

Chapter 6

The Mongolian Experience (August 2006-April 2007)

"Experience is not what happens to you. It is what you do with what happens to you" – Aldous Huxley.

I cannot agree more with what he said. What happened to me was meeting David Whitworth. Going to Mongolia with him led me to an amazing and memorable experience.

Arrival in Mongolia

"Hello, I am Urnaa from VSO Mongolia Programme Office. Welcome to Mongolia! We hope you had a good flight." A young Mongolian woman greeted us, a group of thirteen weary travellers, in perfect English at the Chinggis Khan International Airport in Ulaanbaatar. David and I were on the same flight from Moscow with eleven other VSO volunteers of different nationalities – English, Welsh, Dutch, French, Finnish and Canadians. Had we had a good flight? Well, perhaps we had had a bad fright. All the passengers in the plane clapped spontaneously when the wheels of the Tupolev TU154 Aeroflot plane touched the runway. Our anxiety changing to relief, was not groundless, as there had been several accidents involving the Tupolev TU154 dating back to the 1990s. Not long after our flight, in the same month (August 2006), a Tupolev plane crashed in Ukraine, killing all on board.

Urnaa was with her colleague, Duya and the van driver Ganbold. After rounds of greetings and handshakes, we were driven to the VSO office. By the end of the day, our accommodations were all settled. David and I were fortunate enough to be assigned a well-furnished apartment just vacated by the acting Director of the VSO Mongolia Office, who left for a posting in China. There was still milk and food leftovers in the fridge. Deprived of sleep since leaving London, we slept very well on our first night in our new country of residence.

Orientation started the next day, a Sunday – no time to recover from our jetlag! Anyway, excitement overcame fatigue. It was a beautiful sunny morning when we



Our first photo in Mongolia, taken outside a ger during the excursion on the second day of arrival.

gathered outside the building of the VSO office. New volunteers were introduced to the 'old hands' who had been in their placements in Ulaanbaatar (UB) for at least three months. David was delighted to see John and Mary from Scotland again, having met them at a VSO training course in the UK. Had it not been a

delay in David's departure, he would have travelled with them to Mongolia back in May. Urnaa and Duya had planned an excursion to the countryside to see the Mongolian steppes, the Mongolian traditional tents, and have a face-to-face encounter with yaks - the first time in my life.

In-Country Training

As everything was strange to us new volunteers, the five-week In-Country Training (ICT) was a tremendous help in understanding the country, its people and customs. From Monday to Friday, sixteen of us novices attended Mongolian language lessons for three hours each morning at the Bridge International School. The other new volunteers not on the same flight from Moscow with us were from The Philippines, and a young woman from Kenya.

The written Mongolian language uses the Cyrillic alphabet. We had to learn not only a new writing system but also a different way of pronunciation. By the end of the five weeks, both David and I still had no confidence in communicating in Mongolian, but we could at least say, "How are you?", "Goodbye", and "Thank you". And we were able to identify the kinds of shops and road directions in the city streets by reading the signage.

The afternoon sessions of ICT consisted of lectures and briefings in the VSO office given by its staff, guests from the police and other Mongolian organisations. These talks were about the culture and customs, safety issues and the "Do's and Don'ts"

specific to the country. The VSO training in the UK focused more generally on issues relating to multicultural differences and living in a new environment.

Besides organising talks, the VSO Office helped us to gain a first-hand knowledge of Mongolian culture and customs through interacting with Mongolian families. A visit to a herder's home in the countryside was an eye opener. The usual compartments of an urban house – the living area, dining area, bedroom and kitchen were compacted into a

single open space within the round traditional Mongolian felt tent (the ger). A herder's wealth was not in terms of money in the bank or the usual assets which we are familiar with. It was the livestock in his possession – goats, cows, and horses. His nearest neighbour was miles away. The family did



The herder family we visited during orientation

not stay put in one place. When his herd had cleared the green pasture around the ger, the family would dismantle it and move lock, stock and barrel to another area for his herd to fill their stomachs. It was a fascinating introduction to the Mongolian open concept dwelling and nomadic way of living.

Each volunteer was to stay with a Mongolian family for five days in the final week of the ICT. Knowing that we were all urban creatures, VSO office did not put us up with a herder's family in the countryside. Our host families lived in the city, mostly in small apartments with no guest room. My bed was a sofa in the living area of an elderly couple with a young granddaughter. David was fortunate as his host, a young couple with a toddler, let him sleep in their bed,



With my host family in front of a big portrait of Chinggis Khan in their flat.

and made the living room their bedroom.

