

One Day in Guangzhou

I woke up an hour and a half earlier than usual to the annoying sound of my alarm clock. As expected, the time was 6:00am. I can already hear the city being very much alive as if it never slept. Different from what I'm used to, there were cars honking, basketballs bouncing, kids yelling, and music being played by the usual people practicing Tai Chi every morning. It was going to be a different day at work today as I won't be in the office handling documents; instead, I was going to spend the day visiting my company's representative office in Guangzhou.

We were scheduled to meet down at the lobby of our office building at 7:30am. When I arrived at the lobby my co-workers, Selina and Serena, were already waiting for Mr. Ho, the senior partner at the K.C. Ho & Fong law firm, to come pick us up. Being that Queen's Road Central gets extremely busy in the mornings, the three of us were ready to go any minute. We recognized Mr. Ho's BMW driving towards us and we climbed quickly into the car. And our journey begins.

Our first stop was to Mr. Ho's brother's house. The purpose was to pick up a more accommodating vehicle to fit the three passengers and the driver himself. As soon as we entered the residential premise of Mr. Ho's brother's house, I perceived it to be an obviously upscale area. The grand façade of the houses with slightly tinted windows and an expensive car sticking out of the overhanging garage hinted to my conclusion. The houses looked similar to one another and they were all separate units with multiple levels. Just as I was beginning to admire the buildings, Mr. Ho's swiftness suspended my thoughts as he affirmed it was time leave.

The drive was estimated to be approximately three hours until we got to Guangzhou. A conversation started between everyone in the car; but shortly after, one by one we started falling asleep (all except the driver, of course). When I woke up from what seemed like a half an hour nap, we were already two hours away from Hong Kong and nearing China's border.

As we approached China's customs, Mr. Ho, having thought well in advance, asked us to prepare all necessary items in order to be as efficient as possible. He even had a stack of health declaration forms in his car! Although he does travel to and from Guangzhou quite often, this is a good example of his high standards for initiation and preparation. Not only does he want things done fast, but he also wants things done right and up to standard. So as requested, Selina, Serena, and I all had

the appropriate documents ready and filled out. Because Mr. Ho was driving, Serena and Selina had helped him fill out his declaration form; I felt the amount of attentiveness and exactitude they both had when they were listening to and writing down his personal information. Realizing this naturally made me a bit tense as if committing any slight errors in the future would deem me as incompetent. It has always been subconscious, but it was not until that point when I realized how much respect Mr. Ho's workers generally have for him. I believe it is not solely about his authoritative position as the senior partner in the firm, but it has a lot to do with his charisma and personality that easily enables workers to not just work for him, but positively work for him. As for results, we passed through customs in only a matter of minutes.

If the sign welcoming me to China wasn't a good enough indication, the blanket of pollution hovering in the sky and the free-for-all driving attitude told me I was, indeed, in China. It seemed as if there's a tangible wall that divides the atmosphere of Hong Kong and China because the air just suddenly gets worse. For as far as I can see in the distance, Shenzhen had the same shade of grey in the sky. Not only was there a difference in the atmosphere, but also I immediately noticed a less civilized driving pattern. China's infamous way of driving never ceases to impress me. Cars come in from left, right, and center, yet accidents seem to happen more often in Vancouver, which has a very organized driving system. On the road in China, it's a dog-eat-dog world. I've gotten to understand the fact that if you don't play aggressive to fight for a spot, you're not going anywhere! I can recall multiple times where I thought another car was going to hit us, but it didn't seem to faze any of the locals as they're probably accustomed to it.

After a short drive, we finally arrived at K.C. Ho & Fong's Guangzhou representative office. My first impression was that it was small and shabby compared to their Hong Kong office in Central. However, when I learned that a large portion of that floor was dedicated to the firm, it felt very spacious and welcoming. Adding to this effect, the workers there were also very inviting and hospitable.

