles and scooters, cars and transport trucks in this depth of water and just imagine the rooster tail created by a vehicle travelling with some speed. Everybody and everything gets VERY wet. As I am driven to work every day, I pass all of these people on or in their selected mode of transportation and witness their unfettered desire to get to work. Most travel at least 30 minutes to work in ideal conditions, so I can just imagine what it's like under these conditions.

On Thursday, I ventured off to Guangzhou, the largest city in Guangdong province. The official census reports that Guangzhou has a population of 6 million, but the unofficial count can almost double it. When you drive into this city, you can tell that the population is much larger than the census. In addition, you can also tell that it is a very wealthy city.

When I first travelled to China in 1989, Guangzhou (formally the city of Canton) was the very first city I visited. I arrive after midnight after flying in from Canada on a Hong Kong connection, so I did not get to see much during my cab ride from the airport to the hotel. The next morning I did get up early to venture for a walk in the area and my first experience in a city within China did overwhelm me to say the least. When I walked out of the hotel, I remember being at a four corner intersection, and the light was red in one direction and green in the other. What I remember most was that I could see local commuters on bicycles for as far as the eye could see with the occasional car in sight and many small trucks. They were of the "pile-the-whole-family-on" rusty bike type, a staple in this society. I am even sure that most people used one bike to go to work on and another to get back home as they all looked the same when I inspected them in the parking lots scattered throughout the city at the time.



This week as I travelled to and through Guangzhou, the pile-the-whole-family-on rusty bike is hard to find. Everyone seems to have moved up to a scooter, or motorcycle in the 125 to 250cc range, a whole range of locally produced micro cars and trucks, and most popular are the European, Japanese, Korean and North American brand of cars. These cars are not by any means cheap. A Toyota Corolla costs about \$30,000, a BMW 500 Series is about \$150,000, a Buick Regal is about \$60,000 and a Hyundai Sonata is about \$25,000. A locally produced car that is considered competitive in size to a Corolla and a Sonata are the

cars made by Geely and Chery. The cars sell for \$5,000 – 6,000. Based on this you would think that they would be the most popular. Well you would have guessed wrong. VW is the largest volume selling car in China, with Honda as number two, Toyota at number 3 but is quickly catching up and will probably

surpass Honda in 2006 for 2nd spot, and then it is GM and then everybody else fights for the remainder of the market.

Driving through Guangzhou was not any different than driving in Shun De. Highways and streets are four to eight lanes wide, and everyone drives in whatever lane they want and not necessarily in the direction that the road signs dictate. One of the most peculiar things that I did notice in Guangzhou that I have yet to witness in Shin De, are the U-Turn lanes. Imagine a street with four lanes of traffic going both ways, and the outside lane at a light is allocated as the u-turn lane. They have a light that tells them when they can make the U-turn that is crossing all lanes to get into the lane that is going in the opposite direction. This may not seem to be a bad situation at first glance, however imagine that the vehicles that are making the U-turns are everything from bicycles, cars, trucks, buses, carts (basically anything with wheels), rickshaws, etc.... and then the light goes from green to red. As in North America, how many vehicles stretch the light, that is make the turn when it is amber or red. Same goes here, except the speed at which everyone moves varies based on the vehicle making the turn. What happens next – well its up to your imagination – This is when you learn why a horn was put in a vehicle. The horns start blaring and the people making the U-turns must be deaf, because it doesn't bother them. What you don't seem to find is road rage, as the drivers must vent their frustration when they use the horn.



The wealth in this city is also very apparent. I went to a shopping centre the size of the West Edmonton Mall. It was packed with big brand stores of clothes, jewellery, hand bags, fast food, restaurant and anything else you can think of, and all of it was of the most expensive brands. The place was packed and people were buying. I couldn't afford what was in there. Levi's had a store and their jeans were selling for \$125 – 150 a pair. Everybody in the shopping centre very well dressed and the number of staff in the retail stores would make any Canadian Retailer shake in their boots, as they would not view this as customer service, but as a significant affect on the profitability of the outlet. Getting someone to help you in a retail store in China is not a challenge, and best of all they appear to have knowledge of the area they work in.