After ICT

After the five weeks of orientation, I felt rather alone being the only one staying at home while all the other volunteers went to work on their assignments. Volunteers normally would have their placement confirmed before leaving their home country. VSO identified David's placement very early, shortly after his application. He was to work on an Asian Development Bank project to develop curricula for short courses in the construction sector. The objective was to create opportunities for young, unemployed Mongolians to acquire practical skills and be gainfully employed. Being a late recruit, I was unable to get a placement as there was inadequate time for the VSO office in London to set one up for me.

We decided that I should be engaged in some creative activity while waiting for a placement. So, after buying an easel, a few canvases and painting materials from a local shop, we set up an art studio in our living room, and I started painting Mongolian landscapes.

The first snow fell in mid-September while we were still on the orientation programme. Snow so early? We had not yet bought our warm clothing and boots! This prompted us to visit UB's Naran Tuul Market - the Black Market. We had gone to see this place during our ICT when Urnaa brought us there to have a feel of the huge market. There were countless rows of stalls selling various household items, clothing, shoes, Mongolian souvenirs, fabrics, and antiques, many offering similar items. She warned us to be on the alert as the market was notorious for pick pocketers and bag slashers. Anyway, I got my thick winter coat from there. David preferred to shop at one of the departmental stores in the city centre as he disliked haggling. He got a great coat as well as an Armani suit made in China for his office attire at very reasonable prices. Each of us bought a pair of Mongolian boots from the Black Market, the best place to get felt-lined footwear for the freezing winter.

A couple of weeks after ICT, some of the VSO volunteers who arrived in August with us, initiated a social gathering at the apartment of John and Mary. The organisers told me that it was meant to be a joint 60th birthday celebration for John and David, and I was not to tell the latter before the event to give him a pleasant surprise. David's birthdate was on 11 October just three days after John's. As I was uncomfortable keeping the secret from David, I let the cat out of the bag after a few days of mulling it over. He then had to pretend to be ignorant of the birthday celebration so as not to spoil the fun.



60th birthday party. John was not in the photograph as he was behind the camera.

Our New Home

Soviet style apartment blocks, typically three to five storeys high with shops on the ground level, lined Peace Avenue, UB's main street. Not long after the end of ICT, VSO moved David and me to a flat in one of these residential blocks, built in the 1940s and 1950s. It was a good move as our new home was located



Peace Avenue with old trolley buses plying on the street

right in the city centre. Reinforced with two doors at the entrance, the one-bedroom flat on the fourth floor was accessible by a flight of eighty steps. Good daily exercise for us. The location was excellent. We could get easily to the essential places on foot – a twenty minutes' walk to VSO office and fifteen minutes' walk to David's workplace. The nearest supermarket at the State

Department Store was just a stone's throw away and two wet markets – the Mercury and the Bumbugur were also within walking distance.

The flat was comfortably furnished, centrally well heated and equipped with modern sanitation, electricity and water supplies. A washing machine was, however, not provided. We did our weekly washing at a laundrette behind the State Department Store. During the long winter months, the temperature outside could be -10°C in the day and -40°C at night, but we were able to live comfortably at $+25^{\circ}\text{C}$ within the thick walls of the Soviet built flat. Only occasionally did we experience a temporary blackout or a cut in water supply.

Teaching Taiji Again

When I left Singapore in 2003, being a Taiji instructress overseas was not in the plan. I had started teaching Taiji in Emerson solely because of the interest of the students there. Teaching Mongolians this Chinese martial arts? Never would I dream of doing this! I was astounded to find myself giving lessons about a month after ICT with David as an assistant Taiji instructor. He had been learning the 24-step Taiji movements from me while we were in Bridgend, and he was a fast learner.

This came about through our friendship with a Mongolian family whom we got acquainted with soon after arriving in the city, and who offered their premises for conducting the lessons on Saturdays. The Nomin family of five - three daughters living with their parents, was still very traditional even though they had lived in London for about ten years. The father had worked in the Mongolian Embassy in the UK, and the two elder daughters, Oyunaa and Namunaa, educated in England, spoke perfect English. Both Oyunaa and her mother were interested to learn Taiji and they got a group of friends to join in.

The first time we received the fees from the students, who paid in advance for twelve lessons, David and I were on cloud nine. My first pay day in Mongolia! We went to a European café in the city centre and spent about 7000 tugriks (the local currency) which was about S\$10 on one coffee, one hot chocolate and two pieces

of cake. This was exorbitant in Mongolia! A real treat for us living on a shoestring budget with our daily diet based on bread, rice, potatoes, cabbage, carrots and occasionally pak choy.

