

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS  
GUILIN: A VISIT TO ANOTHER WORLD

By Cammy Wilson

Rice paddies have an odd effect on Mr. Wong.

Whenever he sees them he breaks into nervous giggles. Considering how many rice paddies are in the vicinity of Guilin, a small city in southern China, this can be something of a disadvantage, especially for a Chinese tour guide.

"Before, I work in the rice paddies, same as this, for three years," he would tell us, giggling all the while, when rice paddies came into view.

"During the Cultural Revolution?"

"Right, right," he replied, laughing harder.

Much to Mr. Wong's chagrin, our tour group insisted on stopping to take pictures in the countryside.

"Will you do work like this again?" I asked as he unhappily followed me down a paddy berm.

"Oh, I think not," he laughed, pushing his rather thick-lensed glasses back on his nose. "I did not like to work in the fields."

After a few moments he added soberly: "Actually, this is difficult to say. Very difficult to say."

A visitor to China returns with much the same impression. It's very difficult to say: how the people live, whether they are content, how well off they really are. Instead of a fund of knowledge, you return from China with a framework in which to wonder.

Tourists have streamed into China since 1976 when changes in the government permitted tourism to really begin. Yet, even when travelers speak Mandarin and Cantonese, indeed, even when they're Chinese, they often return unsure of precisely what they've seen.

Before going to Guilin I tried to coax some observations from the editor of a business magazine on China, a man who speaks Mandarin and Cantonese and has spent his life in Asia. All he would say was, "It's like a visit to another planet."

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It isn't, of course. Not on the surface. Guilin, an hour's flight north of Hong Kong, is famous for its magnificent limestone mountains. The surreal configurations, beloved of Chinese landscape artists, were molded by the various elements-- earth, wind and sea. Gorgeous, yes. Another planet, no. The rice fields of Guilin look like the rice fields of Southeast Asia, especially of southern Thailand where the Thais have their own hills and crags that sometimes rise out of nowhere. And the squash vines and watermelon hills and farm villages in the Guilin countryside are downright ordinary.



Known as Karst formations, these hills were beneath the sea 300 million years ago. They abound in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region where Guilin is located.

What isn't ordinary, even for travel in remote parts of Asia, is the ambiguity you sense in the people. Sometimes you have the uneasy feeling your senses are conveying different, highly conflicting messages. That's where the extraterrestrial feeling comes in. In a verbal sense, it's as if you think you see the ground, but when you put your foot down, it slices right through the dirt and keeps on going.

Seonaid Abernethy, a New Zealand attorney who spent a year studying in Beijing (Peking) and now teaches law in Hong Kong, says when she lived in China, she had to develop new ways of listening.

"The hardest thing about living in China was dealing with a different kind of reality," she said. "In China you can't rely on what you think you're hearing. Reality just isn't communicated verbally." Likewise, the interpretation of law turns on what is at the moment regarded as the correct way of behaving, Abernethy said.

Nevertheless, a trip to China is a great adventure. The people are friendly. Even in the rice fields they will grin broadly and nod and respond in kind to what is probably a woefully mispronounced "nee ha" or greeting on the part of a foreigner. Sometimes it is the foreigner's turn to be startled. Once I nodded and said, "nee ha" to a man who'd stopped to watch me take a picture downtown. "Hello, how are you?" he replied.



Almost all travel to China for westerners is still confined to tours and the composition of the group in which you find yourself can enhance or even wreck a trip. My group was small: There were only five people, plus Mr. Lam, the guide who accompanied us from Hong Kong, and Mr. Wong, the local Chinese guide who joined us whenever we left the hotel. The group included two other Americans: a young woman, an advertising executive from Florida and a middle-aged man, a geographer from upstate New York. There were also an elderly German artist and her son, the latter a chemist bound for New York on a post-doctoral grant at Columbia University. The group as a whole was a game one; most of the members had spent years living in Asia at one time or another. There was, however, the unfortunate matter of the German painter's "gall bladder stomach," as she delicately described it and its workings at every meal.

