

China 2010

Observation by Kenneth Jessen

China continues to move away from a third world country status into the modern industrialized age. Five star hotels are spectacular, food is excellent and service is unparalleled. On this trip (our second), Hong Kong, Tainjin, Shanghai, Xingang, Xian and Guilin were included. We wandered the streets unrestricted, interfacing with the Chinese people directly. They are curious about Westerners and quite friendly. Care has to be taken on taxi rides to insure that the directions have been mapped out first in Chinese. English is rare except in the tourist areas. Prices on handmade items remain low, and bargaining is par for the course.

Economically, China is incredible with sparking cities, modern high-end shops and infrastructure including high speed "bullet" trains between major cities. During my trip to the airport in Shanghai, the magnetic levitation train reached a speed of 258 miles per hour and cut a one hour bus ride to just seven minutes. Skyscrapers in Shanghai reach well over 100 stories and even higher ones are under construction. Outside companies are given relative freedom to manufacture within the county, but the land is always owned by the state. Individuals can buy and sell apartments leading to a new era of real estate speculation.

Hong Kong remains separate administration providence with passport control from mainland China. The British turned over Hong Kong in 1997 after 150 years, and the Chinese government apparently does not want to screw up a good thing. Every bit as amazing as other Chinese cities, Hong Kong is a busy economic center with incredible skyscrapers, excellent subway and light rail and an efficient airport.

Tourism is a major source of income and the Chinese government has spent ten of millions of dollars on archeological sites such as the terra cotta soldiers near Xian. If one is not impressed by seeing over 7,000 replicas of the emperor's army dating back 2,200 years, one will be impressed by the buildings that protect the site. Along the Li River near Guilin, all of the factories have been closed and operations moved to other areas to protect water quality. Guilin has been designated as a tourist town.

Tens of millions of new trees are planted every year. They are in evidence within city parks, at major intersections and extend back hundreds of yards on toll roads. Some of the guides point to beautification and improvements in air quality as the reason. Some say it is a reforestation program to replace all the trees harvested in the past. Others say it hides the poverty that can be seen in rural areas.

The Chinese people tend to accept government without question. At present, the majority of its programs are for the betterment of the people. Important are the new high rise apartments added in the cities along with the simultaneous move to bring impoverished people from the rural areas into an urban setting. A quota system keeps a balance between housing and jobs so that the enormous slums seen in India do not form in China. One of our guides pointed to the fact that 80% still live in poverty and that the average yearly wage between urban and rural dwellers is ten to one.

Forget freedom of speech. China is trying to control the internet content for an estimated 400,000 users with over 1,000 censors monitoring traffic. Seemingly harmless words are censored along with words associated with pornography and insurrection. My attempts to e-mail my guides to thank them have failed. Social networks, such as Twitter, Face Book and You Tube, are either restricted or banned. Google has withdrawn from China. The government also controls the media, and Chinese find television programming bland. The government worries about civil unrest and organized protests organized on social networks.

A reduction in population is necessary to align it with the food supply. Our guides admitted that in some years of poor rice crops, there have been people that starved to death. The one child per family, however, has some disturbing consequences. Male babies are highly valued in the rural areas since they will be more productive in the rice fields and will also carry on the family lineage. Female babies are discarded along the roadsides and in some cases, are rescued by benevolent organizations for adoption outside the country. In Xian, we saw about 30 girls around the age of ten in a restaurant. China was their country of origin. They had been abandoned then adopted by Swedish families. The girls were on a field trip to see their country of origin for the first time since they were born. Human rights groups point to the disparity between men and women, but the percentages are quite small.

Poor air quality has given the country a bad reputation and many residents can be seen with surgical masks hiding part of their face. There seems to be little pollution control on the numerous coal-fired power plants and visible automobile exhausts are common. Adding to man made pollution, Beijing suffers from fine dust from the nearby desert.

China is a good bet for investment despite some risk. Past turmoil has subsided, while the government seems to understand economics. It concentrates on infrastructure and education while regulating the influx from rural areas into its cities. Outside interests establish factories side by side Chinese factories. The take over of Tibet is now a thing of the past and most Chinese regard it as a return of the land that was once theirs in the Ming Dynasty. China would like to get back Formosa, however, they have resigned themselves to viewing it as a trading partner. Barring a dictator and the return to isolation, it appears that China's GDP will continue to grow.