My First Job in UB

Two months after arriving in UB, we realised that we were not doing very well financially as two of us were living on the allowance for one volunteer – David’s allowance being just US\$180 per month. This was only adequate for one person’s monthly grocery needs and a couple of meals out a week. The cash in sterling pounds we brought from England was by then running low. And the Mongolian VSO office still had not found me a placement. Fortunately, the Asian Development Bank, David’s project managers, footed the bills for our accommodation and utilities.

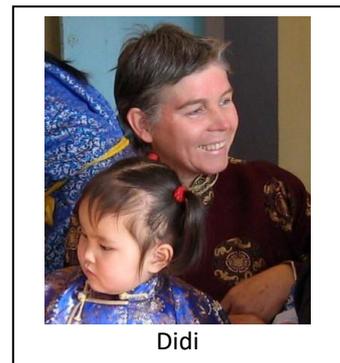
I now needed to find a source of income. Hartford Institute, a Singapore-based organisation under the Raffles Education Corporation, came to my attention. Hoping that this Institute which offered international degree courses in Mongolia might have an academic position open for me, I went to see its head. “Sorry, we have no vacancy presently.” he said. Then two weeks later, out of the blue, he called me to say that I could start work immediately. A teaching position had come available by a sudden resignation. I got a contract for three months to teach six hours weekly. Well, now it was back to my old career in Singapore before leaving for Emerson College. I still wanted to be a volunteer, despite my monthly take home pay from Hartford being over ten times more than a VSO’s monthly allowance. While working at Hartford Institute, I got to know two other Singaporeans teaching there – Reno and Yee Ling. Surprisingly, more Singaporeans crossed my path during the rest of my stay in Mongolia.

The Lotus Children’s Centre

Just before the end of the ICT, I was pleasantly surprised to receive an email from my friend, Ee Lin in Singapore. Her colleague was in UB with a group of eight

other Singaporeans on a two-week volunteer project. Would I like to meet them? Of course, I would like to, very much. Feeling rather alienated in the strange new environment, I would never forgo the opportunity to converse in Singlish with fellow Singaporeans. We met at Cafe 888, a Chinese restaurant in the city centre, happily chatting away like old friends. They were volunteering their service at the Lotus Children's Centre. Coincidentally, our ICT programme had included a visit to this centre, arranged by Maria Wells, a VSO volunteer working at its primary school.

Didi Kalika, a remarkable Australian lady who first came to UB in 1993 to teach yoga and meditation, started the Lotus Children's Centre. She saw girls in their early teens living on the streets, in constant risk of being raped. Beginning with giving food and water to the street children, she went on to provide them with more



Didi

permanent shelter and security. The population in the Centre grew from one child to around 140 when I was there, ranging from newborn babies to youths in their late teens. House mothers were employed to take care of them, one house mother to approximately ten children.



Lotus's residential site - the 'baby' house

The babies and toddlers lived in a brick building with a central heating system while the older children were housed in gers, each with a stove located at its centre. Like other households in ger districts, the children relied on burning wood, coal, or any flammable material in their stove for heating. Shared toilets and bathrooms were outside their gers. Imagine that you had to go outdoors for a pee on a wintry night with the temperature at -40 C. It was certainly not very pleasant.

Besides housing the children in a district named Yarmag, just outside UB on the way to the airport, Didi also gave them an opportunity to receive an education.



School building at Lotus Centre

She set up two kindergarten classes, and a primary school headed by Maria Wells. Locally trained teachers were engaged to teach in the school of five classes, following the Mongolian school curriculum. There was also a class for five special needs children. The primary school and kindergarten were brick buildings with central heating. Didi's efforts in her relentless pursuit for funds from overseas sponsors and supporters had been the main

driving force sustaining the operation of the Centre.

Preparation for my art exhibition

One day, David had a bright idea. "You could use your art to help the Lotus." This fired me up to paint with enthusiasm. I had a purpose now – to hold an art exhibition to raise funds for Lotus. From November to March, I spent most of my spare time painting and organising the exhibition. We had been visiting various art galleries in UB during the weekends. Of these, we felt that Xanadu Art Gallery with its more contemporary outlook, would be a suitable venue for my exhibition. A young Mongolian lady, graduated from an American university, managed it. Coincidentally, her mother was a manager in the Asian Development Bank – the banker for David's VSO placement project.

