

## **A FAMILY VISIT, *Discovery*, December 1994**

AS WE LEFT THE TRAIN in the cavernous hall of Guangzhou station and passed beneath the scrutiny of the khaki-uniformed customs officials, I realized that the week ahead was not going to be like the one we'd just spent in Hong Kong. The atmosphere here was more World War I film set than late-20th-century border crossing. We were sternly directed to pay duty on any gifts we were bringing into the country and to list our personal valuables, so they could be accounted for when we left. We soon discovered that the bringing of presents to one's Chinese relatives was an arcane ritual, full of protocol and ceremony.

Our hotel was crowded with returning overseas Chinese and their expectant kinsfolk. Little clusters of people waited in hallways and stairwells all around the hotel. My wife Shiane's task was daunting: to locate, in an alien, confusing country—using a language she was feeling very self-conscious about—a half-sister and nephew she had never seen before. Our whole visit to China, the first for either of us, was premised on the slim chance that a letter written from Canada by Shiane's half-brother George had made its way to a tiny village in rural Guangdong Province, and that someone was available and willing to make the long trek to the city in order to meet us.

Finding no one, which was half-expected, we went down to the hotel restaurant. Should we fall back on a standard tourist itinerary? We needn't have worried. Returning to our room we were waylaid by an elderly woman in a maroon pant suit and head scarf and a smiling man in his early 40s. Shiane embraced Gim Yee, her half-sister, and Tung, her nephew, and we invited them into our room. My wife, a third-generation Chinese-Canadian, discovered with relief that the smattering of village Cantonese she had

learned from her parents would be sufficient for communication. Our adventure in China had begun.

Gim Yee, 30 years older than Shiane, was so excited by our visit that within minutes she was opening our suitcases to check for presents. Under normal circumstances, this eager curiosity would not have brought out my best side. I knew that an open mind and heart would be required on this trip, but I hadn't expected my Western sensibilities to be tested so soon. I said nothing. Tung must have felt my awkwardness, for he diplomatically suggested waiting until the whole family was gathered before any gifts were distributed. For me, a moment of intense culture shock passed.

Tung, we learned, was working in Guangzhou on a construction site. Like thousands of other men from the surrounding countryside, he had taken advantage of economic liberalization and the increased freedom to move about. He lived in a men's dormitory, he said, and missed his wife and two children, but he could earn far more in the city and still come home to help plant and harvest the rice. None of us could know that southern China would soon be so transformed by new buildings and enterprises as to be hardly recognizable. At the time of our visit, these trends were just beginning. Today I realize that we were privileged to be observers at the end of an era.

AT 5:30 THE NEXT MORNING, Gim Yee brought us sticky rice dumplings with chicken wrapped in lotus leaves, which we ate while drinking tea. Tung had helped us hire a minibus and driver the day before, and today he would guide us on an 18-hour expedition into the countryside. We travelled on the main road southwest to Zhanjiang, across the flat, fertile delta of the Pearl River (Zhu Jiang). In our smart red minibus, we strained to pass a slow-moving throng of bicycles, scooters, buses, trucks and trailers. It's amazing what a Chinese farmer can fit on a motorcycle: six

pigs, a dozen geese, two dozen chickens, great baskets of vegetables, his family.

At the shore of the Pearl delta's main stem, a motley flotilla of ferries plied frantically back and forth, slapping their landing ramps down on the riverbank wherever there was space. The great bridge that crosses there now was still under construction. A dense layer of grey fog hugged the water, making the channel look as wide as the ocean. Passing through this swirling veil seemed to separate us from the known world.

Mid-morning we reached the town of Taishan, where we were greeted by a white banner stretched across the road. "Welcome to Taishan. Home of the Overseas Chinese," it said. The sign wasn't entirely correct; overseas Chinese came from many parts of the country. But tens of thousands of laborers emigrated to North America from the Pearl delta during the second half of the 19th century. Shiane's paternal grandfather was one of them.

Taishan felt strange to me, divided. The division was not between those whose relatives had gone to "Gold Mountain," as North America was popularly known, and those whose relatives had stayed in China. No, everyone in Taishan had an ancestor who had made the journey. The division was between the families that had benefitted, whose forebears had flourished in the New World and sent back money, and the ones whose grandfathers and great-uncles had never been heard from again.

Taishan was a study in contrasts: fine houses, private schools and hospitals stood beside run-down shops and crumbling apartment blocks. Many welcoming faces hailed our little entourage (the expensive rented minibus marked us as overseas visitors), but I saw bitterness and envy also. Shiane's grandfather had prospered in Gold Mountain, enough to return as a rich man and lord it over his home town, but for every success story there were a dozen tales of woe, a hundred mysterious absences. Gold Mountain

was a place of suffering and tragedy for most Chinese immigrants, where loneliness, discrimination and abuse were routine.

