

Reflections on Travel to China: Opportunities for an Underground Mission Field

By Therese I. Poirie

BACKGROUND

Why China?

In early May 2019, I traveled to China on a guided tour for a travel learning experience. This was the first time that I was traveling overseas without any work connections. You may ask, Why go to China? My love for the Chinese people and my interest in this country was nurtured while I lived in Pittsburgh, PA and attended the Allegheny Center Christian and Missionary Alliance church (ACCMA).

I always described the ACCMA as “The Harvard of churches” because of the quality of its preaching and ministries, and it was one of the reasons I stayed in Pittsburgh for 24 years despite opportunities for career advancement. The CMA is an evangelical church founded by A.B. Simpson, a Canadian Presbyterian minister in the late 1880’s.¹ It became an official denomination in 1974. The focus of this church was on the Great Commission and

evangelism. Billy Graham was first affiliated with the CMA in 1933-37. My early Christian growth was a result of my involvement in the ACCMA church. Many of our pastoral staff had family members (the Taylors and Thompsons) who were early pioneer leaders in service to China and the Far East including Vietnam. Hudson Taylor was the first Protestant missionary to China in 1807.² An ACCMA’s pastor’s wife was a great-granddaughter of Hudson Taylor. Hudson Taylor was the son of a pharmacist. My friend’s parents had served as missionaries to China prior to the 1996 Cultural Revolution. Today, the CMA has missionaries in nine countries including Cambodia, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.³ During my early formative Christian life in Pittsburgh I heard

many stories about China and the Far East. One of our own missionaries was a Pittsburgh-trained physician, Dr. David Thompson, whose missionary parents were killed by communist soldiers in Vietnam during the Tet (Vietnamese New Year) Offensive in 1968.⁴⁻⁵ This was a major turning point in the Vietnam War when South Vietnam fell to communism. Many of my friends and peers participated in overseas missions including trips to China to teach English as a second



language since missionaries are outlawed in China. I also have many friends who adopted babies from China. Over many years, I heard much about the billions of unsaved people in China. As a result of all of the above influences, I have wanted to travel to China for many years. In May 2019, God finally gave me the desire of my heart.

Where did I Go and What Did I Do?

I joined a tour group from Toronto in Beijing for 10 nights in China⁶⁻⁷ (see Figure 1). The tour consisted of 3 nights in Beijing where we visited Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, The Tongrentang Chinese Medicine Institute, The Great Wall of China, Olympic Village, Jade Workshop, and a Kungfu show. Beijing is the capital of China with an urban population of

over 22 million (third largest city). We took the bullet train (which travels at 217 mph) to Xian, the ancient capital city for 11 dynasties, for a 2-night stay. Xian has 8.6 million people in an urban area and is in the province of Shaanxi (9th largest city). There we visited the Shaanxi History Museum which houses many Chinese treasures. We also visited the Terra-cotta warriors and horses at the Qinshihuang Mausoleum, one of the most significant archeological excavations of the 20th century. We viewed the Terra-cotta figure workshop and the Big Wild Goose Pagoda which is a holy place for Buddhists. I also enjoyed a dumpling banquet and the Tang Dynasty Dancing Show. We then flew to Shanghai on China Eastern Airlines. From there we took a bus to Suzhou, the “Venice of the East”, for one day. Suzhou has an urban population of 4.3 million and is in province of Jiangsu (16th largest city). We took the historical cruise on the

Grand Canal. We visited the Couple’s Garden in Suzhou and a silk embroidery factory. We then took a bus to Wuxi for one night to visit the Li Garden and the Tea Pot Center and the pearl breeding center. Wuxi is in the province of Jiangsu and is becoming part of Shanghai-Suzhou-Wuxi area. It has a population of 3.5 million (30th largest city) and most of the residents live in the countryside. Nanjing is the largest city in Jiangsu province. From there we traveled by bus to Hangzhou, the fog capital of China, for an overnight stay. Hangzhou has an urban population of 10 million and is in the Zhejiang province (5th largest city). We spent time at West Lake which is a botanical garden and a honeymooners retreat. We heard the Butterfly Lovers story, which is the “Chinese Romeo and Juliet”. We experienced the

Impression West Lake Show called the “G20 China 2016” that was choreographed by the same person who choreographed the opening ceremony for the Beijing Olympics. We also visited the famous Dragon Well Tea Plantation. Our final bus ride was to Shanghai for two nights. Shanghai is the financial capital of China and the largest city with an urban population of 24.5 million. There we visited the Bund, the famous waterfront area connecting the old and the new and stretching to the ocean; the Chinese market for bartering (knock-offs such as Nolex vs Rolex) and Nanjing Road which is the number one commercial center in China (lots of famous brands). We saw the bottle opener skyscraper and the Shanghai Tower which is currently the second tallest building in the world. We also visited a Jade Buddha Temple and a government operated jewelry store. We experienced the MAGLEV train with speed up to 267 mph, the Jinmao Tower to the observation deck and a cruise on the Huangpu river to view the city lights at night.

