

Asian journey, through southern China

Diary of a journey via the great sites of China in 1991

The summer of 1991 was a good time for Jan and I to visit China together, to visit some of the classic sites, to drop in on some old friends, and to experience life in China as it was then. China had emerged from its dark years under Mao, but was still twenty years away from its great economic transformation of the next century. A lot remained of the classical China, and this made any visit a fascinating experience. It was only two years after the madness of Tiananmen Square, so there were very few westerners on the tourist trail, meaning that there were no problems finding places to stay. We flew in and out of Beijing, and had pre-booked four internal flights, because our grand tour had to be squeezed into three weeks, which was all the time that Jan could be away from the Evening Post. But other than those flights, we sorted things out as we went along, and enjoyed every minute of it.

Sunday August 25, flight

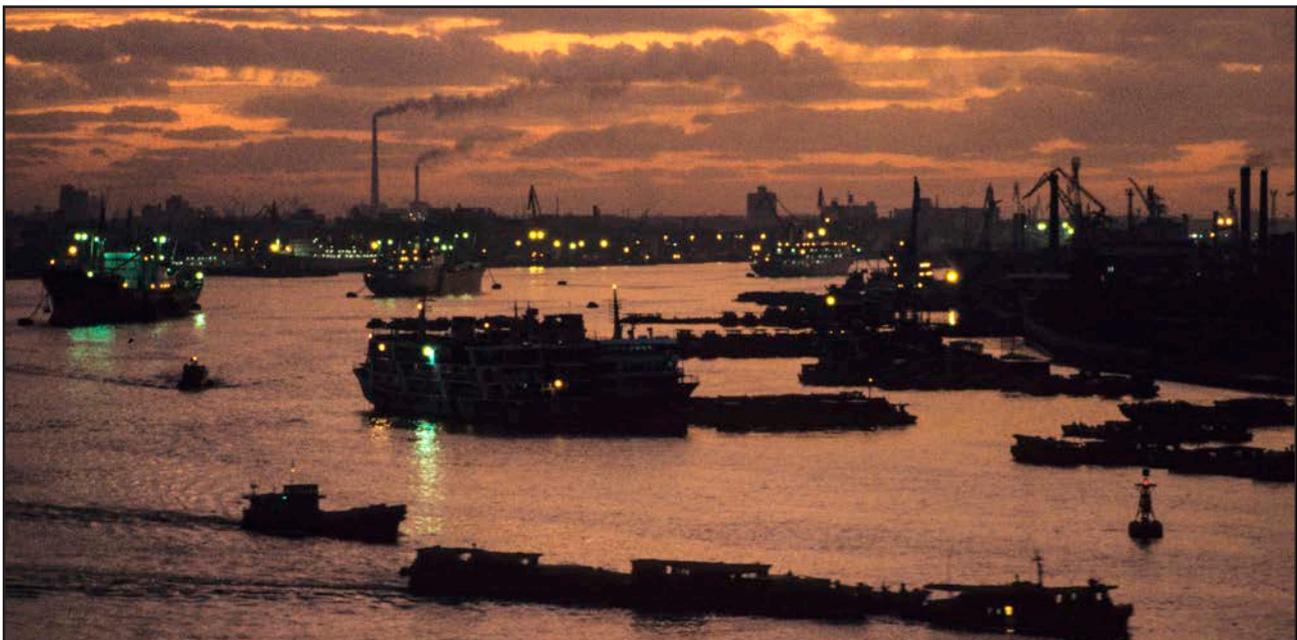
Stayed with Sam in Welwyn before driving into London on a quiet Sunday morning, to Victoria, from where we took the train to Gatwick, and Sam took the car home. China Airways was fine in a 747, with good food, and plenty of Coke and wine. Midnight stop at Sharjah (the cheap option among the Emirates re-fuelling stops) with nothing to see.

Monday August 26, Xian

Cloud cover into Beijing, and we are first out because we have only hand baggage. Change money at $9Y = \pounds 1$ (that's Foreign Exchange Certificates, which are all that foreigners are supposed to use, and have a black-market value a bit above RMB, 'people's money'). Across to Domestic Terminal, and change the



Dawn over Shanghai from our hotel window.



tickets for an earlier flight to Xian only 2h 30m after arrival. Window seats near wing, but few views over cloud cover. Xian is warm and humid.

Haggle a taxi from 30Y down to 20Y to far side of town and huge, empty Renmin Hotel, 120Y for room with bath, air con and TV. Walk to station but FEC office closed, so book Hua Shan train tickets at Jiefang Hotel CITS branch (China International Travel Service where foreigners can book travel and pay with FEC). Huge thunderstorm, so buy umbrellas. Then have to cross town to CITS at Xian Hotel, to order train tickets out of Chongqing. Easy taxi ride through flooded streets; one woman wearing white shoes goes up to her ankles in mud. Also book for a tour to the Terracotta Army on Tuesday, 195Y each, double the locals' cost but eliminates multiple hassles, so worth the extra.

Bus back into town, then walk to huge and impressive town walls and gates. Hotel is dead at 8.30pm and only two others in the dining room. Early night after long flight and long day. Good first impressions, with bright people, families on pavements, old folks on stools, short skirts, snakes in the market, glimpses of the hutongs, bicycles everywhere, a few cars, and not many westerners.

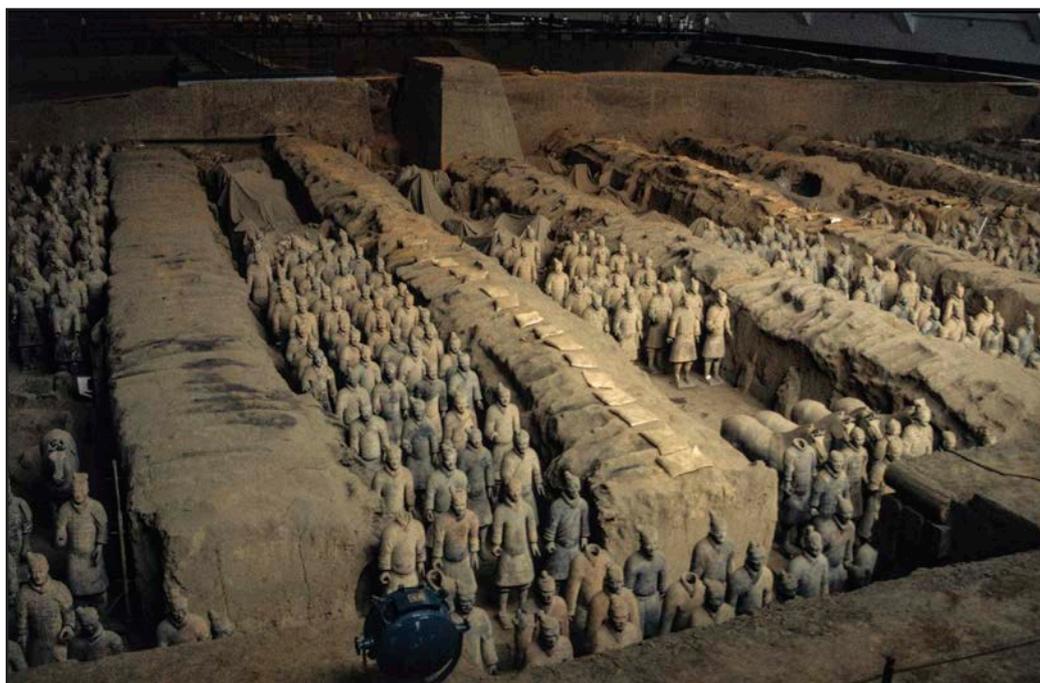
Tuesday August 27, Terracotta Army

Wake to grey morning, and ready for tour bus that arrives early at 8.50; just us, two French, two Germans and two Hong Kong Chinese (all from hotels at 150-200Y); very comfortable and the guide is OK. Good drive out with chaotic traffic; even cyclists play chicken with the bus. First stop at Banpo Neolithic village; not very exciting, all protected within a giant hangar. Then east on a toll motorway, the first in China, opened in 1990.