To alleviate the exhibition cost, I searched for sponsors. I did not need to go far to find them. The main sponsor was a Singaporean, Ben, who managed MacCoffee's business operation in Mongolia. Oh, no. It was not MacDonald's coffee. It was a Singapore-based enterprise which distributed 3-in-1 coffee as well as tea to many countries in Asia and Russia. I got to know Ben through the head of Hartford Institute. He agreed without hesitation to pay for the rental of the gallery, the reception for the exhibition opening and a big banner. He already knew about the good work Didi was doing for the city's street kids and would gladly contribute to my effort to raise fund for the Centre. The other sponsor was

the Mongolia-British Friendship Society, which had been set up by the Nomin family.

Visit to Singapore

While preparing for the art exhibition, David and I decided to take a trip to Singapore around the Lunar New Year period in February 2007. As it was 'down-time' at work with Mongolians busy celebrating their New Year around the same time as the Chinese, David was



able to take leave for a couple of weeks. The visit was an opportunity for me to introduce him to my siblings, relatives, and friends in Singapore. My income from Hartford came in very handy as it provided us with the financial means to buy the air tickets. There were only two airlines by which we could fly from UB – MIAT, the Mongolian national airline and Air China. If we flew by MIAT, we would have to change for another flight to Singapore in either Seoul or Beijing. We decided to travel by Air China via Beijing, taking the same airline all the way to Singapore. David had to apply for a visa from the Chinese Embassy for the transit stop at Beijing Airport. This requirement apparently applied to British and American visitors only. As for me, my Singapore passport enabled me to be in China without a visa for fourteen days.

Leaving UB at the end of January, we had a ten-hour stopover in Beijing. What was the point of hanging around at the airport? So, we took a taxi to the city centre – to the Silk Street Market where I browsed for some gifts for my relatives and friends. This was David's first visit to China. I think he was very surprised by the modern high-rise buildings and tidy streets of Beijing. The rapid rate of development also astonished me, having been on holiday to Beijing three times - first in 1983, and twice in the 1990s.

Leaving Mongolia at a freezing temperature of around -30 C and touching down in the tropical heat of Singapore in less than 24 hours, was quite a transition. On arriving at Changi Airport very early in the morning, we were met by my brother Chek Tow, his wife Sandie and their daughters, Audrey and Clara who were very keen to get to meet my 'angmo' partner. David felt very welcomed by the warm reception shown by the Lim family. We had breakfast together at the airport, and then David and I took a taxi to the residence of Swi, my friend who visited me twice at Emerson College. She had kindly offered to put us up during our stay in Singapore.

My family – The Lims

Perhaps at this point in my writing, it is timely to say a few words about my family background, which is not exactly straightforward. I have two brothers and one sister born of the same parents plus two half-sisters – Kim (fathered by my father and another woman), and Meng (mothered by my mother and another man). Both my half-sisters were born before my parents got together, during turbulent times in Singapore - Kim just before World War Two and Meng in 1942, the year the Japanese invaded Singapore. My brothers, Lak Hai and Chek Tow, were born in 1947 and 1950 following the birth of my elder sister Noi in 1945. When my mother was carrying me, she agreed to give me away to her younger brother, Tan Chee Heong. He and his wife were childless. I lived with my foster parents since my birth in 1953 till their passing and addressed my biological mother as 'Big Auntie'. My foster parents always encouraged me to maintain contact with the Lim family.

'Big Auntie', a widow since the 1970s, had been living with Lak Hai and his wife and their two children, Joe and Yang Hwee. After Joe got married, his wife Adeline lived with them too. At the time of our visit to Singapore, 'Big Auntie' was in a nursing home. She had become rather weak after a fall at home and an operation. As she needed constant attention, it was difficult to look after her and the family decided to place her in a nursing home. Unfortunately, before David and I were able to pay her a visit, we received news of her sudden death. It was a shock to all the family members. Lak Hai, visiting her almost every day in the nursing home, did not notice any signs of her imminent passing.

For the next five days we were at her wake, held on the ground level of the HDB block in Punggol where Lak Hai lived. Every night, while Taoist monks were chanting around the casket, relatives and friends who came to pay their last respects chatted with the family members. After the cremation at the Kong Meng San Monastery in Bishan, the family, including David, were ushered into a room at the crematorium. From a tray holding her ashes, each family member was to pick up a piece of bone with a thong and place it in an urn. This was subsequently kept in a niche in the temple where family members would pay their respects during the annual Ching Ming Festival, equivalent to the westerners' All Soul's Day.

