

Guangdong and Gaungxi (i.e., east Guang and west Guang)

Our trip began in Guangzhou, the capital of the province of Guangdong. Both the province and the city are more known by the name Canton. We were there to accompany James and his parents that came to visit relatives and pay respect to the late grandparents who are buried there.

The province of Canton is viewed by many Chinese as a strange and "suspected" province. This is because of their relative autonomy and self-sufficiency, their proximity to Hong Kong, their distinctive tongue (that is spoken also in Hong Kong), their very distinctive and bizarre cuisine and their strong ties with "foreign barbarians". Canton city is repelling at first: massive air-pollution (now I realize that this comes almost automatically with the title "city" in China), millions of people, cars and bikes, and a restless fast pace. Only after some time you get to observe the charm and fascination of its markets, the vitality of its newer parts and the tranquility in its more relaxed parts. The city that looks like Delhi at daytime, transforms into a Paris when the night descends. The Pearl River becomes a Seine with its illuminated bridges and the bright tour boats, and numerous restaurants and clubs along its northern bank explode of light and people. Not to mention that the air pollution is less observed at night. We ate at one of the fanciest and largest restaurants in the "light district" along the river. There is much to tell about that extraordinary dinner, but I will keep it for some other time.

Spending few days with James and his family, we couldn't help noticing that they refrain from physical expressions of affection and love. When we met James' cousin in Canton I couldn't believe that the man who accepted his uncle, aunt and cousin with a nod in his head was him. When we drove one day to the old villages of the father and the mother in rural Canton, we were greeted by elated family members that limited themselves to a gentle touching of the shoulder. You must understand - these are relatives that haven't seen James and his parents for a long time and do not have a phone in their village. And don't get me wrong: they were truly happy and excited to see each other. But some unwritten rule of etiquette seemed to have prevented them from going any further with their expression of affection. Even when we left the parents and started our trip, Eyal and I felt like hugging James' parents (who were warm, sensitive and lovable) but of course we didn't, because James himself didn't despite the fact that he won't see them for at least few months in which he will travel around the world. When I asked James about it, since in western eyes (and especially Israeli eyes) this seems quite odd, he explained to us that this is how things are (not only with his family but in Chinese families in general) and that they have other, more subtle ways of expressing their feelings.

Let me tell you about the day that we spent in the villages where James' parents grew in order to visit the grandparents' graves. These are very (very!) basic villages of farmers. We began at the father's village. It is almost completely naked of any sign of modernity: clay-brick houses, water pumps, rice fields, buffalos, pig sties - quite different from Canton that was only 2 hours away. The visit of the grandparents' graves was very ceremonial. The local people prepared the necessary "equipment": candies, dry tart cakes (just like we have in Israel), white spongy sugar cakes, hard boiled eggs, rice wine and a whole roasted pig, lying on a large wooden tray, ornamented with red paper. After

exploding two packages of fire-crackers (a strange act that repeated several times throughout the day), the event began. The 25-30 participants, composed of villagers and guests (us), formed a parade after the leading man that carried the pig on his bike. The parade marched through the rice-fields and the forest towards the first grave. Add to the picture the colorful umbrellas that each one of us held as a puny weapon against the cruel sun and you get a surreal scene that could have been easily taken from a film of Fellini.

At the grave, the women lit scent-sticks, peeled the eggs, spread the food and then James and his parents stood in front of the grave and said few silent words while holding their two hands together in a praying manner. After the short ceremony finished, the food was recollected and we moved to another grave, where the whole ceremony repeated. The interesting thing is that they do not have a cemetery - the graves are scattered all over the place, far away from each other. Despite the unbearable heat, we visited the graves of what seems to be all of James' father's relatives. At the end, the big pig was chopped to small pieces within few minutes and everybody was welcome to eat from the pig, the cakes and the rice wine. Surprisingly, the leader of the ceremony went around and gave 20 Yuan (about 2.3 US\$) to each of the villager participants (Eyal and I were also offered this donation but we declined it politely with a timid smile).

Later on we drove to the mother's village. The ceremonies there were similar. The only difference was that the parade was motorized this time: 1 van, 1 motor wagon (a strange noisy vehicle) and 3 motorbikes on which James, Eyal and I were taken. That could have been a scene from a modern remake of a Fellini-film.

From Canton, we took the night train to Guilin in Guangxi. Guilin and its area rank very high in the list of touristy attractions of China. You all know the famous pictures of the many tall and sharp krast pinnacles of that area, with a man on a bamboo raft on the Li River (Li-jiang) that flows there.

The place where everybody goes to see this scenery is the town of Yangshuo, one hour south of Guilin. This is a very touristic place with many western restaurants that is ready to take your money from the minute you step off the bus. Despite a loud criticism about the place, I liked it. True, it is highly commercialized and very western, but what else can you expect from a place that, together with the Great Wall and the Terracotta warriors in Xian, is famous around the whole world and attracts numerous tourists every year? I say that if you limit your stay there for 2-3 days (no reason to stay more), you take a short break from chop-sticks but you realize that this is not China, just a place in China, and then you move on to more authentic places - I am all for it. I found it to be a very happy place and I loved the busy main street even though it was unbelievably crowded with thousands of Chinese who celebrated their national October holiday and even though the prices were almost tripled.

There isn't much to say about the scenery: beautiful, awesome, breathtaking, etc. Together with a local over-enthusiastic guide named Rose (who looked like a typical student from UCLA and spoke English very well, even though she never left China), we explored the area on bikes and on boat. She took us to a 3-hour bike ride through the fields and villages in the area, and we visited her house in one of those villages.

That was a lovely afternoon during which we saw not even one of the many tourists that were flooding Yangshuo; only occasional farmers and some groups of school kids that kept bombarding us with "Hello! Hello!" greetings.

From Yangshuo we returned to Guilin that turned out to be a superb city with fantastic natural setting. It offers tall hills, a magnificent Ming palace, an extraordinary stalactite and stalagmite cave and the wide shores of the Li river. The city was full with celebrating (and so very loud) Chinese on their holiday who added a cheerful flavor to our visit.

Next stop - Yunnan.

Tamir