2012 China Retail Study Tour: Experience Report


The first example of what we were to experience in China happened in San Francisco. Upon looking around the plane on a US based airlines we realized we were the only ones within eyesight who weren’t of an Asian nationality. This would seem to imply that the large majority of people traveling between the US and China are Chinese as you’d expect America’s to prefer US carriers and Chinese to prefer one of their carriers for trans-pacific flights, but here we were on a United flight from San Francisco full of people who didn’t speak English. In fact, most the flight attendants seem to prefer Mandarin has their main language.

All my initial impressions from Shanghai from the airport to the transportation to the hotel and its food struck me as very Western. If it wasn’t for the writing and the people you could probably convince someone that you were actually in any of the big cities in America. Some of the few noticeable differences were that instead of building one of some building design, all the designs in Shanghai seemed to be built in sets of a dozen of the same building next to each other. Another was how the traffic operates; instead of obeying the traffic control devices and laws drivers just seemed to do whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. The side effect of this was that all the drivers on the road were paying complete attention to driving and could predict someone cutting them off. In some way I seem to prefer this, there may have been a small increase in the number of minor accidents but we were told there were few major accidents because of the slow speed of traffic and you didn’t have cars crashing into each other at full speed because the driver was texting.
The flight to Shenzhen reminded me of pre 9-11 air travel in the US. Security was tight, but not over the top. The flight attendants spent the whole flight serving drinks and free food compared to the small drink and bag of pretzels you now get on US airlines. On the bus ride to the hotel at night, we drove miles and miles on the downtown strip that with all the elaborate building designs and lights could have been straight out of Miami, LA, or Las Vegas.

A short bus ride away was Guangzhou where we met with Andrew’s contact. Tim offered a very different perspective of the Chinese economy and of US firms in China. He believed that the Chinese government enticed US firms over to China holding as the carrot the emerging Chinese market and special access to newly constructed Chinese research and industrial parks and infrastructure. He said what they don’t tell you are that the Chinese firms get more consideration when it comes to winning contracts locally and in competing in the local markets.

After another flight and a two hour 160km bus ride that somehow turned into four hours we arrived in Yingkou. This was a Tier 3 city that was almost being entirely centrally planned to become a Tier 1 city. By this time the group all agreed that Chinese food is pretty similar to what we think of in America. The only difference is that it tastes blander and is a lot healthier. It is more greasy, very little protein; meat is usually pork and sometimes will be served consisting almost entirely of grizzle and fat.

We took the “high-speed train” (which never went faster than a car on an interstate to Beijing. This city is very similar to Shanghai in scale except a lot of the Western influences were replaced with Chinese federal government influences. Every tenth car on the road was a black government official’s car, which like the rest of the cars on the road, never reach higher than 20mph. My favorite part of the trip came on the last day when we visited the Great Wall. Out of
everything, this was the thing that least met my expectations. The builders of it would route it through the most perilous path instead of the easy route; on the ridge of the almost un-climbable mountain instead of through the valleys. The unimaginable size of it is analogous to the country and the amount of labor they still have available to take on huge public works projects to benefit the future growth of the country.