At end of motorway, up through village to the Qinshihuang tombs etc. Pass conical hill that is the actual mausoleum of Qin (died 210BC) The army was only found (by peasants digging a well) in 1974 a mile or so east of the tomb hill. Now a huge tourist site with vast hangar over the main pit, and entrance fee of 30Y. The army of warriors is very impressive, lined up in trenches that were roofed over by timbers, much of the site still not excavated, and some parts with broken figures. Photos not allowed from viewing platform, but take some from under coat, with Jan off to the side telling me the angle to point down at. Also on display chariots and horses, half size, all in bronze, inlaid with gold and silver. All well worth the visit.



On top of the town walls of Xian.



Excavated part of the Terracotta Army, in our clandestine photo taken from the viewing gallery.

Bus east to Huaqing hot springs; even larger tourist complex at back of Lintong town. Spring is in dull square pool, but paths and buildings impressive with hordes of Chinese tourists and stalls with food, souvenirs, ivory and animal furs. Excellent included meal in self-service cafe. Back through Xian and south to Dayan Pagoda, Buddhist with views lost in drizzle. Then cloisonne factory with girls twisting brass strips with pliers to copy patterns by eye before inlaying with enamel.



Proud display of furs on a market stall.

Back in Xian, go to CITC office and told train tickets will be waiting in Chongqing office. Plane tickets will only be ready on Thursday. Then bus across town to the other CITS office for train tickets to Hua Shan, but only for the 10am train. Stay in Jiefang Hotel for good dinner of pork, beef, veg, rice, beer, Coke for 24Y. Walk back through dusk; lots of shops, good food street; but bar in hotel is dead loss. Into our room for 9pm, after a good day.

Wednesday August 28, Hua Shan

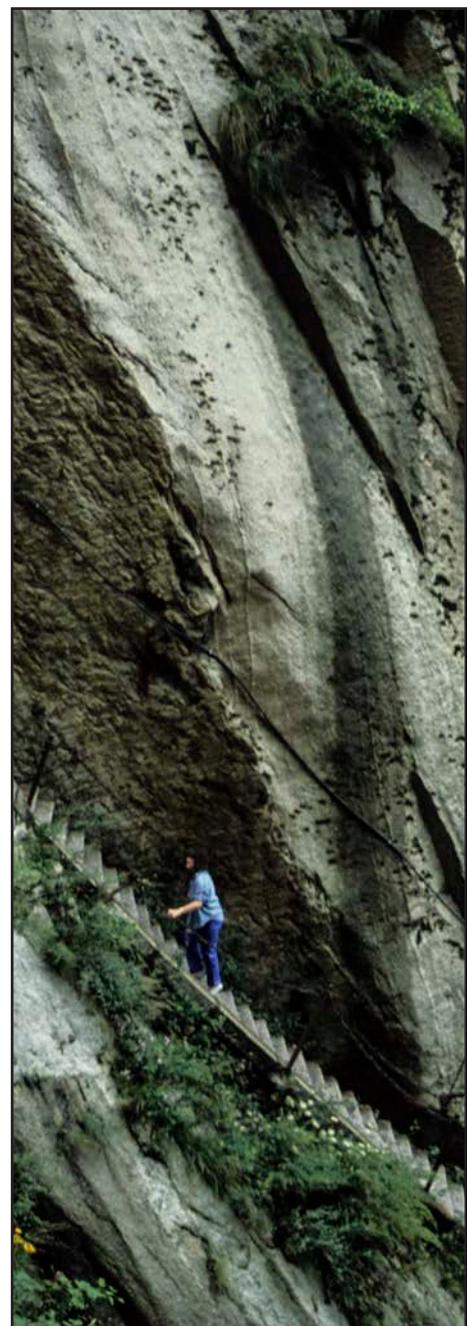
Another dull morning but no rain. Omelettes for breakfast in dining room with just us and seven staff. Pack up and take #3 bus to station for 10f. Milling crowds; we buy drinks and wait in main waiting room. At 9.20 someone shouts that the #520 train is from the upstairs waiting room. Then onto the platforms, but no signs for the #520; but we find it and get in; it starts in Xian, so plenty of room and we have four seats to ourselves; electric loco, and all 15 coaches are hard seat. Leaves dead on time, but stops everywhere for two or ten minutes. Pass the Qin tomb tumulus, corn fields, and loess terraces with caves,

Arrive Hua Shan at 13.10; no pinyin on station, but recognise Chinese on previous station, so are ready; then conductress comes to tell us; very kind. Right at foot of spectacular granite mountain. Walk down dirt road, then man off the train suggests a bus to the Shier Dong Binguan (Twelve Caves Travel Inn); the 'bus' is a knackered motorbike with a trailer for 5Y on a route of 12 km across fields and up paths with first gear about to disintegrate. The Inn is in a Buddhist monastery, beside the Hua Shan entrance, and just below the railway. 60Y for a room, very hard bed, two broken chairs, and at the far end of the garden a loo with no flush because it has a free drop into the pig sty beneath. The grunting could be disturbing.

At 2pm we leave to walk up the holy mountain. Lots of tourist stalls, with drinks and oranges, a mega-path of granite blocks, lots of Chinese but not too many to spoil the walk. No sun, so not too hot, and magical clouds around the peaks. Through zone of gneiss and ultrabasics, then coarse white granite with aplites and pegmatites. Walk 5 km up a valley between huge granite walls, then 1000m up steps and past temples; last run of steps up gully at 60° with chains for hauling on. Very impressive. More steps to temple at North Peak and great views of faces below other peaks. Time precludes at 5pm, so we turn back, and are down at the monastery by 7.30.

Very good dinner in street cafe, with beef, mushrooms, veg, oranges, beer, tea for 30Y. Dusk and back to hotel with noisy street outside. Noisy night with shouting hawkers worse than the trains.

Stone steps up Hua Shan.





Shopping and family dining in the busy morning market in the village of Hua Shan.

Thursday August 29, Xian

Cloudy morning turned into sunshine. Walkabout in monastery gardens with carved rocks. Walk down into the 'town' and become centre of attraction when we stop to buy some food. Then take another motorbike taxi along main road, but leave it where the track up to the station is crowded with an excellent market, where we walk up past endless vegetable stalls and children.

Train due at 10.30, so wait on steps, and eventually buy tickets at 5Y each (locals' rate); all entrances locked, so walk round the end and onto the platform. Train is late; have to climb over a goods train to reach the far platform. We get window seats, and it's not crowded. Many long stops when passed by expresses and freight trains, and into Xian at 3.30, two hours late.

