China Diaries 2005

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20.10.2005

Flew to Baochen which is beyond Dali on the Burma road. A minibus was waiting for us there and we drove for over three hours to Tengchong near the Burmese border, half of the time in the dark so we couldn't continue to admire the magnificent countryside. This is the edge of the Himalayas so the hills are high. We had to climb part way up Gaoligan Shan then down the other side to Tengchong. After so little sign of large habitation, was surprising to find a broad, well-lit dual-carriageway with lit buildings in old and new style, and a tower with a light on the top beaming all over the town, said it was on top of the Tower of Literature.

Notebook

Baochen airport then took National Highway 302 which runs from Shanghai via Guilin to Ruili. Part of the Burma Road, also called road of five colours - red (blood of locals), green (grass), yellow (crops), white (drugs), black (guns). Growing rice, maize, tobacco - silk route. Earth-block houses.

Film of Burma road to Tengchong

On the outskirts of town turned off down a small road and stopped in a dark car park. Walked up an alley and turned into a vast and splendid Qing house built by a jade and emerald merchant, and now a restaurant. During the Mao era had been used as offices but its grandeur has been restored with the high-backed lacquer and gold furniture that one sees in art books of the period. Felt we'd been taken out of time into a dream of old China. We dined with four of Xiao Ma's friends, all schoolmasters in Tengchong. Couldn't eat much as we'd stuffed ourselves with crisps on the journey, but had a good conversation (see notebook).
Then drove right through the town to Heshun village where we are staying with the headman of the Liu family. Amazing to find ourselves living in an old Han house of luxurious proportions. We have a bedroom with a room adjoining that looks onto its own courtyard. The eaves of the roofs are carved and the tops of the wall decorated with paintings bordered in ultramarine. There is an ancestor hall at the high central point of the house. Our bedroom is to the far right of this. At the low point to the right is the lavatory. A crouch-type ceramic bowl has been placed on planks over the old hole. The pig pen beside it is occupied by a yapping dog. Washing is done in a bowl on a stand outside the front door. There is a cold tap with hot water in a large thermos for washing. It would be a pretty exposed place to try to wash much of oneself. Very tired by this point so went to bed without much further explanation of where we were.

Film of Heshun house interior

Notebook

Conversation with teachers

Marvellous house of merchant built 1895 from profits from Burma trade. Talk with teachers. Much hatred of Japanese still here, but fond memory of Americans. Some Chinese students on refusing to buy Japanese commodities throughout China. Old and middle aged will never forget - hurt is too deep - Koizumi can do nothing to improve it. Think Americans are very independent - longing for freedom - good at making money - brave - and go everywhere in world. A lot of Americans think Chinese still live in the Ching period. Can tell difference in pronunciation between Americans and English - more English. Iraq war - powerful against the weak - not good.

Classes start at 7am and end at 11pm. Get up 6.30am - get up with stars and leave with stars. Five classes in the morning, four in the afternoon and three in the evening. Each class lasts 40 minutes. Lots of pressure from parents and society. Some lesson spaces for homework.
Main five lineages: Chun, Liu (headman), Li, Yin and Jia. 6000 villagers - village, not town, as a village that grew.

21.10.2005

Slept reasonably though I never feel that I've had a deep sleep nowadays. We were going to breakfast in a temple, Xiao Ma told us. Walked through a market. It and shops slowed us down as Alan and Xiaoxiao taking lots of film.

Film of walk through Heshun town

Climbed up to the temple but we were by then late for breakfast. A nun kindly made some rice soup for us. The temple was full, mainly of elderly women, but there were male scribes writing "prayers" which were put into box "envelopes" and "posted", by burning, to heaven. Many women were making prayer boxes or paper money and other things for burning. Others were praying, telling beads etc. A hive of industry. We saw the chief monk offering prayers to Guanyin for her birthday and then went by taxi to another temple which, like the last, was being rebuilt, where Xiao Ma had sponsored a small orchestra to play in honour of Guanyin's birthday. As Xiao Ma had paid for it, she had to stand at the front of the worshippers. There was a "service" of sorts led by one man. As the music was Daoist I wondered if he was too, but these are really Confucionists. Much talk on where is God in this. Delightful experience.
Went on to lunch at the Li family's clan ancestor hall. Huge place which seemed to be a sort of club. Lots of eating places and sets of Chinese chess. Met all the important men of the town there. During lunch talked on the big issue of democracy among other things.
After lunch went to see the house built by a Hong Kong architect for the father of Aisiqi, a marxist who influenced Mao, so one of the unwitting architects of the Maoist revolution. The house was disliked by the builder, so he never lived there. It has become a museum for Aisiqi. The locals do not like it either.

Finally, crossed the bridge over a lake back into town and went to a museum recording the Japanese war in Yunnan which was searing.
Before this we went to one of the oldest libraries in Yunnan where they'd managed to preserve books both from bombing during the war, when they hid the books in caves in the volcanic region, and during the Cultural Revolution. Managed to use their computers to service e-mails and then went back to the house for dinner and a chat.