Like any group of strangers thrown into life-or-death situations, our group learned to pull together. On the first day, when the painter announced to one and all: "I can eat no pork, I can eat no duck, I can eat no fat of any kind," one enterprising member of the group shamelessly passed her a plate of duck and said, "Here, have some chicken.

"Chicken? Are you sure this is chicken?" she asked her long-suffering son.

"Chicken, mama," he replied. "Have some."

The Jia Shan Hotel, where we stayed, was a surprise. It was actually a brand-new Australian motel, built on the outskirts of Guilin.

"The hotel is a joint venture between an Australian company and the Chinese," a representative of the China Travel Service, the official Chinese travel agency, told me in Hong Kong. "For six years the Australians will take out their profit, then the hotel will belong to the Chinese."

I could not help wondering whether the Chinese or the Australian business people would come out ahead. The place reminded me of FHA "rehab" jobs I'd reported on during the early 1970s when some unscrupulous American real estate operators made fortunes by performing cosmetic repair jobs on slum housing, using government money. Such companies had favored aluminum siding, like that on the Jia Shan, whose aluminum and glass doors invariably seemed to stick in the wrong direction. FHA projects often included items people could not readily use, much like the bedside table with built-in radio and snooze alarm in my room at the hotel, presumably for the nonexistent pop music to lull sleepers awake. There was a television in the room as well but either it didn't work or I missed the programming hours.

Furnishings were standard motel fare, down to the large mirror and low dresser, complete with "Jia Shan Hotel" stationery and a notation that "Your Succestion Are Welcome." Draw-drapes sported kuala bears and small brown kangaroos. There was even a small refrigerator. The latter was quite handy as a pantry, whether food needed refrigeration or not, as a rat called each evening when the lights went off.



The Jia Shan Hotel

There was no room service but staff members kept water in the refrigerator and each room had a thermos for hot water and more than an adequate supply of chrysanthemum tea. Items such as film and Coca-Cola were on sale in the hotel shops--at \$10 a roll and \$1.87 a can. It was difficult to determine who would receive the profit--Australians or Chinese--and I never got a satisfactory answer. However, I recalled the words of an American priest who's lived in Hong Kong for many years.

\*spelling theirs

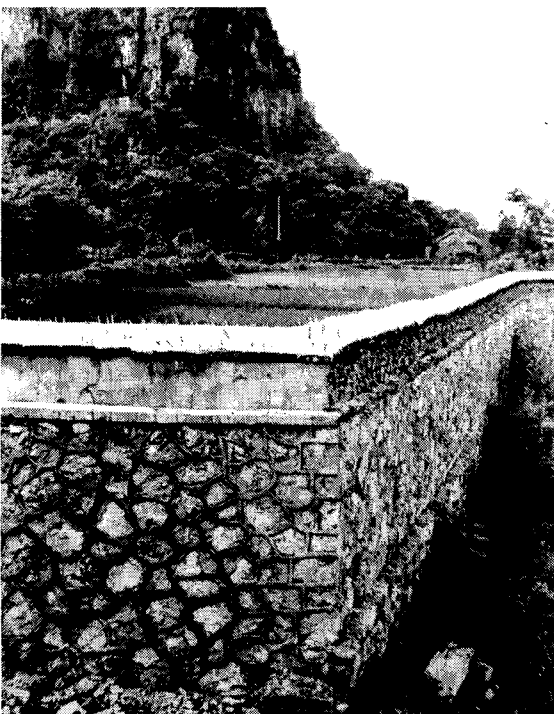
"When American businessmen go to China, the new ones always come back and tell you what a great deal they made," he said. "The ones who've been around a while know they didn't make a great deal--they just made the deal the Chinese wanted to make."