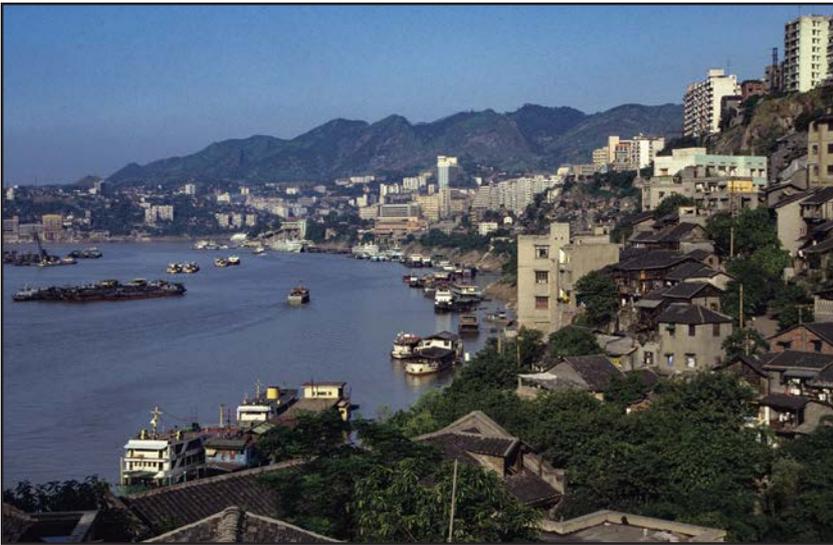
Check into Jiefang Hotel for 99Y, better than the Renmin. Then #5 bus across town to CITS office in huge new Tangchang Hotel and girl soon appears with our one double ticket for tomorrow's flight. Taxi back to town, and walk along town wall, superb 10m high and wide, unbroken and great views from the southeast corner. Walk back through fun back streets and markets, with many photo stops. Jan buys some waffles, but they are brown tofu and horrible. Battered fried eggs and bread rolls are much better. So much food and so much life; an excellent afternoon. Back to station square, and into Jiefang Hotel for a good dinner of beef and peppers for 10Y, and amusing argument on next table. Outside to buy beer and Coke, and wander through the crowds, including many hookers. A good day, even if the train rides took longer than expected.

Friday August 30, Chongqing

Up at 7.00 and it is still dark after it was light at 8pm because we are on Beijing summer time. Taxi as ordered, through silent streets to airport. Easy check-in. Got window seats on request; they normally just dish out seats in sequence, even on different rows. Only hand baggage, which saves hassle. In lounge, one man doing huge tai chi routine; absolutely no shame. Plane had 60 seats, and 2 propellers below high wing; good views, low flight, noisy, and heavy vibrations. Need to circle to gain height to cross beautiful mountains, forested in blue sky above cloud in Xian valley. Endless terracing in Red Basin, and long descent to Chongqing airport. Straight through modern terminal, and CAAC bus for 3.5Y each, soon full, including fold-down seats in aisle. 40-minute drive through lovely country of red shale and sandstone ridges. Into city from the north and over Jialing River.

Only ten minutes' walk to huge Renmin Hotel. Excellent room for 160Y in refurbished block. Find the CITS office and tomorrow's train tickets are waiting; cost 173Y (about £19, compared with £79 if bought ahead in England). On train #73 leaving at 10.30am and due in around 9.30pm.

Superb walkabout in city; no other westerners all day. Bus to centre, then cable car across Jialing (60f at locals' price) to north side; great back streets, no vehicles possible, lovely markets, superb views, many staring squads as we are rather unusual visitors to that part of town. Then ferry back to Chaotianmen Dock. Walk along south side of town, via endless back streets and flights of steps, a few very dirty houses and everywhere steeped



Morning tai chi.

Chongqing and the Yangtze River.

Below: Huangguoshu Waterfall.

in character. Cable car over Yangtze and back (3.2Y at tourist rate). Fantastic ride of a kilometre over houses and river, with brown floodwater backing up into the Jialing; coal barges move very slowly.

Back through town, and round department store. Stop off bus for fantastic views in clear evening air, and see a local bus with huge rubber bags of gas on roof. Dinner in hotel; nobody else, just seven waiters; the Tiananmen Square impact on visitors has not yet worn off. Evening walkabout thin, with few food stalls; pass a dentist's surgery open to the street, and a hospital with wards off the pavement. Hotel bar for quick drinks, cheaper than in the shops.

Saturday August 31, train to Guiyang

Up at 8.00 and walk around hotel to conference hall; like the Albert Hall, but better outside than inside. Then taxi to station via tunnel. Wrong directions, but at third attempt find the entrance tunnel tucked away amid a construction site for an entire station re-build. Long queues in hall for train #73, the Shanghai Express, so use the foreign-guest technique and go in parallel entrance straight onto platform. Buy beer and pineapple, then onto train in comfort and style in hard sleeper coach. Spectacular spitting and hawking, and rubbish all over. One man speaks a bit of English and is keen to practice his pronunciation with Jan. We buy good box meals of rice and mixed vegetables.

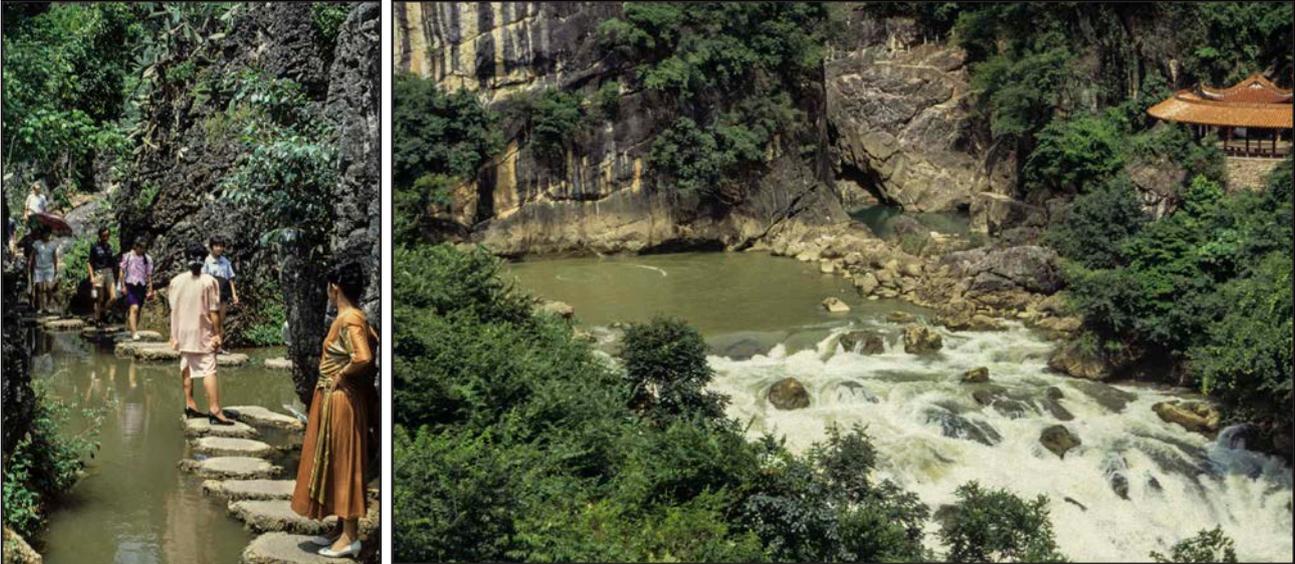
Train goes alongside the Yangtze, through endless suburbs of high-rise flats, then over the river and climb into sandstone hills. Into limestone on high ridge and then down to Wu Jiang, before even longer climb through cone karst that gets better south of Zunyi, with many large cave entrances. Line is being electrified.