**Old library in Heshun**
Notebook

Temple - female god Guanyin's birthday. Three birthdays for her a year but last month's birthday was Confucius. She is the central image, to her right is the god of literature and to her left, god of money. Xiaoxiao pointed out these are like saints, but there are no gods, unlike Christianity.

Another newly built Buddhist temple where Xiao Ma has sponsored a musical performance for the Buddha. No priest, just orchestra. She in front of elderly ladies, praying. Guanyin is here to right of the Buddha. Music wonderful - strong wafts of incense. This is Daoist music.

Second temple in Heshun
Conversation at lunch

Li ancestor hall for lunch - first bowl, brain food. Signs of tourist village - lake built by villagers, but jetty with awful boats was built by a tourist agency run by the son of a General in Kunming. Re Government support - eyesore - influential townsmen at lunch are not happy. Alan questioned them on democracy. They said China is led by one party - we accept - but could have democracy at a lower level. Have been ruled by emperors - don't think they can adopt the American system which does not always give democracy. Target is to set up an harmonious society. Former mayor had said at village level we have democracy, but higher level by appointment. Education will be most important thing in the next ten years. Major problem is peasants leaving the countryside - average income per head 1000Y (government figure 2700Y - Mr Liu disagrees). Village - agriculture and peasants - central problem of government. 4 people in a house, each getting 1000Y - a happy life. But another man said some are not as they let their lands.

Before 1949 this village reached population of 6000 - built library, secondary school, Ladies Formal School, and two primary schools - almost free tuition and salaries of teachers very high, so rich. Since 1962 relationship between China and Burma deteriorated - started to improve again after 1978 - still improving. 1930-40's reached the peak of wealth and cultural life. British rule very good for them. Don't care much about what is happening now in Burma. Chinese don't want to involve themselves. Ex Mayor said he went to Burma in 1938 - situation very good indeed under British. When Japan entered Burma 1942, fled. Before 1942 brought much money back and built these great houses. Burma advanced compared to Yunnan. Rode horses to Burma and changed to cars and buses there. Two disasters - Japanese war, then Cultural Revolution.

During Great Leap Forward had 1.5gm of gruel a day to eat - seldom saw meat, no vegetables as land collectivised. After 1962 collective returned us some land for planting and we had some vegetables here. Without the Cultural Revolution would lead a happy life now. It was a spiritual attack! Praise Deng Xiaoping for liberation from political and economic strait-jacket. Their questions: Does Britain have democracy? Britain was once the strongest power on earth, what happened? Mr Liu's grandfather had been an official in Burma so had much contact with the British. Why have the British not sent men into space?

Ancestor Hall

This village among the top ten beautiful townships in China. There are eight ancestor halls like this. Watched man doing feng shui with compass - this village should be a birthplace of writers. Main hall of Ancestor Hall higher than the sides as it is seen as top of the head with ears at the side. Ancestors' graves up behind hall. - Li hei-shi-bo, founder of the Li clan in Heshun - Ming dynasty - 21 generations recorded here. At death paper praising achievements, then Daoists open the throat to allow dead person to speak after death. Ghost may go to the land of the dead and he can speak with the king of that land. Believe in rebirth after 15 years. Li family had run of bad luck, then built this lineage house and their luch changed.
House built by father of Aisiqi in 1918 - (Government house - symbolic red paint). Aisiqi born in village nearby. House designed by a Hong Kong architect but all wrong - father disliked the house and never lived there. Chinese believe you shouldn't do things in extremes, otherwise punished. Alan asked if they believed in ancestors. Some hoped they were there - not punished or helped by them. Xiaoxiao said ancestors were benign - modelled on grandparents - but if you have bad luck, possibly grandparents telling you they are not happy - perhaps go to grave and find it damaged, if repaired all will be well.


Library preserved during the Cultural Revolution - hidden then one of the very few in China from that date. Xiao Ma is copying some books with digital camera. During the war hid books in caves in a volcano, during the Cultural Revolution they were locked in a room in the library.

*Connection with Burma*

Hosts grandfather graduated at university in Rangoon. Grandfather head of a county in Burma, near Mandalay. - "When British were in Burma they ate meat and left, we Chinese ate the bones. So we got rich".

*Outskirts of Heshun*
22.10.2005

Tengchong

After breakfast went to see the ex-mayor in a much larger, but more dilapidated version of the house we had stayed in. Then went to the city [Tengchong] to see a Mr Li who was variously an opera singer, prisoner, and archaeologist, which he is not, with an interest in the history of Heshun which mirrors Xiao Ma's. Very nice man with whom we had lunch. Managed to show him the Naga database. He'd already accessed Alan's web site. It was a fast connection and perfectly easy to demonstrate, much faster

We left about 1.30pm and went to the Middle School where Alan briefly questioned 5th grade students (15-16).

Visit to Mr Li’s house in Tengchong
Middle school in Tengchong