According to the Chinese custom, we mourners could not celebrate Lunar New Year. This unanticipated death changed our plan to share the joyous occasion with friends and relatives during our Singapore visit. However, David did have the opportunity to meet my relatives and some of my friends during the wake.

The Return Journey to Mongolia

On our journey back to Mongolia, another unanticipated event occurred. We flew again by Air China. While in transit at Beijing Airport, there was a delay in our onward flight due to unfavourable landing conditions at UB airport. Initially, we waited in the airport lounge. When it appeared that it would be quite some time before the plane could get airborne, Air China checked us passengers into a hotel to await further instructions. We thought we would be staying overnight there, but then, a few hours later, we were taken back to the terminal again. There was much confusion. We did not expect to join the queue through immigration and custom checks to board the plane. We had earlier been whisked out of the airport through 'the backdoor' by Air China staff without going through immigration. Air China could have been more organised in facilitating our departure. In a way we were fortunate as the delay was just a few hours. Later, we heard that it was quite common for Air China pilots refusing to land upon approaching UB airport because of poor visibility and turning around to fly back to Beijing with all the passengers still on board. There were occasions when the passengers had to stay for days in a remote hotel without easy access to amenities.

Upon arriving at UB airport late at night, David and I wondered if the taxi driver whom we had booked before our departure from UB would be there to meet us. He was! Thank goodness, he had been tracking the flight arrivals from Beijing. And he carried another passenger in the taxi with us – Reno, my colleague at Hartford Institute who had also been visiting Singapore and was on the same flight as us.

The Exhibition – ‘FUSION’

I managed to complete twenty-six oil paintings by March 2007. David, a keen photographer, selected twelve photographs of Mongolian landscapes and portraiture he had taken, to display alongside my paintings for the exhibition. Over a hundred guests including VSO volunteers and people we got to know in Mongolia since our arrival half a year ago, were at the opening on March 29.



Exhibition opening night with my favourite painting

David and I were very pleased to have the honour of the British Ambassador in Mongolia, Mr Christopher Osborne, to open the exhibition. I could hardly hide my delight when he and his wife took time to appreciate my paintings at the opening and decided to buy not one but two of them.



Exhibition at Xanadu Art Gallery, UB

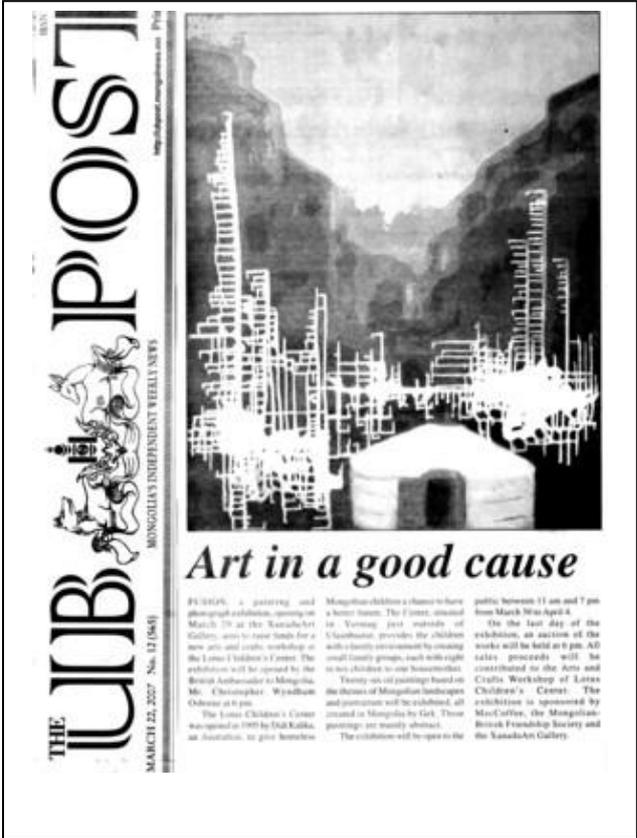
A group of children from the Lotus Centre was at the opening to present a short performance of songs and dances. The exhibition was well covered by the local press too. UB Post published an article on the exhibition, and the other English newspaper, Mongol Messenger, carried an article on street children in UB. A Mongolian language newspaper even published an article based on a lengthy interview its reporter had with David and me.



The two paintings purchased by the British Ambassador.