Dark into Guiyang at 9.30pm. Met by Zhang Yinjun, Tan Ming and Zhang Ren. Taken to Plaza Hotel, only a year old; 130Y in FEC for excellent room on 14th floor, and bar on roof at 25th level. The whole city looks good; greatly improved on 1985. Short evening and Zhang Xinghuai (the English prof.) calls in.

Sunday September 1, Tianxingqiao

Tan Ming comes round at 8.00 with university car and driver Seng. Early breakfast in a nearby pavement cafe. "Guess what it is" says Tan; we give up; "Congealed blood and stomach" he says with delight. Road to Daji Dong has been washed out by recent floods, so our day out will be in the Zhenning karst. New motorway out to Anshun and then bypass through splendid cone karst, then a new highway out past Zhenning to Huangguoshu. The waterfall is now a major tourist site with lots of new development. For just 3Y entrance fee, walk round trails with endless stalls and





Tourist trail and resurgence pool at Tianxingqiao.

photo booths, and through caves and tunnels in the tufa screen behind the waterfall. All really good. Then back up to road for lunch in an open-air cafe; best yet, with chicken, beef and ginger all stir-fried over a coal fire within an oil drum.

Then 5 km down the valley to Tianxingqiao, Natural Bridges Park, where the entire river goes underground in a spectacular white-water sink, and reappears after less than 500 metres at a superb resurgence pool. Great walk around stone forest, waterfalls, gorges and viewpoints; a magnificent site.

Back through the Longgong karst, and sadly straight past many colourful Miao villages. Into Guiyang for 7.30 and call it a day to get some peace on our own. Passable dinner in the hotel, but cannot buy stamps that are small enough to fit onto a postcard to England. Good evening walkabout to see a bit of Guiyang street life.

Monday September 2, Guiyang

Lazy morning until Tan Ming comes round at 9.45. Walkabout in town; many good shops, better than Chongqing; walk as far as the Jinqiao. Then a private minibus back to the university; 60f instead of 20f on the public buses, but we have seats. To Zhang Yingjun's flat for lunch with ten others, including Chen, He (chief of university, just out of hospital so not drinking for the first time ever) and Zhang Xinghuai. Great meal with 15 dishes, many with ginger or chilli, also good lotus stem; all prepared by Mrs Zhang and daughter-in-law. Centrepiece is Eight Jewels Pudding, a traditional ceremonial dish of rice topped with eight different dried fruits, including goji berries, red dates, raisins, lotus seeds and candied water melon. His flat has just six rooms, each ten feet square, one is Zhang's office. Various talks, with pleas for exchange visits and research posts.

Talking to Tan Ming, we get some idea of living costs (all in Yuan, at 10Y = £1); as assistant lecturer he earns 1500 per year; Zhang gets 3000; Tan pays 15 per month for flat on campus including electricity and water; a flat in town is 100-200 per month; car costs 100,000, TV 3000. Tan has a TV and also various subsidies from the university.

Then off to university department to present lecture on karst. A bit basic, with a sheet for a screen, but it had not even been ironed. Then tour the department, with good new library, but lacking any displays or inspiration. Back to hotel for early evening feast hosted by He. In his speech he compares Jan and myself to London Bridge; difficult to think of a reply. By 8.30, everyone gone, and peace at last after two very sociable days. Collected train tickets that had been obtained by the hotel, but only after we had provided passports to buy the only two tickets reserved for foreigners.

Tuesday September 3, train through the karst

Heavy rain all night, but stops at dawn. Zhang, Zhang, Chen and Tan down to the station to see us off via the soft class waiting room. We have good hard sleeper berths on train #80. Less crowded than in previous years, and fewer standing in the hard seat coaches.

Good journey; some flooded streets in Guiyang, then clearer in open country. Excellent karst with fenglin towers on the plateau at their best around Dushan, then descend into gorges through great fengcong cone karst,

best around Mawi. The cones get higher, almost towers before dusk towards the lowlands of Liuzhou. Into Guilin at 03.40am, and Zhu is at the station. Soon to bed in a conference centre room, like a mid-rate hotel.

Wednesday September 4, Guilin

Zhu suggests a late start after the broken night, so breakfast at 7.30am! Egg and steamed bun, then to his office for tea (better than dubious canteen milk) with useful discussions about Xingwen project planned for next year (the area looks superb) and about joint visit to Tibet (which he calls Xizang). Hu Mengyu calls in for a good visit to the karst museum, where Mrs Hu is a guide. Catch up with Yuan Daoxian before lunch in the Institute.

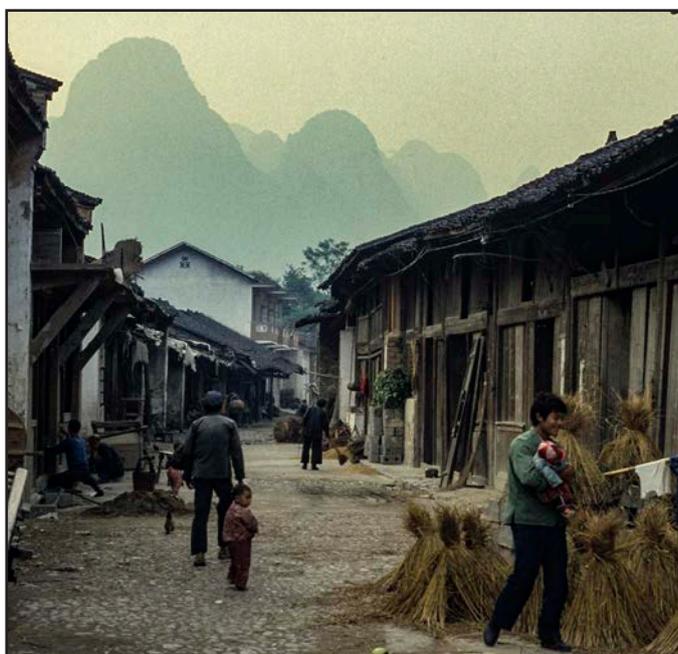
Take a bus into town, confirm the Hangzhou flight, and buy boat tickets for 155Y each, one-way to Yangshuo (though only 175Y for round trip back on bus). Walkabout in town, but it is hot at 95, and not as interesting as Xian or Chongqing; a few westerners about, but hardly crowded. Take bus back to the Institute in the rush hour, then evening writing notes, with very good green oranges.

