

A Most Memorable Event

by Lim Hao Xin (Horst Lempp)

“One, two, three...” and – click! - time and time again Johnny Lau’s stentorian voice rang out above the din of traffic and the jabbering of kids to call yet another group of students and/or teachers to attention for a snapshot. He must have taken thousands of pictures with his hightec professional camera. An indefatigable and able photographer! And always cheerful! But then he was but one of a number of dedicated staff from both a Hong Kong and a Nanjing based school, who patiently shepherded not only a significant number of their own students, but also 22 students and eight staff from four visiting foreign-based schools around Hong Kong and across southern China for the best part of a fortnight.

The highly memorable occasion was an international gathering of students from five countries and six schools around the world with the objective of focussing attention on the protection of the world’s precious and highly endangered water resources. Within the framework of the World Educational Alliance (a forum for facilitating the exchange of ideas between schools around the world), the gathering of minds was initiated, planned and organised by the Nanjing Yuying Foreign Language School and the Hong Kong Baptist University Affiliated School Wong Kam Fai Secondary and Primary School, whose principals and organisers had called an international symposium on one of the greatest and most pressing challenges of mankind.

The arrival of the delegations from the United States, South Africa, Germany and Singapore was staggered over two days. As each group alighted after their long flights, it was met at the airport by a reception committee of friendly, helpful and competent members of the hosting schools, holding an identifying banner aloft and instantly making everybody feel welcome and at home. The organisers had worked ably and tirelessly for months before, in order to stage-manage a comprehensive program for the four overseas visiting schools, which started in Hong Kong on March 17, culminating with the actual symposium in Nanjing on March 25 and concluding with a sight-seeing tour of Suzhou, Hangzhou and Shanghai from March 26 to March 29.

Supporting the theme of the symposium, we visited the Shatin Water Treatment Works in Hong Kong, with a highly informative audiovisual presentation on the water supply situation of this huge city with virtually no hinterland. Some of the significant facts to emerge were that the city purchases the bulk of their water supply (i.e. close on 70%) from the Province of Guangdong in Mainland China and that some huge reservoirs had been constructed by damming off and reclaiming large seawater estuaries, which were then pumped dry and used for fresh water storage. The Wong Nai Chung Reservoir, one of the smaller (and older) storage facilities, was also visited.

Amongst the social events, a visit to the Hong Kong Heritage Museum was arranged and a tour of the Peak area on Hong Kong Island, where students were taken on a sight-seeing walkabout with spectacular views. At a formal Welcome Party on the premises of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, students, organisers, guest student parents and teachers were given the opportunity to meet informally over a delicious meal; presents were exchanged, new friendships established and – of course: “One, two, three...” produced many more memorable snapshots, against the background of a surging sea of city lights in the valley below.

During one of the “free days” the author and his wife took a ferry boat to Sok Kwu Wan on the small island of Lamma, a most enchanting place without any motor traffic, beautiful

scenery and picturesque little seafood restaurants, with views over a fleet of house boats and fish rafts anchored in the bay. Following a most delightfully laid out trail, we crossed the island on foot (taking a swim in the South China Sea on the way!) and ended up at the settlement of Yung Shue Wan on the opposite side of the island, from where another ferry boat took us back to Hong Kong Island.

Another day saw us exploring the far eastern parts of the New Territories, where we discovered – to our utter amazement – that Hong Kong is not only concrete canyons and mega-malls, but also boasting large areas of nature parks, beautiful, wild mountain country, secluded bays and lonely beaches! We hiked a part of the meandering MacLehose trail, enjoying spectacular views and beautiful scenery - until a change of weather forced us to return.

After the short evening flight to Nanjing and a night-time, lengthy bus ride from the airport into the city, delegates checked in at the prestigious Nanjing Shuangmen Lou Hotel for a peaceful night of necessary recuperation. On the very next day, unfortunately, the weathergods had decided to bring home the point of the symposium: nevertheless, undeterred by pouring rain, the group was guided on a sightseeing coach tour around the city. One of the highlights visited was the mighty mausoleum Zhōngshān Ĭng, built between 1926 and 1929 to commemorate Sun-Yatsen, founder of the modern Republic of China. The hillside memorial is situated on the outskirts of the city, perfectly moulded into a sloping, landscaped garden with pagodas, indigenous plants, statues and sculptures. After negotiating the 392 steps leading to the main portal on top, visitors are rewarded with a magnificent view.