One aspect of hotel living--the Chinese attitude toward theft--is quite enough to give westerners an "otherworldly" feeling. Tourists the world over are prey to robbery. In China, however, they are told--not to watch their belongings or to put them in the hotel safe--but to leave them in their rooms, in vehicles, at their tables. "Not to worry" is the message. And, indeed, stories of returned items abound. One member of my group related how a film cannister had been forwarded from one city to another after someone during a previous tour had discarded it in a waste basket. When the artist in our group forgot her purse at the breakfast table, all was intact when she returned to claim it ten hours later. Still, there was the matter of the glass--the glass shards implanted in walls around the hotel. Why the glass?

"Because some people, some not so good people, maybe come in and steal," I was told. Apparently "not so good" people gravitate not only to hotels but to schools, factories and even army barracks, all of which were apt to be surrounded by high walls bearing their ration of glass. Since my return to Hong Kong I've seen several newspaper accounts of anti-crime campaigns in China. Crime is a fact of life throughout Asia, where disparities between rich and poor are great. But what does it mean in China, where, we've been told, consumer goods are devalued and people have much the same? The tour guide--always "ready for your question"--had an answer.

"Not so good people everywhere," he said.

As much as possible, guides attempt to occupy tourists with "the sceneries," as they put it. Yet even the attractions themselves sometimes add their own notes to the guides' well-delivered recitations. Some caves in the vicinity of Guilin contain Buddhist statues, for example, and there are some temples on nearby mountainsides.



Wall between hotel and rice fields is implanted with glass.

"Oh, could we see a Buddhist religious service?" the advertising executive asked.

"Ummm, I think not," the guide replied.

He made no mention of the government's sometimes violent suppression of religion during the past three decades, during which many churches, mosques and temples were destroyed. Others were made into dormitories and granaries and farm buildings and are so used today. Even ancestor worship, the most pervasive "religious" practice in China, suffered along with Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Once I saw a hillside graveyard out in the rice paddies, before it would have been imperative for relatives to keep the graves in good order. Though people worked nearby, tall grass had grown over many of the stones. Some relaxation of official attitudes toward religion has occurred since Mao's death, though religious fervor has hardly come into favor.

Do local people ever light joss sticks in the temples?" I asked.

"No, no joss sticks," Mr. Ching began to giggle.

"Would that not be good for people's careers?"

"Right, right," he said. "Not good at all for career."

Contradictions were common. Visitors are taken to Chinese opera performances, for instance, in theatres (air-conditioned) used strictly by foreigners. Performers wear beautiful costumes in glorious color combinations. These are all the more striking when you leave the cool theatre and join the rather drably dressed people on the streets. Today women in towns wear dark shirts or trousers and white or pastel shirts; men wear dark pants and light-colored shirts. In the fields both men and women wear black or navy pajamas. Until the last few years, even pastels would have brought official and community disapproval. Bright clothing is still seldom seen. The advertising executive was so struck by the sight of a red tank top on one young man that she took his picture.

"It's the first red thing I've seen," she said, though red is traditionally a joyful color for the Chinese, who elsewhere wear red wedding dresses and send red invitations to special friends and use red "ang pow" envelopes for gift-giving.



Old-style two-story housing next to new four-story apartment house.



Two schoolboys who didn't want their pictures taken.....



But could not resist a peek

On two occasions we wandered about in downtown Guilin, mostly unaccompanied by guides. Streets were wide, sometimes 5-7 lanes wide. Traffic was sparse and mostly limited to bicycles. There were also a few buses, some were new, and a few vans, the latter transporting tourist groups such as ours. One evening an old Mercedes had shown up at the hotel in tip-top condition, a brown feather duster standing up on the back seat. "That's the Guilin taxi," the guide said. It was the only one we saw.

Shophouses--the lower floor used for business and the upper ones for living--were generally no more than two or three stories and appeared to be built out of cement. Cadres had planted trees, sometimes two rows deep, at regular intervals down the streets. Oleander bushes had been planted along roadsides in the park downtown; flowers, except at the hotel, were nonexistent. "Some people think they are a waste of time," we were told.