Thursday September 5, Li Jiang

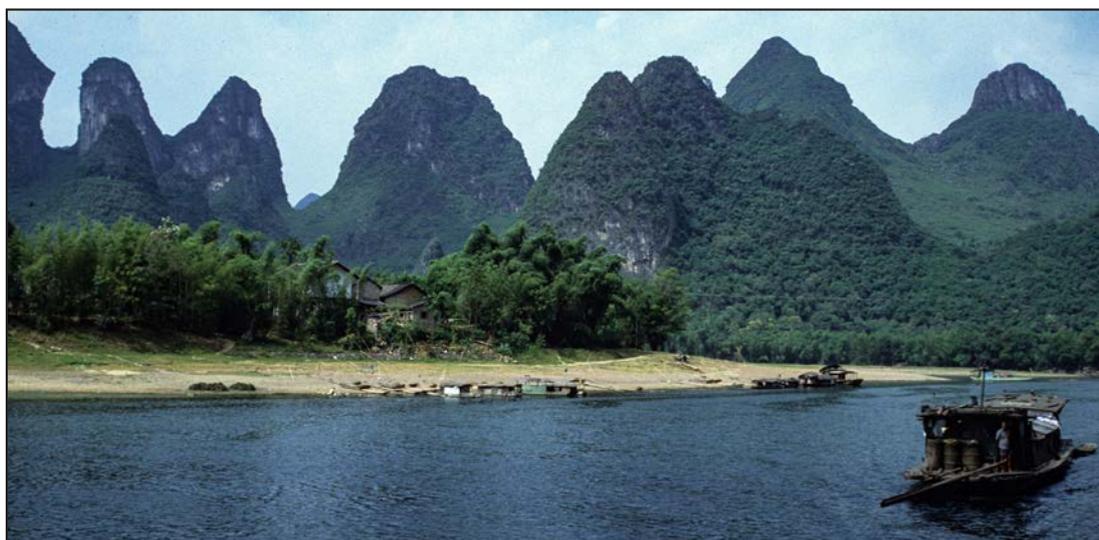
Wake at 7.00 again because of Jane Fon Da Tai Chi with a ghetto-blaster just outside our window; horrendous. Pay 105Y for the two nights, and leave at 8.00. Crowded #14 bus into town and walk to the Li Jiang Hotel through residential district with babies being bathed, teeth cleaned, chins shaved, all out on the street. Very fat American tourists in the lobby, but at 9.30 sent to bus for five-minute ride to Dock #1. Only 16 of us on a smaller boat (though seats for 40), and a good upper deck floored with with astroturf. Leave at 9.50 for the ultimate karst river trip down the Li Jiang.

Great out through town, past Daxu, then some 2 km downstream to large boat dock on west bank; there are now 120 boats on the river and most start from here; we were lucky to have the smaller boat starting at Guilin. Much of the river channel has been dredged. Hot and sunny, but the usual haze. Stop at Caoping for visit to rice spirit factory in a house (very potent), and quick look along main street, still very attractive but with a new road into the far end. Hurry back to boat, then stop at Guanyan. Short path to the cave, then ride a bamboo raft into three lake chambers via arches that had been blasted since we found the way through in 1985; minimal lighting, coloured of course, and very effective. Guide says that most boats do not stop, as cannot handle large numbers on the rafts.

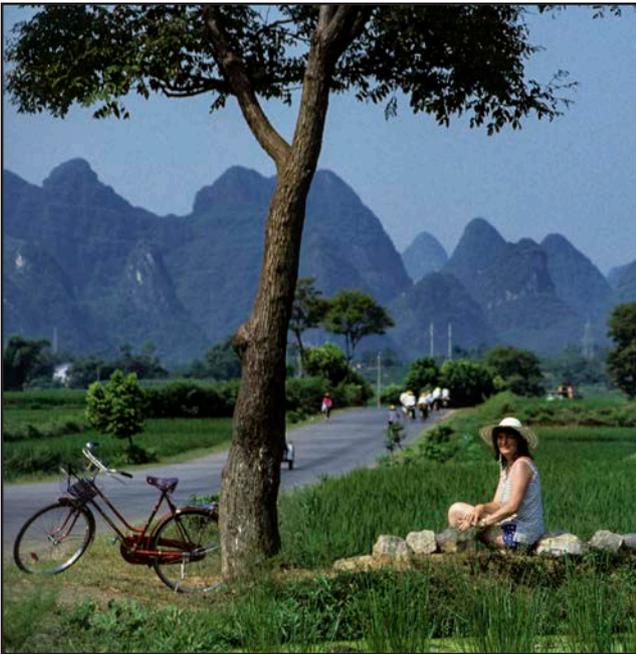
On down-river still excellent, though power cables across dome panoramas; many freight



Main street in Caoping.



Just one part of the endless panorama of tall limestone towers that make the boat ride down the Li Jiang one of the world's classic karst experiences.



A break beside the road to Fuli.



Hard work at Gaolian.

barges; fishermen with cormorants, nets or spears; multitudes of ducks, grazing buffaloes, and wading weed gatherers; but the village of Yangti appears to be rather in decline.

Into Yangshuo at 5pm. Main street is very touristy for first 100 metres from boat dock. But then is a really good small town; clean stone streets; endless cafes and shops; signs in English, and shades of Pokhara since it has become a major stop on the back-packer trail; but again fairly quiet post-Tiananmen. Into Yangshuo Hotel at 60Y for a large room with air con and a bathroom (compared with others at 35Y with neither). Helpful man at CITS, and the whole place is geared up for foreigners.

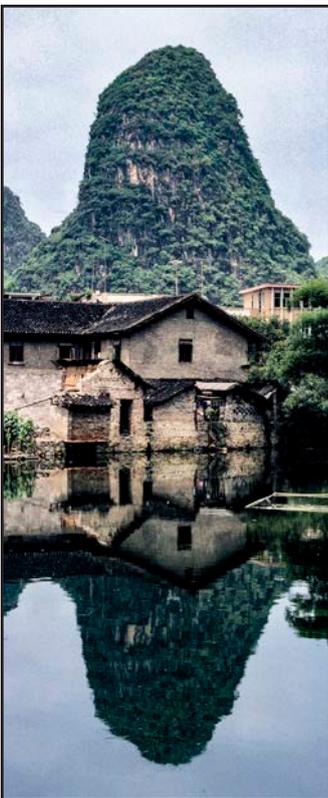
Walkabout to river and a little downstream for great tower views, and back via side streets and big food market; good dinner in a pavement cafe; endless stalls with beer and Coke; late-night cafes; good ambience.

Bought a wonderful walnut shell with tiny figures carved into it, still one of our best souvenirs. Dubious electricians in the hotel but they hold together. Another really good day.

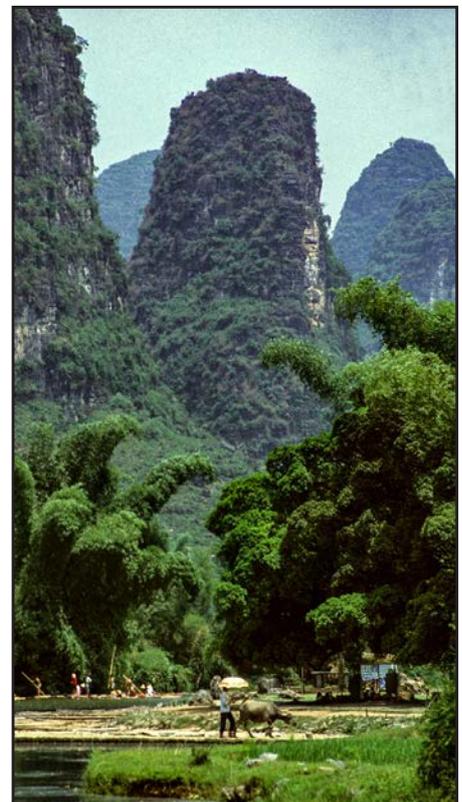
Friday September 6, Yangshuo

Late up at 8am for an easy day. Rent bicycles out front for 3Y per day, and good ones too. Head south on Wuzhou road through fabulous tower karst with vertical walls 200m tall everywhere. Rice paddies below with farmers scooping water. Cross river with beautiful views, and 8 km from town arrive at Moon Hill Park, Yue Liang Shan. 70f entry and 10f to park the bikes, then 20 minutes' walk up stone steps to viewpoint inside huge cave arch. Dirt path to top 200m above the plain, with fantastic views but hazy. Drinks in arch on return.