INSIGHTS INTO CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHRISTIANS

China is a country of 1.4 billion people (the world’s most populous country) encompassing 3.7 million square miles (third or fourth largest country by area and second in land area).⁶ With the tremendous growth in population, decreasing lack of land space, and declining food supplies and water shortage, there are significant concerns for the future of this country. Sanitation infrastructure and the high pollution pose challenges.

The formation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 resulted in religious persecutions.⁸ The Cultural Revolution brought forth the closing of places of worship and banning of religious practices. The People’s Republic of China is a socialist state under people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class. It openly endorses communism, and the communist government espouses atheism. There is more tolerance of



religious practices since the 1980s, but religion is still highly regulated. Religious organizations that lack state approval are subject to persecution. Even though there is some freedom of religion, they cannot practice their beliefs openly, since it would interfere with others who do not have religion. In 2014, 74% were atheists or practicing Chinese Folk believers, 16% Buddhists, 1% Muslims, 8% Taoists and Folk Salvationism.⁶ The practice of Buddhism includes worship of Buddhas with offerings of incense flowers and food; practicing meditation, and mantra recitation. Buddhists believe in the existence of gods and ghosts as well as reincarnation or rebirth according to one’s karma. They pay respect to dead ancestors, and they perform religious ceremonies to help souls of the deceased find peace. There are also a lot of superstitions – the visit to the Terra-cotta warriors and the Buddhist temples were strong evidence of this. Only about 2 to 5% of the population are Christians.

Thus, with a large, unreached population that faces numerous challenges, there are tremendous opportunities for Christians. As we are reminded in Matthew 9:37 (NIV), “the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” We are also admonished in Mark 16:15 (NIV) to “go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”

However, as previously stated, the government highly regulates religious activities in China. Religious activities must be registered and permission granted by the government. No activities involving a large number of people are allowed to be conducted outside of an approved religious site. It is still quite difficult and dangerous to practice Christianity in China.⁹ China is ranked tenth as a country in terms of persecution of Christians.⁹ Faith-based organizations are considered a serious threat to the Communist party. In 2018 there were increased bans on religious gatherings that were unregistered,¹⁰ We are reminded in 2 Timothy 1:7 (KJV) that “God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power and of love, and of a sound mind.” How do you witness and serve in a country like China? Thus, there are many challenges – yet numerous opportunities – for sharing one’s Christian faith.

I realize that serving openly in a mission role in China is unlikely, but I will provide insights on how serving and witnessing in a more underground role could be feasible. One common way is by teaching English as a second language. As you establish personal relationships and build trust with the students, there are opportunities for studying the Word through house churches which are allowed by the government. It is also vital to fervently

pray for the Holy Spirit to provide wisdom and opportunities for witnessing and sharing the Good News. As we are reminded in the Psalms, "I sought the Lord, and he heard me, and delivered me from all my fears" (Psalm 34:4, KJV).

Although language can be a barrier, I found that the common language is kindness, a smile, and a thank you. A friendly attitude and optimism when engaging with the people is critical. Opportunities may arise if someone questions the reason for your hope. "Be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15, KJV). The Chinese also highly value their family and children. I was able to develop a respectful relationship with our tour bus driver, and he shared with me videos of his newborn son, just as a proud father would do. Chinese babies are adorable as they reflect their innocence and lack of awareness of the government oppression... it is not hard to love these babies. Thus, we must follow Jesus' commandment in the Gospel of John to "love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35, KJV).

While visiting China, I could subtly reveal my Christian walk even though I could not share the Gospel directly and openly. When one of our fellow tourists, a disoriented elderly woman, got lost in the crowded business district of Nanjing Road in Shanghai, I was able to pray out loud for her. She was not carrying her passport, nor phone, nor tour guide business card, nor any money. We finally found her after more than two hours. I thanked God publicly that she was found safely. This could have been a disaster, a disoriented woman lost in Shanghai, a city of 28 million people.

My heart weeps for China, as there is such an air of oppression throughout the country. Most people in China live with superstition and fear. I thank God

for my freedom to worship Christ here in the US and my inner peace as a child of God. After visiting China, I am much more appreciative of that freedom and my access to Bibles, Christian books, and Christian music.

When crossing the Mississippi River on my way home, I was blessed by the Christian song, *Hills and Valleys* by Tauren Wells, which was playing on my car radio. Here are a few of the lyrics that touched my heart:

*I've walked among the shadows,
You wiped my tears away
And I found the pain of heartbreak,
and I've seen the brighter days
On the mountains I will bow my life
to the one who set me there
In the valley, I will lift my eyes to
the One who sees me there.
You're God of the hills and valleys...
and I am not alone."*¹¹

Please continue to pray for China, its future, and its people. Even if you do not serve in a mission role to China, there are other ways to help reach the people, such as donating to a church or organization that sponsors Chinese missionaries. But the greatest – and easiest – thing we can all do collectively is pray! So please lift up our Chinese brothers and sisters who are being persecuted for their faith. Lift up the unbelieving population, that God will open their eyes to the truth of the Gospel. And lift up the Chinese government, that religious freedom will one day be a reality. After all, Matthew 19:26 (NIV) reminds us that "with man, this is impossible. But with God all things are possible."

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