

Cooler China Study Tour 2014

Summary and evaluation

The tour ran from 29 July to 12 August, passing Beijing, Harbin (Heilongjiang Prov.), Changchun (Jilin), Shenyang and Dalian (Liaoning). There were 22 participants including Janice Dickson of Ian Dickson Travel. The tour was led by Adam Nichols and assisted by Sarah Maude, who retired from teaching in Shanghai in 2013.

Organisation

This was the first China tour which did not receive support from the Chinese Friendship Association at national level which, although normally adding to the cost of the tour, opens doors and helps ensure the itinerary meets expectations. The Friendship Association set up a meeting (with the Population Institute) in Beijing, one in Shenyang and a visit in Dalian, for which we were most grateful. The remainder of the programme was developed through collaboration between personal contacts including two former GAIIF recipients, a friendly British diplomat at the Beijing embassy responsible for the three north eastern provinces and friends and our links with Chinese academic geographers.

Planning the programme was complex. Janice Dickson's Beijing agent, Yin Shuo, was invaluable and efficient in a difficult role, co-ordinating with Zhao Xin (GAIIF 2000) at the Institute of Geographical Sciences, other agents in the provinces, academics and others. We are extremely grateful for the hard work by all our Chinese friends, in particular Zhao Xin and Wang Xiang Dong (GAIIF 2013) in helping us to realise this diverse programme (appended below). As ever, Janice Dickson was invaluable to have in the party for her skill and knowledge of China and of working with agents at national and local level.

Participants

Three of the participants, Janice, Sarah and Adam, had been on previous Study Tours and the remaining 15 were new to GA Study Tours, a very healthy statistic. Of those, 14 are practicing teachers, including two NQTs and two deputy heads. The age range across the whole party was 23 to 71. Two came from International schools in Europe. Primary and secondary schools were represented as well as teacher education and assessment. Three were retired (including the course leaders'). The range of ages and experience was no obstacle to the conviviality of the group.



Programme

The programme aimed to address a wide range of geographical themes in addition to including tourist highlights: physical (hydrology, volcanicity, geology), human (economic, urban, population, and to a lesser extent political, transport and tourism), environmental (conservation, National Parks, wetland) and historical (Manchu dynasty and Russian and Japanese imperialism).

Briefing papers: Before flying out to China, participants produced briefing papers to cover the themes of the tour in preparation for visiting this scarcely documented region. The North East of China is home to more than the entire population of the UK and is the powerhouse of Chinese heavy industry, its main source of energy and a zone of massive economic regeneration being once branded China's 'rustbelt', and is the only region in China to experience population decline in absolute terms.

These papers represent an enormous treasure chest of useful resources for teachers; the papers contain up to date information, references, web-links and an extensive bibliography. They can be downloaded [from this page](#). Commentary on the Daqing oilfield by Brian Kelleher during a coach journey was well received, as was the off the cuff, non-stop guided commentary by Brian Connolly (broadcaster, geographer and Beijing resident) from the hotel in downtown Beijing to way out beyond the Great Wall which was fascinating for its insights into culture and society as well as urban morphology and change. On future tours more could be made of participants' personal 'specialist knowledge'.

The programme itself was subject to numerous revisions due to unforeseen events during the tour. However, no important itinerary item was missed without being replaced (e.g. a spa in the volcanic area rather than a Russian sauna in Harbin, and a visit to a museum about the Japanese occupation in Shenyang rather than in Harbin), and some extras were squeezed in (e.g. A visit to the Olympic Park, which *should* have been included in the original programme).

Visiting fewer cities may have been appropriate, but each offered something different or provided a unique opportunity. E.g. Changchun (home to Wang Xiang Dong) provided the opportunity to spend an afternoon with local geography undergraduates.