Cycle on a few kilometres to Gaolian village with more towers and paddies. Return to Banyan Tree, and



Yangshuo.



Gaolian.



Fuli village.

Tower karst at its best.



Tower of Shu Tong Shan, and our ferry from Fuli.

walk through to lovely stone village, buffaloes and cave with path through to viewpoint with an old man. Very hot sun; back on road with endless tour buses, all full of Chinese off the boats. Back to town at 4pm and ride out on road east. Over the Li bridge onto shale inlier, and views of Shu Tong Shan, a splendid tower in clearer evening light. Meet a school teacher on the bridge and go back to his house, which is little more than one very bare room.

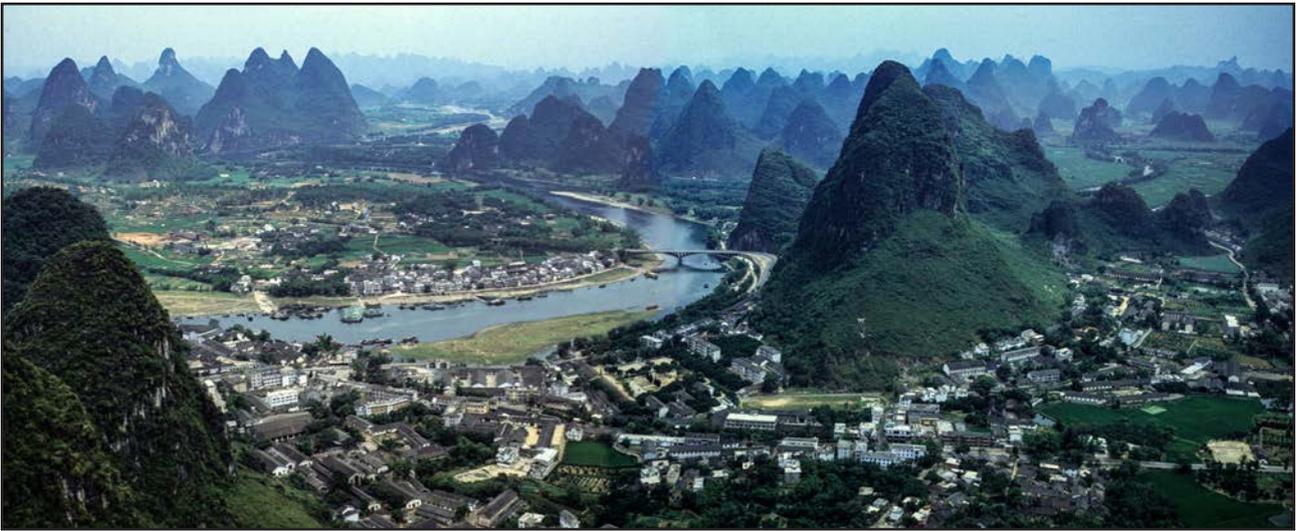
Back into Yangshuo for walkabout in markets, with tobacco, dog cooking and de-furring with blow lamps, ducklings etc; all very easy-going. Enjoyable evening in street cafes, with various travellers to talk with, and a good dinner for 11Y. The ordered chop stones are not yet ready, and the CITS office has minimal tours on offer; the Lotus Cave is closed because of damage.

Saturday September 7, Fuli

Lazy up at 8.00, and drop off laundry before collecting bikes again. Head out east to Fuli. Good new road with a tunnel under some towers, but tower karst across more open plains unlike the road south. Tiresome student at one stop, wants to practise his English; not enough westerners about this year.

After 8 km cold drinks on the main road and turn south into excellent old town of Fuli, larger than Caoping and with good central market. Many stone buildings, workshops, shops, flour mill, schools. Lots of atmosphere, great when hordes of kids pour out of





Panorama of the magnificent karst around Yangshuo and the Li Jiang, seen from the top of Pantao Shan.

school at midday, and are mightily amused to see two foreigners standing in a doorway. Farmers in adjacent fields, tailors, kapok quilt factory; a live dog horribly trussed up on a pole, heading for market. Then catch a ferry back up the river (15Y tourist rate, with just us with our bikes and four Dutch on board). Wonderful ride for 45 minutes, past fishermen, freight barges, bamboo, buffaloes and fenglin towers. Best of all the limestone towers is Shu Tong Shan, where we turn up the Banyan tributary and are dropped off at a bridge under a country lane. Only a few minutes back into Yangshuo. Was an excellent trip out; Fuli was a real highlight.

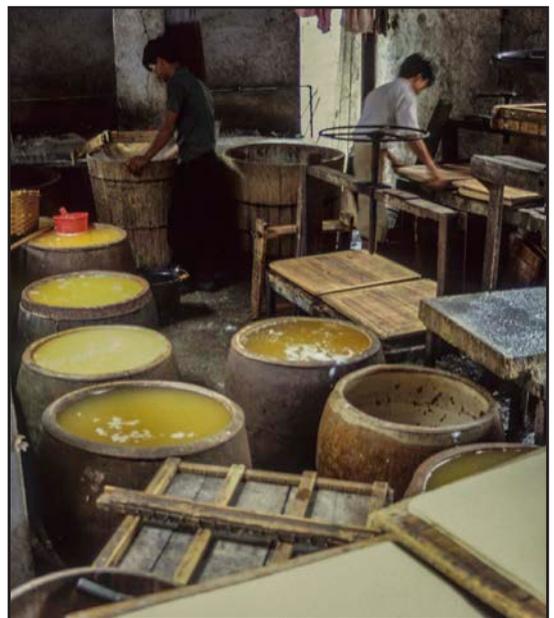
Drop the bikes off, then walkabout in town, and watch the tour boats coming in. Find that there are frequent buses to Guilin. String of cafes (including Mickey Mao's) out on the main road are too touristy for the backpackers as they cater for the boat tours. The main street in town has much the better ambience. Back to hotel for baths, but no hot water at 6pm. Kid on street has a praying mantis on a piece of string, but teaching it to fly cannot help its condition. Walk out to bridge for a modest sunset, then to an excellent cafe for the best meal outside Guiyang, beef, peppers, pork, mushrooms, mixed veg, two Cokes and two beers all for 20Y. Back to hotel for feeble showers, and News in English on TV at 10.30pm. Another excellent day, even though very hot.