The week-long exhibition saw the sale of seven paintings. The new owners of three paintings were from overseas – a London-based lawyer, an Australian from Melbourne and Sock Hoon, my Singaporean friend. David sold a few copies of the photographs

displayed. After the exhibition, I gave a couple of artworks to the sponsors of the event and left most of the unsold paintings to Lotus Centre, hopefully to sell to its future visitors. A few, returned to our flat, were given later as farewell gifts to David’s colleagues and the Nomin family.





More importantly, Lotus was richer by about four thousand US dollars. David and I were happy to absorb the costs of the exhibition which was very little with the generous support of our sponsors. Our cash outlays were just for the material costs such as canvases and framing of the artworks.

Trip to Beijing

Shortly after the exhibition closed, Ruth and Richard visited us, taking two weeks' leave from their work in London. After some discussions through email, the arrangement was for them to stay in a

hotel near our flat for a week and do a bit of self-exploration in UB. Then the four of us would go for a week's holiday in Beijing. It would be their first trip to Mongolia and China. We decided to organise the holiday ourselves, without going through a travel agent. For accommodation in Beijing, I found on the Internet, a 3-star hotel in the city centre, walking distance from Tiananmen Square. As online booking was not available, I made an overseas phone call to book two double rooms – easily done as I could speak Mandarin. Preparation for the journey to Beijing from UB proved to be a bit more of a challenge.

David and I wanted to travel by train which would take us across the Gobi Desert. After a few inquiries, we found out that it was impossible to book the train tickets to fit in with our visitors' schedule. There were two types of train passing through UB heading for Beijing. For the train coming from Moscow, we could not book the tickets in advance. We would have to wait on the station platform in UB on the day of our journey and get the tickets on the spot if there were any vacant seats. Surely, we did not want to take the risk of there being no seats for us. However, we could pre-book tickets for the Chinese train commuting between Beijing and UB which operated just once a week, but the day did not fit in with our travel dates. Only one other option was open to us – to fly to Beijing.

We chose to fly by MIAT instead of Air China this time, as it would be more certain for us to arrive in Beijing on our planned date, given the Chinese pilots' caution in not touching down and taking off from UB airport due to 'poor visibility'. Once bitten, twice shy. We booked four one-way tickets to Beijing. Ruth and Richard would be flying off back to London from there. David and I were determined to return by train despite not being able to book in advance the return tickets in UB. We could only book the tickets from Beijing in Beijing itself. How frustrating! With the travel plans arranged, we happily waited for the start of our one-week away. Then something cropped up, showing us to always expect the unexpected. Forty-eight hours prior to our departure, I called the MIAT office to confirm our flights. Imagine my shock when told that our bookings were not in the MIAT airline system. Immediately I called David at work, and both of us with Ariunaa, David's translator, rushed to MIAT office. After some frantic moments, we got our bookings reinstalled and flights confirmed. Phew!! Crisis over.

Free and Easy in Beijing

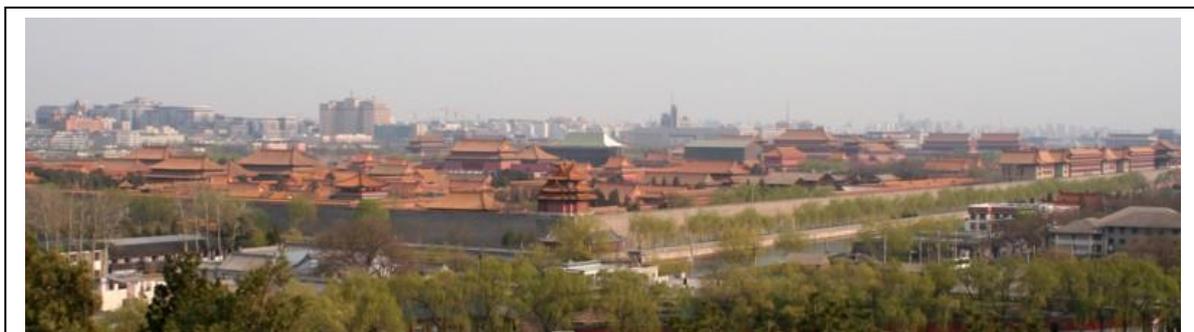
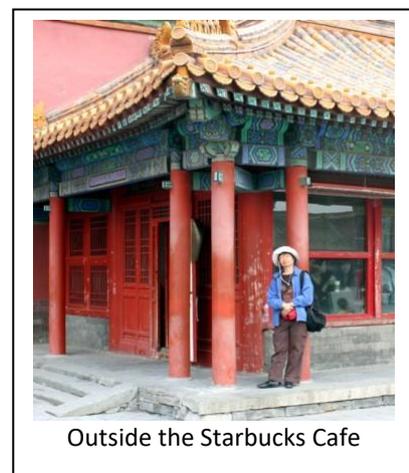
Our first task in Beijing was to purchase the return train tickets back to UB for David and me. All four of us went to the Beijing Railway Station only to find that we could not buy the tickets there. As foreigners, we had to buy at a Chinese state-run travel agency whose office luckily was in a hotel nearby. With this settled, we could relax and enjoy our holiday, which we all did immensely.