After being introduced to most of the workers there, we were scheduled to have lunch with one of Mr. Ho's good friends from the law society. The restaurant we ate at was only a couple minutes walk from the office; I must say that the food and service was more acceptable than I thought it would be. I couldn't put a name to some of the dishes served, but they were very delicious and familiar. During lunch, I

couldn't help but to notice that the table was naturally arranged with women on one side of the table and men on the other. I suspect that it's just a culture difference from what I'm used to in Vancouver. It is true that China has a relatively wider gap between male and female gender roles in not only the workforce, but also in the general public compared to that of North America. Normally, males and females would be mingled together; in fact, it may even be encouraged for people to involve both genders in all situations. Even in a simple setting such as lunch, China's culture, based on my example, is valued and practiced naturally without question. While on the topic of culture, I noticed that people were very altruistic and selfless when it came to eating etiquette. I don't recall one person serving themselves first when eating a new dish. People normally offered food to others before having a portion for themselves. For example, a small pot of fresh tea was placed on the table and I saw one of my co-workers, who had an empty cup, pick up the pot. Naturally, I thought he was going to refill his cup, but he took the tea and filled everybody else's cup – all except his own. By the time he got to himself, there were only tea leaves left over. I could tell he really wanted to have some tea, but out of respect and his belief in cultural values, he waited for the second round to have some.

After lunch, Mr. Ho had a meeting with [REDACTED] Properties, which Selina and I were to attend as well. The expected attire was quite formal; I could've gone to my high school prom in exactly what I was wearing that day. I remember my tie was slightly crooked while going up the elevator to Mr. Zhang's executive boardroom; Mr. Ho asked me to readjust it so that my top button wasn't showing and that my tie was straight. Once we reached the top floor, the three of us were greeted by many workers. At first glance, the superficial shell of the place looked fine and luxurious. We were taken into a nicely furnished glass room that was complemented by a panoramic view while waiting for [REDACTED]. The longer we waited and the longer we had time look around, the less impressive the place seemed. As a conversation stroke between the three of us, we talked about how the finishing details of the room did not compare to our first impression given by the exterior. Examined closely, we saw stains and paint marks along the corners and edges. From that, Mr. Ho rendered the observation into something more meaningful. "The edge", he started, "never lose it". It was quite figurative, but I understood. A person's "edge" is all he has that defines him and differentiates him. The "edge" of a person makes life exciting. Being eager, charismatic, and sharp, to name a few, are just a few traits that I think adds the "edge" to a person. I completely agree with Mr. Ho and this ended up becoming one of the most distinct memories of this day trip.

Shortly after, a young lady came into the room. Without saying a word, she started to fiddle with the cups and drawers on the side. It was clear that she was preparing some tea for us while we waited, but the manner in which she approached us was rather unprofessional and inhospitable. The very least she could've done was a mere greeting or even a nod would've sufficed for me. Either way, I had my afternoon tea; besides, I was going to meet the co-chairman of one of China's most comprehensive and successful real estate enterprises.

Despite our efforts to be in our Sunday best, I was slightly disappointed to be reciprocated by [REDACTED]'s casual attire. I wondered if it was the culture there in Guang Dong. Guang Dong people are supposedly known for dressing casually even for business meetings. Not that I take offense in this, but it was quite funny to see a host lying down on his couch wearing fabric slippers while chatting with his guests. Our visit wasn't greeted by the warmest welcome, but we only stayed for about an hour and a half and returned to the Guangzhou office.

After finishing some business that Mr. Ho had to attend to at the office, it was around 7:30pm when we started to depart from Guangzhou back into Hong Kong. I remember listening to really good classic tunes, all of which were at least 10 years old. While enjoying the music and looking out the window at the view, I thought to myself if I could have a future there in China. I reflected on my day in Guangzhou, based on the culture that I witnessed, to see if I can imagine myself living there and holding a steady career. Up to this point, I still haven't come up with a conclusion. This decision will be made soon for the long run, but for the short run, I know that working in Hong Kong and gaining an international experience for the summer was one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Jeff

30th June 2009