Sunday September 8, Yangshuo

Cloudy morning, but out by 9am. Cycle some kilometres along Guilin road, but scenery not so inspiring. So return to first large polje west of Yangshuo; floor of rice paddies and fish farms surrounded by superb towers. Ride out along some rather narrow footpaths, through beautiful little villages, then onto a good canal-side path. Cross new road being built towards tunnel where hand-held drilling precedes blasting. Then into back end of town, via an old man's garden of rocks and gnomes, and a horrendous tofu factory with curdling, separating, drying and pressing stages all in one small shed.

To Yangshuo Park for a quick look up its hill, then Jan to the shops and cafes while I walk up Pantao Shan; we had found a tenuous route to this, at the backs of houses to an unsigned upward footpath. Rough path of rock and concrete up 1400 steps to a TV transmitter tower; 30 minutes' hard going but the best karst views ever.

Back down for a walkabout together, and join a CITS tour to the local hospital; paediatric, gynae, ENT, surgical, all out there and horribly basic, with ancient drips and oxygen cylinders; no surgery or acupuncture because it's a Sunday; lots of people lying around with huge wounds and crude dressings, and with visiting families. Back to main street for a good dinner and sociable evening, but then the 10.30 TV News is in French on Sundays.



Tofu factory at Yangshuo.

Monday September 9, Hangzhou

Possible dawn views from top of Green Lotus Hill ignored because of bad state of overgrown path. Down to river for 7am sunrise, but only modest, then up Pantao Hill again but the visibility is even poorer than yesterday; while Jan has cafe breakfast. To bus station for 10am, and buy tickets for 3.1Y each and instantly on a bus to Guilin; very efficient for 90 minutes' ride to terminus at Guilin train station. Walk into town past endless new hotels, to CAAC office. Great street watching, mainly of bicycles, many near-accidents, stalls offering dried lizards etc. Worst are the restaurants with live food in cages for diners to select: chickens, fish, snakes, tortoise, terrapins, crayfish, some unknown little furry animals, and even a live pangolin. At 2pm, free bus out to airport, and usual waiting before flight on a 737 to Hangzhou. Cloudy most of the way but some glimpses of the huge city on the approach.



Ferry boat dock at Hangzhou.

Usual hassle with taxi into town, and settle on second hotel, the Wanghu, that is better located nearer town; room is 210Y but can pay with credit card. Passable but expensive dinner in rooftop restaurant at 7pm dusk, then short walkabout. Hangzhou looks OK, leafy streets and many folk walking by lake.

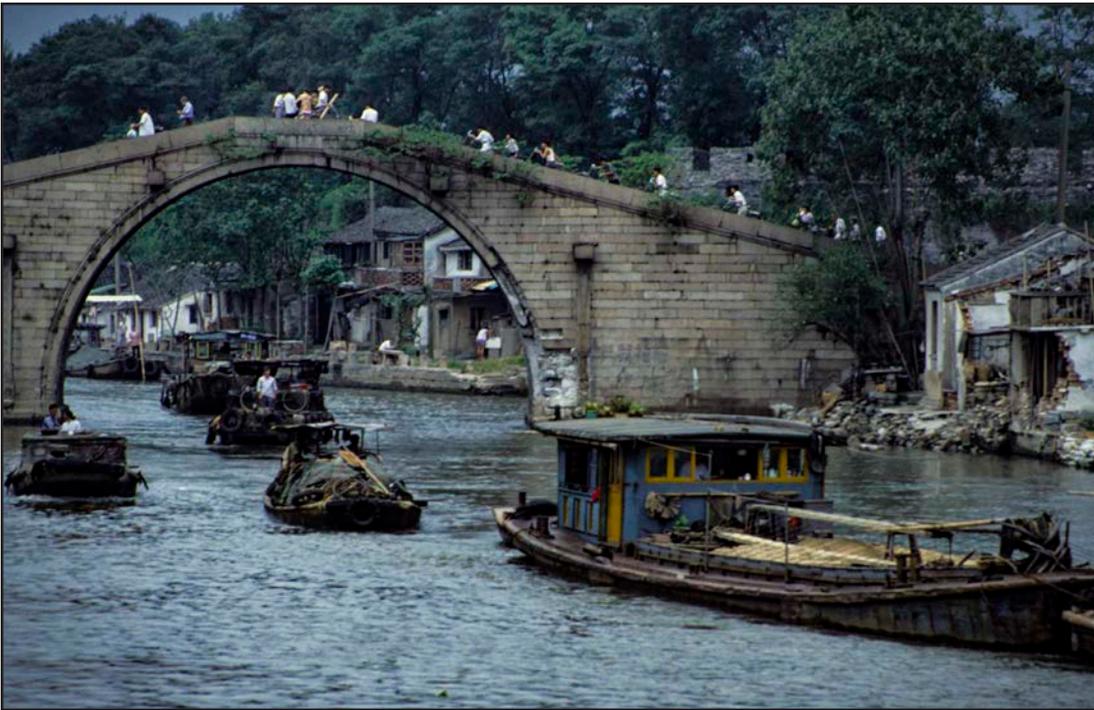
Tuesday September 10, Grand Canal

Frustrating morning in hot, sultry, humid, misty weather. Hotel buffet breakfast is expensive at 20Y but good. CITS desk is useless and we are told to go into town, but to a CAAC office. No bus stops nearby, and then all the trolley buses stop because of a power cut; total chaos and timetables become useless. We resort to a taxi and a pedicab. Eventually find the ferry office to book tickets, but can only go on the night boat, so take them at 29Y each. Back to hotel and find the CITS office hidden away on the 4th floor of an unused building; but really helpful folk. They tell us the big bore on the Qiantang River is on the 24th, is very small at the pagoda bridge, and is best seen downstream at Yanguan (so it is next year that I get to see it). They also explain that the day boats to Suzhou are very dirty, crowded and with few windows, so best avoided; and our night boat is very basic, definitely not a tourist boat.

Take a bus out to Lingyin, superb park with endless Buddha carvings in limestone hills and caves; monastery remains have restored Buddhas including one 18m tall, wood and fabulously decorated. Walk back via Bai Di causeway, and take a taxi to the boat dock.



On the Grand Canal.



Old stone bridge across the Grand Canal through Wumen, a suburb of Suzhou.

*Below:
In the Garden of the Master of the Nets, in Suzhou.*

Boat leaves at 5.30 on time. Three boats are tied together like a train; we are in the middle on the best boat with 4-berth cabins and an open deck above. We are the only foreigners on board, with 240 in berths and 200 in seats. We have good pork and rice for 10Y, having brought beer and Coke from the terminal. Excellent views from the upper deck. The Grand Canal (Da Yunhe = big cloud river) is wonderful; 100m wide, canal-side houses, a few old stone-arch bridges; and ceaseless traffic, with a few hand-powered but mostly with diesels, including one train of 12 barges. Really busy, right into the night; an excellent evening.

Wednesday September 11, Suzhou

Into Suzhou dock half an hour after dawn, only in through an industrial zone. Shortage of buses, so walk to the Nanlin Hotel; over the top at 250Y, but luxurious, and could check in at 8am.

Soon off for walkabout. Into Wangshi Yuan (Garden of the Master of the Nets), a classic Suzhou garden; tiny, neat complex of lakes, rocks, grottoes, trees, pavilions with old furniture; another era, a haven of peace; meet old professor whose father was at Birmingham University and he goes to the garden every morning. Back streets of town are lovely, canals with a few boats, not easy for pictures in poor light, some fine old houses, weeping willows. Buy good bread rolls, wonderful barbecued pork (chashao ru), pastry, Coke etc from little shops, and have snack beside a canal. The famed cake shops along the pedestrianized main street look awful and a hundred years old. Xuanmian Taoist temple had fine statues, markets and a sword-swallower. Then some rain, and chaos on the buses again.