While in Guangzhou, I also had the opportunity to visit the largest restaurant in the city. Imagine a restaurant that serves at the tables and not from a buffet, 500 tables that seat 10 people each. You got it.... This restaurant seats 5,000 people per sitting and the place is always packed. I elected to have lunch in a much smaller location, you know a family restaurant that seats a mere 500 people per sitting and again, it is not buffet style, it is served from a menu. The main reason for visiting the city of Guangzhou was more for conducting research on the development and ongoing evolution of the automotive industry in China. I won't bore you with the stuff, but only to say that you haven't seen a parts store unless you visit an auto parts mall in China. The wheeling and dealing that goes on for mere half pennies is incredible. You must think of this area as a Canadian Tire store. A typical Canadian Tire store occupies 40,000 square feet of retail with the automotive area for parts and accessories occupying only 6,000 square feet of this space. The parts and accessories market in Guangdong occupies in the

neighbourhood of 2 city blocks, each department having a 20 ft by 20 ft location and the locations occupy 2 floors.

In Shun De, I also had the opportunity to have breakfast one morning at a Dienn Seen (We know this as Dim Sun in Canada). It is called different in this area of China; however the food is very similar. I was picked up by a co-worker and taking to a small family run location at 6:00 am, as this is when everyone goes for breakfast on their way to work. So, based on this you can then imagine that the streets are packed and they all converge on these Dienn Seen places for their morning breakfast. This small family run location can sit in excess of 500 people, and you are quickly served tea and pickled chicken feet. MMM MMM Good. Next you get an assortment of dumplings and other stuff that sometimes is difficult to identify, but I'm told that all is very good for the body. A common statement made here is that "It's good for the body."



Today is Sunday and I once again venture for a long walk in some of the old areas of the city. It feels weird to being the only white guy in the area, as everyone does take a second look. As I walked through these areas, you clearly witness many of the lost skills in North America, as it relates to trades people. All of these shops are no more than 20 feet by 20 feet, and each one of them specialize in a special product. One may make doors within frames (with carving in door panel), another makes stools, another makes tables, another is a machine shop that fabricates anything a customer wants out of metal. What is also interesting is that you can compare the different skills and wealth of each location. One shop may use finely cut wood that is purchased from a lumber yard to fabricate his goods, whereby the next store makes the same product, but he uses the scraps from the first location. Sometimes it is difficult to tell the finished product apart, they are that good at fabrication. In China there is still a high emphasis on



making things manually. Why make it using a machine when labour is cheaper I always say. The best comparison to this are is that of a Home Depot store. They occupy in the neighbourhood of 150,000 to 200,000 square feet of space. In Shun De, there is no such thing as a Home Depot, except that the 20 ft by 20 ft store locations stretch on for miles, side by side, and in each of these shops you will find something that is offered in a Home Depot store. It is overwhelming, but interesting to see.

As part of my walk, I entered a newly opened shopping centre called "Lucky City." This place just opened in the spring and like anything else that is built in China, why build something without a purpose or differentiating factor. This shopping mall is something like the West Edmonton Mall. It even has an ice rink. It can be viewed from two floors. Children can go there for skating lessons. So as a Canadian, I had to do the Canadian thing. I rented skates and took the blades to the ice. Let me tell you, this was an experience. First of all, the rented skates had boots of the roller blade design. They are not lace ups, as they have the claps like ski boots to secure them to your feet. Secondly, they were dull as can be, and thirdly, they were broken in by someone who was bowl legged. What I mean is that I could not stand straight in them for all the money in the world. As I skated onto the ice, there was a mist for the first 18 inches. The ice was sluggish and boy did the skates hurt my feet and knees. The inward slant of the skates made it very difficult to skate but I persisted for a good 20 minutes, being able to adjust to the

lack of grip and the softness of the ice. Now I can say that I am one of the few people I know that has had the opportunity to skate in China, a country that is hardly familiar with skating at the best of time.

Lastly today, I also went to a temporary open market. Most of the stalls offered clothes for sale, and the cost was very low. The most striking thing one notices is that the t-shirts or golf shirts have some kind of saying or logo in English. If it isn't in English it doesn't sell. It doesn't matter what's on the shirt, it must have something and these sell very well and everybody wears them day in and day out. If it's FOR America it must be good, even if the garments they are purchasing are factory seconds. This type of market is like a flea market and from what I witnessed, I am sure that you could buy those to.