

A piece of Chinese life

By William Corden

We'd had dinner in Guangzhou with a mainland Chinese friend who was CEO of a listed Hong Kong real estate company; my wife knows quite a few of this society from her days as a Police Chief in that same city.

He was your typical Chinese success story.



He had grown up as a peasant in Chairman Mao's time, moved to the city and somehow landed a job as a chauffeur for another wealthy stock company CEO. His new boss was very young and needed someone with the gravitas of middle age to bolster his credibility at important meetings, so he was brought along as a plant to convince the other side that he was on the up and up. He quickly learned the tricks of the trade from these meetings and before too long he set up his own operation and became a mega-millionaire in his own right, he was only in his late forties. Pretty much uneducated except for his knowledge of Chinese opera, which we'll deal with later.

The dinner went really well and he invited us to his home in the inner city the following day. The Chinese are unfailingly marvellous hosts.

The home is in the teeming city of the aforementioned Guangzhou (formerly known as Canton, population 15 million, give or take) in a neighbourhood where there are several Georgian style buildings dropped into the middle of some very ancient Chinese style community homes and right next to a lake and canal system which had just been re-opened.

Years of neglect had left the lake and the canal a smelly and disgusting watercourse to be avoided at all costs; now it is a gathering place for the populace and children with all the trappings of a resort. It's fair to say that the governments all over the country do spend money on rehabilitating their cities.

America, take note

The house is an individual unit in a row of three storey terraced style residences, very much like the ones you see surrounding the squares in or along the boulevards in European towns, with a marked difference. All of the houses along this street, except the one we were going to visit, are just eyesores with bits and pieces added on over the years with no consideration of the overall look. Crooked additional floors have been slapped on the roofs, bulges stick out of the sides showing mortar work that even I could have done a better job with, drainage pipes going off at all angles and, because of their obsession that someone will climb the three storeys and rob something, bits of barbed wire and broken glass topped walls to complete the scene.

That didn't stop our friend from purchasing one of the sturdier examples a couple of years back for around \$10,000 or so and ripping the inside out. The renovations are just what you would expect from a guy with a lot of money.

Through the most impressive front door I've seen on a private residence so far, you stepped into a life that was led by wealthy Chinese some 100 or more years ago.

The floors had been covered in a highly polished hardwood on all of its three levels and all of the furniture reeked of restored antiquity. There wasn't much on the walls in the way of artwork but in the cultural department they did have a small orchestra room where the local musicians practiced 3 times a week. This was full of music stands and unfamiliar musical instruments.

It was then that I found out that our host was a very famous Chinese Opera singer. Male Chinese Opera singers I can handle, but the females sound like chalk on a blackboard to me, especially when they're accompanied on that awful "erhu", so I didn't ask for an impromptu performance.

Despite all of the money that had been spent it didn't come anywhere near the opulence of the townhouses of Europe I mentioned and to be quite honest I thought my own home in Vancouver had more of a relaxing atmosphere to it.

Anyways all of this stuff is just a matter of cultural tastes, it was beautiful and he was happy to show it off before ushering us up to the patio on the third floor. If you've ever seen the video of the Beatles singing "Get Back" in that rooftop performance then you have a good idea of what it was like to be up there. The main difference being that on either side were the top floors of the eyesores I told you about, and they were within touching distance!

But those same eyesores became fascinating pictures of Chinese life, with the washing hanging out of apartments all along the street, a bird's eye view of all the tiny narrow alleyways below and the non-stop human traffic. You could have easily handed an item from one building across the alleyway to the other at the third storey of many of the buildings you could

see.

As I said, this man was quite rich and although they don't like to flaunt their wealth in this country, the well off do get some special treatment in unusual ways. While we were having tea on the rooftop patio a voice shouts out from down below across the street and everybody gets up and says "Zhoule", which means, "let's go". It was the owner of the restaurant opposite telling us that lunch was ready, so off we all trotted to a private room in the eatery and there was our lunch arrayed before us in 8 or 9 dishes.

It's another strange part of their culture that people quite often arrive half way through a meal and just tuck in to whatever's on the go, or another dish is ordered. Nobody eats like the British or Canadians, where it's all gobbled down as fast as you can. They'll go at it with gusto at the start, then they slow down and pick at it, even though it goes cold. In the end every plate gets a good working over, even though it seems as though you're the only one who's making a dent in it.

What little was left was packed up into a doggy bag; even if you're rich, nothing gets wasted.

I've visited China a few times now and I'm getting a bit more used to these affairs, but it's still quite a trial getting through them when nobody even bothers to translate for you and, worse still, they talk about you, laugh and point 'til you shrink with embarrassment but they don't tell you what it's about.

It's very distressing when you're already self-conscious about being a big clumsy looking white man who looks ever so old, tubby and oversized compared to the rest of the population, and the only white man to boot, but you're in the hot seat and there's nothing you can do about it but sit and squirm!

An interesting fact surfaced in our conversations. None of the high rises that were built 20 years ago have any provision for parking cars, either above ground or below, the newer ones do, but you have to purchase the underground lot on top of the price of your apartment, so who knows where they park their cars? They are a bit like the Italians in this regard and will park their SUVs wherever there is an open space, be it on the sidewalk or the middle of the traffic. They are amazing drivers and can fit their cars into any nook or cranny.

I tried to find out what the system is for the equivalent of the monthly property fees that we pay in North America as "maintenance fees" on our apartments but no one knows. No one could give me an answer, as to who is responsible for managing the money. The one we were staying in had saved up about 5 times for new elevators to be installed but each time they did, they say the money got stolen. I would like to see how long something like that would happen in Vancouver before someone was in jail!

After we made our goodbyes we jumped in a cab to go back to the apartment we were staying at. It took us about 2 hours to go 3 miles and every inch of the way was heaving with people and jammed with traffic.

I learned from the internet that the metro population is 14 million, not counting the undocumented ones (there are 100 million people within a 100 mile radius). How they feed them and maintain order is just a miracle to me but it seems to work and I see more harmony and tolerance than I've seen in any Western City I've visited.

I couldn't live there permanently though, it's a life of eating, massages and just getting through the day. You can't really take out your bike and go for a ride because you'd get flattened by a passing truck. They don't have community centers with pools and gyms even though there is a very strong sense of community with outdoor dancing and tai-chi through to

the late evening.

It's nothing to see schoolkids, boys and boys and girls and girls holding hands as they walk and you do get a real sense of that harmony and respect as you stroll along.

There's good and there's bad but overall, it's just too overcrowded for me.