We stopped at Taishan's best restaurant, where I was to host a celebratory lunch. A happy crowd of relatives and friends waited, and as lunch proceeded, the number of guests began to expand alarmingly. Gim Yee was beckoning acquaintances to join us off the street, and I began to worry about the size of the impending bill. But lunch in rural China—even for 50—was then still not expensive. As we left the restaurant, two dozen other people showed up, downcast at having missed the meal. Gim Yee screeched at them for their lamentable timing.

As our expanded cavalcade headed into the countryside towards Gim Yee's village, I struggled to see her side of the picture. Her father had followed his father to North America, where he had enjoyed a long life, earning and losing, by Chinese standards, several fortunes. He had arranged for Gim Yee's two brothers to emigrate to Canada, where they now lived comfortable lives. But she was still stuck here, a rural peasant. She had suffered during the communist revolution; she had suffered during the communist revolution. The least we could do was redress the balance with gifts.

Gim Yee's house was one of the largest in the village, a one-storey, three-room affair under a flat roof. The open central area was for living. The family slept in one wing, while the pigs, separated by a brick wall, occupied the other. We passed out the long-awaited presents: money and clothing brought from Canada, sweets and cigarettes from Hong Kong, biscuits and booze from Guangzhou. Gim Yee proudly showed us the color television—a Toshiba, mind you, not a Chinese-made job—that had been bought the previous year, along with a Singer sewing machine, by Shiane's half-brother.

The silent television, watched by a group of kids and some chickens just in case it should miraculously come to life, sat in a special cabinet at the heart of the living room. This was so it could be locked up—the only object in the entire village, we were told, valuable enough to rate such treatment. Private property had infiltrated the village's communal lifestyle: the television was a bomb in disguise, an ideological Trojan Horse from the developed world. I could imagine this shining status symbol gradually insinuating itself into the community like a slow-release capsule, then changing it forever.

After tea, we continued our tour, which didn't take long. We greeted most of the hamlet's hundred or so inhabitants, smiling and shaking hands furiously. We inspected a number of friendly pigs. On the roof of the house, where rice would later be spread to dry, family photographs were taken. The watching neighbors giggled benevolently, especially when I set my camera on the wall and used the self-timer to include myself in the picture. After the automatic click, a collective exhalation could be heard.

THE NEXT STOP ON OUR JOURNEY was a nearby town, birthplace of my wife's grandfather. In the early 20th century, this pioneering migrant had established a laundry in Edson, a small town in Alberta, and made enough money to return home and build a solid, granite, two-storey house with decorative stone trim around the windows and roof. He became a prominent landowner, a bad choice for the revolution years. After he died in 1951, his house was "liberated." Distant cousins had managed to get the house assigned to them as living quarters. The interior was gloomy and dusty; the current occupants appeared to be camping in the dilapidated shell. The remains of faded, hand-painted wall murals still overlooked the scene, and the chipped wooden balustrades and stair railings were of delicate lathework. Gim Yee produced a wizened little man who was reputed to be

over 100 years old and a friend of Shiane's grandfather. Startled, perhaps, by the sudden attention, he kept any revelations he may have had to himself.

Finally, it was time to leave. We still had to locate Shiane's aunt, her mother's youngest sister, who lived in a different district and whose name and village had been written out for us on a scrap of paper. For two hours we drove hither and thither over the Pearl delta, having numerous roadside consultations with bystanders. With the help of Tung, who was coming back to Guangzhou with us, and our stalwart, patient driver, we eventually began to close in on the elusive destination. The last few kilometres took us over dirt tracks through rice paddies and vegetable plots. We constantly had to stop while farmers moved their produce and tools aside and let us pass.

Late in the afternoon we reached the village of my wife's aunt, Ying, who was another of those who had been left behind while the rest of her family had managed to move to the Promised Land. Ying had also received a letter saying that we would try to visit her, and she met Shiane with both joy and sadness, for my wife's mother had died earlier that year, and Ying would now never again meet the elder sister from whom she had been separated in childhood. Her husband and I left the two women to cry together while he showed me the sights: the fabulously clean communal bathroom with its octagonal arrangement of squat toilets; the orange orchards for which the area was famous.

When we returned, and entered Ying's home for tea before the long journey back to the city, I had a small epiphany. On the wall above the household shrine, I found a photograph of my parents, my wife and myself: a picture from our wedding the year before. So far from home, the unexpected image exploded in my psyche: the vast differences between us of place and race, and wealth and social condition collapsed. Here we all were, under the same sky, doing the best we could. Deep in my heart, I felt

truly connected to these people for the first time. They were my relatives also. Unlikely as it might seem at first glance, we were one.