Walk south to Grand Canal to book ferry to Wuxi, but it is not running because of floods (how do you flood a canal?). Wumen Bridge has a beautiful stone arch, with cycle ramp beside steps over it. Buses not running because of massive traffic jam where overhead cables are being fixed; so long walk. Dinner in cafe at Xumaen, good but over-priced. Walk back through side streets at dusk, seeing into lighted houses; many birds in the trees. Could spend longer here if weather was a bit brighter.



Thursday September 12, Shanghai

Wake to loud martial music from school across the road. Leave after 9am, with short walk to #2 bus, and an excellent ride sitting down, through western suburbs, over many canals, and then through industrial zone to train station; all for 25f each, instead of 32Y in a hotel taxi. But hard seat tickets for 9Y each, and join queue for 1040 train #357 to Shanghai. On platform everyone stands in groups for the doors, but train comes in with doors locked. Huge fight to get on, and we get seats by setting a trend with four people on a triple bench seat; locals object at first, but big grins, positive action and lots of 'hong hau's, and all is OK. Train is non-stop for nearly an hour across flat countryside with rice and vegetables and many canals. Through industrial area and onto Shanghai's large new station.

Bluff a taxi down from 50Y to 30Y to the Peace Hotel on the Bund (the river-side embankment); well worth it, traffic is solid on Nanjing Lu, and arrive at hotel at 12.30. No rooms (and other hotels full too) so have suite (using Ma's travel prezzie). Incredible French styling over seven rooms: lounge with gold-thread furnishings and fireplace ornaments and TV; meeting room with a table for eight; hall; large bedroom with another TV; two bathrooms and a dressing room. Ridiculous 1930s luxury, but fantastic; best place in Shanghai, and all for £70 (but we will move to a standard room for the second night). And from our multiple windows, the best-ever views across town, Huangpu River, canals and Bund.

Walkabout along the Bund, and ferry across Huangpu for 25f (return is free), delayed by long train of gravel barges, but with great views of city. Walk out into farmland of Pudong [with bridges and tunnels being built across the river as the only warning of the forest of tower blocks that will be the new city centre in ten years' time]. Stop at trackside stalls for more good barbecued pork, also superb dumplings stuffed with meat and veg at four for 35f. Back across river, then walk south into the old Chinese quarter; spectacular back streets, and no westerners to be seen. Great food market, with woman using scissors to cut heads off frogs, which then jump about headless on nervous reaction before dying in her bowl. Next to market, large and brilliant Yu Garden has lakes with zig-zag bridges, rocks and pavilions with old Chinese furniture including chairs and a table made with banyan roots.

Walk back to hotel, then evening stroll up Nanjing Lu, the main street with bright lights and hordes of people; bicycles are not allowed most of the day so that walkers can take over the cycle tracks that are half the width of the road. Shortage of restaurants because they and shops close at 8pm. So eat in good cafe in hotel lobby with sounds of a jazz band from the bar downstairs. A fabulous day.



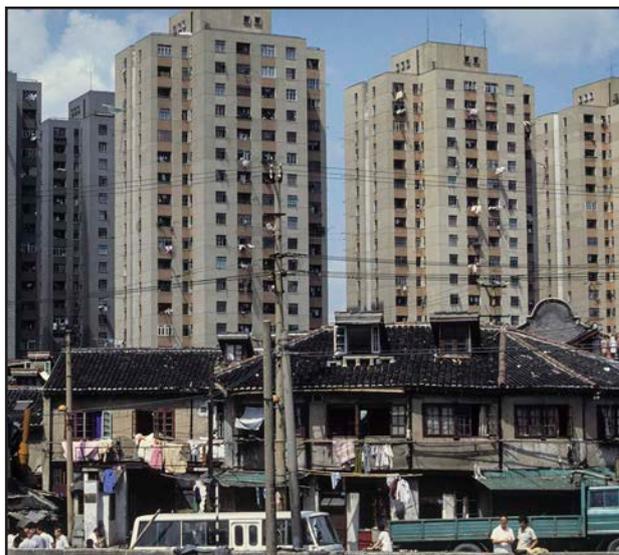
Life goes on in a back street near the Yu market in Shanghai.



The Bund, along the Huangpu River, at the heart of old Shanghai.

Friday September 13, Shanghai

Up at 6.15 for fabulous dawn over the Bund and Huangpo from our suite windows. Down to Bund before 7.00 where many locals there for tai chi and exercises to music; than at 8am, ballroom dancing on the main granite platform, nearby martial arts and endless socializing. Before 9am, we go to CITS to confirm the flights to Beijing, but cannot confirm onwards to London and much confusion as to whether necessary or not. Long walk up Nanjing Lu and round to Suzhou Creek. Really good through the back streets; hot and sunny for photos; hordes of people, crowded buses, barges on the black water of the Creek, making coal-dust briquettes. Lots of good street food for a snack lunch, roast pork again the best, even though enjoyed sitting on steps beside the most evil-smelling canal in the whole of China, and opposite a steel works.



New and old in Shanghai mega-city.

Back to Bund for a few photos, and see that high tide is well above street level; city-wide subsidence due to groundwater abstraction. Excellent dinner at restaurant just up Nanjing Lu, and again no westerners to be seen. Change to a standard room for 230Y with no view, but another good day.

Saturday September 14, Beijing

Up at 6.15, and out to a sunny Bund for the morning performances. Then 7.00 hotel bus to the airport, with a great ride through town and suburbs in morning rush hour. New motorways and massive scale of new development around the airport, all signs of Shanghai's impending expansion. Good airport terminal, and breakfast omelettes, before good flight, hazy at first and then cloudy into Beijing.

Song Linhua meets us at the airport. Hassle to re-confirm flights (on ludicrous re-confirmation system that most airlines use). Then airport bus into town; noticeably more traffic and hotels than in 1988. Through Tiananmen Square, and Song takes us for lunch in a tiny restaurant up a back-alley; incredibly Chinese, we would never have found it on our own, and hygiene was low on its list of priorities. but good food and great fun. Then into Gugong; 30Y for each of us and 8Y for Song (that shows up China as very much third-world even if they are making progress, but their own name Zhongguo means Middle Kingdom and that is the way they think). But Gugong, the old Forbidden City, is huge and very impressive. We are almost literally thrown out at 5pm, so take a very crowded bus west to Song's flat. In a block at back of Institute where Mrs Song works; the flat is basic but better than Zhang's in Guiyang. A good sociable dinner.

Chaotic rush by taxi back to CAAC town office, to catch the airport bus for 8Y each. Hassle with airport tax of 40Y, then chronic sequence of checks before check-in. No bank, no bar; really is a dump of an airport (though run-down prior to huge new airport due soon) and a final reminder of how far behind China really is.

Sunday September 15, home

Long featureless flight through the extended night, passable dinner and Sharjah again featureless in darkness. Into Gatwick at 8.30am, and home for 1.30. End of our great China experience.



Tai chi on the Bund, Shanghai.

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