

Report on the Prominent Persons and Leaders Delegation to China, September 2014

On September 31st 2014 the Prominent Persons and Leaders delegation from New Zealand touched down and regrouped in Guiyang, Guizhou. Our focus as a delegation was set on the Youxie 2014 International Friendship Forum, which was to occupy our first four days in China; but even with our sights set on the forum, I was still an excited 18 year old girl who was about to experience China for the first time. I was soon to find out that the next 10 days to follow, experiencing Guiyang, Zunyi and Shanghai, were to make up one of the most culturally insightful and rewarding opportunities I have been privileged to receive.

From the airport we were greeted with the famous Chinese hospitality and guided 40 minutes into the heart of the 'New' Guiyang. This developing city held the International Friendship Forum for 2014 with the title of '*Green Life, Evergreen Friendship*'. Our first night was spent adjusting to the new, hot environment by taking a dip in the hotel pool and learning some of the cultural sensitivities; due to the population and health awareness in China, wearing a swimming cap is compulsory in the public pool. Our first full day consisted of an opening to the forum with speeches by delegation members from China, Australia, America, Vanuatu, Tonga and Canada. The delegations discussed the importance of our friendships with China and our own New Zealand delegation returned a well-received contribution with speeches from Dave Bromwich, Suzanne Billington and Carla Lindley, who spoke on the title of 'Evergreen Friendship' while adding a youth perspective. As one of the youngest delegates to ever attend the forum I was enlightened to listen to the issues China are facing between themselves and Vietnam in a battle over the South China Sea and, with a passion of becoming a Broadcast Journalist, it was interesting to hear the Chinese talk about how they are portrayed in the media as an aggressive country. As a young student, attending the forum and experiencing the discussion for myself, being able to understand where my opinion lies and making a judgement on this issue without media influence, has benefitted me hugely.

The following four days of the forum saw visits to incredible out-of-the-way places within the Guizhou Province. Our experience started with a visit to the Maotai factory in Zunyi, where famous Chinese liquor is mass produced by hundreds of workers crowding over the factory line to get the liquor ready for international distribution. Mass produced but not watered down – Maotai is 53% proof. The Maotai museum which followed the factory visit explained the history of the liquor which dates back to 1644. On display, old drinking pottery and a line-up showing the development of packaging over the centuries impressed visitors and helped us to understand the long standing history of this drink. This liquor is expensive and very well-respected throughout China, so our forum was privileged to be toasting Maotai at many official dinners and lunches to follow. An escorted drive out into the rural landscape of Guizhou brought the opportunity to visit a Tea Garden. We were blessed to experience and enjoy the tea making process, while also gaining the opportunity to become 'tea garden models', with an impromptu photo-shoot amongst the tea hedges by the official forum photographer. Yet, what impressed me most about this visit were the villages we passed through amongst the valleys of the rural country. This was an opportunity, which was unplanned by the organisers, to see the true rural side of China. These landscapes filled with workers tending to

their plantations of tobacco, corn and chilli, to name a few, that were passing by our windows, would have to be one of the most impressive sights of the visit.

The city of Shanghai occupied our final four days of the trip. While some shopping and landmark visits were in our sights, we started our final days attending the official Rewi Alley Commemoration, which took place in Shanghai's Fu Shou Yuan Memorial Park. This pleasant commemoration was a memorable aspect of the trip which I, again, felt privileged to be a part of. Our delegation was proud to contribute with speeches from: Rewi Alley's great nephew Matthew Stewart; our delegation leader, Dave Bromwich and the Principal of Rewi Alley's primary school in New Zealand, Kevin O'Halloran. Before I went on this trip my knowledge of Rewi Alley was very minimal and it's safe to say that this is the case for most students in New Zealand. As a young New Zealander attending this special event I have gained a better understanding and an appreciation of Alley and his efforts.

Visiting China for the first time I immersed myself in their culture, language, climate, the celebratory traditions of toasting and China's busy lifestyle; and I learnt very quickly that if I wanted to eat I would have to nail the technique of chopsticks. I was also impressed with the efforts being put towards sustainable development; with their use of solar panels on most rural houses in the Guizhou Province, the use of organic materials in farming and the creation of Eco-Parks which we visited in Shanghai; to advertising promoting eco-friendly usage, China is definitely trying to improve the polluted state their country is in.

Accompanying this was 10 days full of laughter, fun and an increase in my knowledge and understanding of China. Like any trip overseas, the people you are with and what you do with your time in the country is what makes the trip a good or a bad one. From my experience of having an amazing time over in China with a great delegation I would be pleased to hear of more youth from New Zealand gaining the opportunity to experience China. My personal experience has allowed me to have a more independent view of a strong country and also realise that New Zealand's involvement in cooperatives and friendship forums should be something that more people are aware of. By encouraging youth involvement and allowing participation in these official events the likelihood of this involvement continuing throughout the generations becomes greater.

Lastly, I would like to thank the Nelson City Council for selecting me as Nelson's Youth Ambassador and funding my return flights to China; and also to the organisers of the Youxie International Friendship forum for hosting our stay in Guizhou Province.

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