There was little in the way of consumer goods available. The largest local department store had three floors filled with utilitarian items. The only real exception was some bright bolts of silk on the third floor, which held little besides fabric. Cotton cloth is reportedly rationed. Garments--ready-made--were not on sale in the store, except for a few pastel dresses and blouses.



Beans being distributed  
in a community



A farmer selling produce from  
her private plot

Household items seemed reasonable by American standards but rather expensive when compared to the earning power of Chinese factory workers. Guilin has a number of light industries, whose adult workers reportedly earn an average of 70-80 yuan per month or approximately \$54-\$61 (1.3 yuan to \$1). Young people only earn \$31-\$38 because they are assumed to live at home or in a dormitory provided by the government.

If the family includes several young people, it might be possible to save enough to purchase a bicycle in six months, the guide said; probably it would take longer. A bicycle--one speed, with brakes and bell--costs about \$96, the next most popular item, a sewing machine, costs slightly less. In the Friendship Store, set up for tourists, Chinese visitors can purchase bicycles or sewing machines for their relatives at higher prices--\$132 for a bicycle and \$125 for a treadle-style sewing machine. They can also take one television set per year into China as a gift, we were told. Trade in electronic goods between Hong Kong and China is burgeoning. However, the Chinese must wait for their bicycles and sewing machines for a year or two--after they've saved the money--because China exports a significant amount of what they produce.

\*The exchange rate in Hong Kong is 1.75 yuan to \$1 but tourists must exchange their money in China, where the bank gave only 1.3.



One of the most popular sections of the department store was the razor blade section. It was crowded with men, one of whom purchased a single double-edged Panda-brand blade. In other departments a two-quart metal saucepan sold for \$1.69; a medium-sized metal wok for \$3.85; a drinking glass for 28 cents; and a large thermos for \$6.15. The ways of foreigners are no doubt a puzzle for the Chinese, especially the long-suffering guides. Quizzically watching me price dishpans (\$3.85), Mr. Wong finally walked over and asked: "Investment?"

Actually, what I did want to invest in, batteries, were nearby. I showed the clerk the old 1.5 battery I'd brought; she nodded. "Six, please," I said. She nodded again and disappeared around the counter.

To my left a small crowd began to gather. One well-to-do man to my left, accompanied by his two pre-school-aged children, nodded and said, "hello" in English (white shirt plus knowledge of English always seemed to accompany above-average body weight, my measure of being well-to-do in China). His son gingerly reached across the counter and fingered the old battery I'd brought. His father sharply scolded him. By this time the clerk had returned bringing the right batteries--16 of them. This time my new acquaintance translated. The transaction complete, I offered the little boy my old battery. He smiled and hid his face. His father laughed. This time I put it in his hand and turned to go. The crowd backed away, smiling and nodding. The child waved. Communication, sometimes so hard, this time was easy.

There was a large, airy restaurant nearby--called the Guilin Restaurant--which we visited on our last night in the city. It was outfitted with fifteen or so of the large round tables typical of Chinese restaurants (in Hong Kong, if you don't bring nine or ten people with you for a meal, waiters often fill your table with strangers). At one end of the room was a counter where you could purchase bottles of liquor to accompany your meal, or, if you preferred Coke, there was a large red-and-white Coca-Cola drink box in the center of the room. As had become the natural order of things, the artist's litany began with the arrival of the food: "I cannot eat pork, I cannot eat duck...." When no expressions of sympathy resulted, she changed tack.

"I'd like to propose a toast," she said. We raised our glasses.

"Eat hearty," she said. "You can eat and I can't"

After a long pause of silence, she addressed one of our guides.

"Oh, Mr. Lam," she said. "My husband and I will be coming back to Asia next year. Is there any way we can be sure to get you as guide?"

Mr. Lam had just lifted his soup bowl to his lips. As far as I could tell, his lips missed his chop sticks and instead he bit the bowl.

He did not reply right away. Apparently, like much in China, this was difficult to say.

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