

BIG

- Aukje Both and Ferry van Mansum

Travelling in our free time, we soon learnt that there are no small cities in China, even though the locals might apologise for the size of their city; if it has a population the size of New Zealand, it does not register as “small” in our minds. Here a real city will have at least ten million inhabitants. Any city, with less than five million people who call it their home, is small according to most Chinese. And people here are not particularly proud of “small”.



However, not much is small in China. “Big is better” seems to be the motto. Passing through the country we saw many new train stations the size of international airports and on the outskirts of cities the skyline is dominated by hundreds of cranes pecking at new high-rise apartment buildings. Old neighbourhoods are torn down and replaced by tall towers and six to eight storey high blocks of concrete. Many are still empty skeletons. An item on the news mentioned an expected increase of 500 million migrants from the countryside to the cities in the next few years. It looks as if there is enough

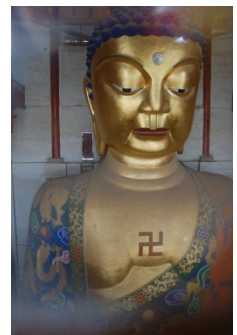
space to house them, if they are able to afford it. In these new suburbs, roads are often six lanes wide but yet devoid of traffic. In the poorer parts of China taxis and trucks still outnumber private cars, but in the east of the country this is changing fast and it is a worry to think what will happen if this trend continues. How congested will the roads become? Where are people going to park their cars? Just as well that public transport is under constant development all over the country. Pillars for new super-fast train tracks, major construction for the underground and separate bus lanes are evident in many places.



Big is something that will even put small cities on the map. Zhangye, where we live, is proud of its Dafo temple. It houses the “biggest indoor reclining clay Buddha” in China, looking as if it just woke up from a pleasant dream.



Shandan, less than an hour away by bus, boasts the “biggest indoor sitting Buddha” in China. In front of this Buddha temple, the city is constructing a large, new temple complex, with lots of marble and impressive gates. Plans are to run a Kung Fu school there. Right in the middle, on a tall platform, will be another enormous statue towering over the area. To get to the Shandan Buddha we took a dirt road that went past some fields and through a small farming community. However, it will not be long before this area is ready for large groups of tourists, complete with a wide approach road and parking for numerous tour buses.





The Mogao caves, in the small desert city of Dunhuang, are world famous for their huge collection of Buddhist art. In the grottoes one can admire walls covered with well-preserved murals, sculptures and several good-sized Buddha statues, one of them claimed to be the “third largest stone Buddha” on Earth.

Our favourite is the world’s “largest sitting Buddha”, carved out of a rock in Leshan over 1200 years ago. A serene- looking, 71 metre tall giant watching over the Dadu River near Chengdu.

According to legend he was too upset to see the devastation caused by a great flood in 1962 and closed his eyes to all the suffering. It was the paint that had peeled off his eyes. In the humid climate it is an on-going job to keep the Buddha freshly painted and clear of moss and weeds.

Now, new and even bigger Buddha are being built in several locations in Asia and China is joining the race to claim another biggest Buddha of some sort. But it is the ancient ones that have been around for hundreds of years that leave the biggest impression.