We booked a one-day trip through the hotel, to the Great Wall of China and the Ming Tombs. This was the only guided tour for the whole holiday as we went visiting the places of interest in Beijing on our own by public transport, with the aid of a city map and my knowledge of Chinese. I enjoyed being a tour guide for my British companions.

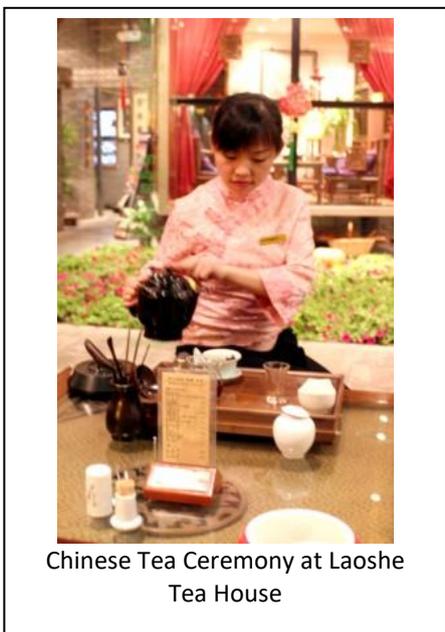
We travelled by subway and local buses to visit the usual suspects - Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Temple of Heaven, Beihai Park and Jingshan Park. It was interesting to see lines drawn on the pavement at bus stops to get commuters into proper queues to board the buses. With Beijing hosting the

Summer Olympics in 2008, the Chinese government was trying to develop the habit of queueing, as it was the norm for Chinese commuters to rush to board the bus when it arrived. Travelling on the buses was also quite an experience, unlike travelling on them in Singapore with the One-Man-Operation (OMO) system. The poor conductress had to squeeze through the crowd in the bus, to collect the fares and issue paper tickets. She also had to be alert all the time, as whenever the articulated bus was negotiating a bend, she would shout out to the passengers to hold on to the rail. When it reached a stop, she would announce the name of the place and the various destinations that commuters could go to from that stop. We travelled by the subway train wherever possible because it was more relaxing, but some places could only be accessed by bus.

I will not go into details about the places of interest we visited in Beijing as information about these attractions in China is widely available. However, I would just say a few words about the Forbidden City. It was undergoing a massive renovation during our visit in April 2007 to get it ready for the influx of visitors for the Olympics. Interestingly, the only café within this Palace Museum was located inconspicuously in a small house like any of the numerous Chinese-style buildings within the huge complex. And it was a Starbucks, an American capitalist enterprise! I would think that a Chinese tea house be more appropriate in this historical setting. This controversial franchised outlet, which started operation in 2000, closed a few months after our visit.



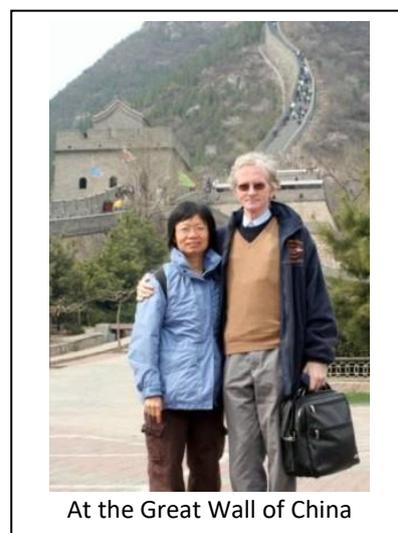
The Laoshe Teahouse



Besides sightseeing, we decided to experience a bit of Chinese culture. No, not Beijing Opera, we preferred something quieter. We went to Laoshe Teahouse for a Chinese tea appreciation and to enjoy 'slow living' much advocated nowadays in our fast-pace society. In the old days, Beijing residents frequented teahouses to enjoy cups of tea and performances by storytellers, singers and musicians, but all these disappeared during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Tea houses revived after the death of Chairman Mao. Decorated in a traditional Chinese style, Laoshe Teahouse, named after a Chinese writer, was a tourist attraction.