Not all meetings lived up to expectations. Those addressing water resource management and population issues yielded only limited insights and little data. However, those with Tom De Fonblanque (British Embassy) on the North East, Prof. Liu Shenghe on Beijing's growth and development and Cathy Chen (China-Britain Business Council) in Shenyang were very successful. The four geography teacher education staff at North East Normal University in Changchun provided insights into geography in the Chinese curriculum and assessment and teacher training which were of great interest to some members of the group. Participant evaluations showed that each meeting meant different things to different people who were able to draw more or less meaning and information from them.

Advantage was taken of the tourist highlights in each locality, but it was felt more time would have been beneficial to enjoy these. Some members of the group were highly engaged with the journeys between venues, observing, questioning and recording, valuing those as much as the destinations themselves, while others would have preferred less travelling. Changbaishan volcanic National Park was a highlight for most of the group.

Travel

Travelling to and from China by the airline Finnair was popular. The break in Helsinki cut the time on the long leg, though it gave less time asleep overnight.

Internal flights were punctual and comfortable. Intercity high speed trains were superb: at 300kph+ smooth as mill pond. The downside was the airport style security check-ins which added time to the journey. The overnight HST from Beijing to Harbin was not as restful as anticipated (due to bright lights and conversation), but special circumstances required us to take whatever way we could to get there, or jeopardise the *Harbin* programme, which ran as planned but we were not in the best of condition to appreciate it. Our booking on a comfortable sleeper train had been cancelled at short notice as an unintended consequence of disruptions to air travel.

Accommodation and meals

Three and four star **hotels** were used. These were Chinese owned and run with the exception of Holiday Inns in Shenyang and Dalian. In Beijing the style was a thoroughly authentic introduction to China, located on the edge of some hutongs, markets and near a metro. The North East gets few 'western' visitors and consequently English was not as widespread as in the tourist centres.

Meals were similarly interesting and varied, with less rice than in other provinces. This is China's breadbasket. Vegetarians were well catered for. Too much food was often provided despite asking the guides to ease back, especially at lunchtime when many participants would have preferred to forage for themselves in the neighbourhood. A restaurant specialising in pig dishes was the least popular- very little was eaten- while the most popular were the Cultural Revolution themed place in Changchun and the authentic rustic fare prepared by a farming family in the mountains north of Beijing.

All participants contributed a wide range of gift items of a British or regional character to express gratitude to the numerous people who helped the group including guides, hosts and presenters. Owing to the clamp-down on bribery and corruption, no items were of significant commercial value.

Value for money

‘Very good value. This could not have been bettered’ (from a seasoned China traveller)

Our first China tour 15 years ago cost £2000 pp. To have run this one for £2,300 pp was remarkable, but there were gains and losses. The Friendship Association was costly to use in the past, but were able to open doors that we could not. Though we used to be accommodated in fancier hotels, the food tended to be blander and offered less variety and less proximity to real Chinese cuisine. Some of this tour’s participants felt that less food (lunches in particular) could have been ‘traded’ for a better standard of accommodation.

All respondents felt it was money well spent, and good value, even though some said they didn’t get quite what they expected (nor did the leaders!), but were glad they came. The majority would recommend a GA Study Tour to others and some are already lining themselves up for Russia 2015.

Follow-up

- Briefings have been reviewed and enhanced in the light of our findings, which are available [on this page](#). These papers provide up to date information about North East China.
- A collection of images and notes for a photo pack ‘Cooler China 2014’ is in preparation, as with previous study tours.
- Conference workshop, Manchester 2015. Three tour participants will collaborate in the presentation.
- All participants received a GA certificate in recognition of their successful completion of this CPD.

It was a unique experience for us all, during which we travelled over 13,000 miles. A lot of rail travel somewhat eased our consciences about our carbon footprints.

Post Scriptum by Assistant Leader, Sarah Maude:

‘It was a very brave undertaking and would not have succeeded at all without your enthusiasm, persistence, experience, contacts and initiative (both before and during). A unique experience’.

Adam Nichols: ‘I’m pretty sure I’d have been hospitalised but for Sarah’s level headedness, experience, judgement, patience and tremendous support for which she deserves my heartfelt thanks.’

Adam Nichols 17/10/2014