Photographs of many famous people who had been there were on its walls. We enjoyed the tea preparation demonstration and tips on how to hold the tiny cups and sip the tea, in a room just for the four of us. From the hundreds of tea varieties on the menu, we chose Pu-er and two other varieties whose names I cannot recall. We did not watch any performances, preferring to appreciate the tea with some Chinese snacks in a peaceful environment. It was not a cheap place to visit, but all of us really enjoyed the experience.

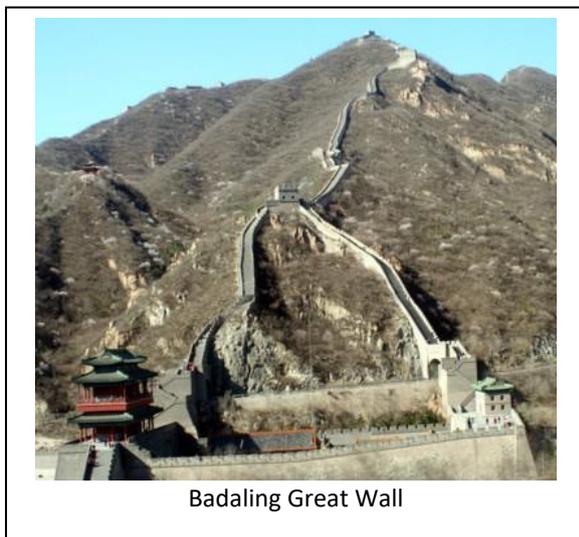
The next morning after our Teahouse visit, Richard discovered that his camera was missing. Had it been stolen from the hotel room? We informed the hotel reception which could not offer much help. Richard, feeling a bit down and suffering from aching legs, decided to rest in the hotel. David, Ruth and I went ahead with our plan to visit the Temple of Heaven. While watching local people practising Taiji at the Temple, David suddenly had an image in his head of Richard placing his camera on the cashier counter in Laoshe Teahouse. We rushed to the Teahouse, and



to our surprise found Richard chatting happily with the staff there! It had also occurred to him while resting in the hotel room that he might have left it there. And indeed, the camera was with the cashier who had been waiting for its owner to retrieve it. Richard was so glad to be reunited with his camera that he bought loads of tea from the shop.

Great Wall of China

A coach picked us up at the hotel for our visit to the Great Wall. After a journey of nearly two hours, bringing us through the busy traffic in the capital city and then to the countryside, we arrived at the Badaling Great Wall, a showpiece for



tourists. The wall, whose construction started some 2700 years ago, is not a continuous structure across the Northern border of China. Built in sections, many parts are now in ruins. My three companions were excited to walk the Wall. Although it was my third trip to Badaling, I still found it a remarkable to walk on the steep stone steps, appreciating its ancient architectural magnificence. The outing to the Great

Wall was the most impressionable experience in the whole conducted tour which included a trip to the Ming Tombs and a visit to a silk and porcelain factory.

Rail Journey Back to UB

The Trans-Mongolian rail journey from Beijing to UB took 30 hours. Soon after leaving the city suburbs in the morning, we got a glimpse of the Great Wall at Badaling again from the Soviet-designed train. The landscape kept changing as the train trundled northwards, from rocky mountain ranges and forests to farmlands on the plain followed by flat deserts. The journey took us through Inner Mongolia, an autonomous region of China. We reached the border town of Eريان

in the Gobi Desert near mid-night, where the train stopped for four hours to change its carriage bogies to accommodate the slightly wider tracks of the Russian built Mongolian railway. The passengers had the choice of either remaining on the train or getting off onto the platform while the change was made. We opted to stay on the train. After being shunted into various sheds, the carriages were jacked up to about a metre high and the bogies rolled out. With the new wheelsets installed and secured, the train was ready to resume the journey. Customs and immigration checks took place in the train with two huge border guards entering our compartment to search our berths and check our passports. Many Mongolian passengers took the opportunity to shop at the Chinese border town during the changeover. It was not just duty-free goods they sought after but also fruits and vegetables and household items.

We managed to catch some sleep after departing from Erlian, waking up in the morning to a view of the Gobi Desert through the window. Traces of the winter snow was still visible on the mountains. It was an amazing 30-hour trip. The train



arrived at the UB Railway Station in late afternoon after crossing the Mongolian steppes and passing through the familiar sight of the ger districts on the outskirts of the city.

Shortly after returning from Beijing, I started my one-year VSO placement with Lotus Children's Centre.