The second evening saw all participants dressed up formally for a sumptuous welcoming dinner party, hosted by senior staff of the local Municipal Water Resources Bureau. In no time at all, the art of consuming the delicious food with unfamiliar chopsticks was mastered to an acceptable degree by the hamfisted Europeans! It was a golden opportunity for meeting one another, striking new friendships, downing many a glass with the customary “gan bei!” and – of course – taking countless snapshots of groups of people: “click – click – click...” went Johnny Lau’s camera!

Preceding the symposium proper, delegates were given an opportunity of viewing some relevant examples of water purification and recycling techniques employed locally. A boat ride on the mighty Yangzi River illustrated the difficulties being encountered in using a riverine system for the supply of sufficient potable drinking water for a city of several million inhabitants. During visits to the Nanjing University of Technology and a military training academy, students could also inspect a wastewater purification plant in action and study various water savings measures. These visits were arranged by courtesy of the Nanjing Municipal Water Resources Bureau, who acted as Supporting Organisation and Sponsors of the event.

The symposium itself was opened with a formal and festive flagraising ceremony on the premises of the Nanjing Privately-run Yuying Foreign Language School, followed by opening speeches by the main organiser and host of the event, Principal Hua Mingyou, as well as co-organiser Principal Dr. Benjamin Chan, who had accompanied his school’s delegation from Hong Kong. After the exchange of presents between participating schools and the organisers and a keynote speech by Mr Zhang Wenxin, Director Water Resources Management Centre of Nanjing Municipal Water Resources Bureau, all six participating schools delivered their carefully prepared audio-visual presentations. With Singapore experiencing similar drinking water challenges to Hong Kong, their delegation’s delivery was focussed primarily on

purification and de-salination techniques, while the German team gave an overview of the general water situation in Europe and drew attention to the little-known problem of “virtual water”. Against a background of South Africa experiencing the negative effects of climate change already, the all-girls team from St.Mary’s School in Johannesburg presented a captivating picture of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project – a stupendous undertaking stretching over several decades, with the aim of relieving the water shortage of the industrialised heartland of the Witwatersrand urban sprawl. The 8-member team from Cleveland concentrated on the world’s largest fresh water resource and drew attention to pollution problems emanating from industrial complexes such as Chicago, Detroit and other cities on the southern fringes of the Great Lakes complex. A novel way of focussing attention on the theme of the symposium was employed by our friends and travel companions from Hong Kong, insofar as they depicted drinking water situations as seen by children in a series of paintings and drawings, whilst students from the hosting school engaged in a number of sketches and performances depicting “water situations”, which brought home the salient points in a concise, visible form.

Another splendidly choreographed event was the official farewell party after the symposium proper. The principal and staff of Nanjing Privately-run Yuying Foreign Language School had gone out of their way to lay on a festive event. Following a delicious meal, the hosting school’s students kicked off the entertainment part of the evening with a stunning and highly artistic display of martial arts, dances and songs, which left visitors spellbound by its scope, professionalism and variety. It was followed by sketches, songs, dances and displays by students of the visiting schools.

The Singapore and South Africa groups then departed on their own ways, whilst the German, American and Hong Kong delegations embarked on a bus excursion to Suzhou and Hangzhou. A saying in China has it that “paradise is in heaven, on earth there is Suzhou and Hangzhou”. The former is also known as the city of gardens and the 12th century explorer Marco Polo was so enchanted by it, that he named it “Venice of the East” – by virtue of the many canals, which criss-cross the city. Both cities are blessed with a variety of sculptured and most enchanting gardens, amongst them “The Lingering Garden” in Suzhou and one of the four renowned classical gardens in China, which has the distinction of being a World Cultural Heritage site. Somewhat delayed by traffic jams in Hangzhou, we nevertheless found time for visiting the historically significant Leifeng Pagoda, strolling along the shores and even taking a boat ride on the beautifully situated West Lake.

The last two days saw us in the modern mega-metropolis and “gateway to the West” Shanghai, a bustling urban complex with more than 20 million inhabitants and location for the World Exhibition this year. Built almost entirely on alluvial sands in the delta of the Yangzi river, Shanghai looks back on a moving and varied history and is today the most important industrial and commercial centre in China. One of the highlights of our too short a stay was a visit to the centrally situated “Old City”, the Yuyuan market and the Yu-garden, which dates back to the Ming-dynasty (1368-1644) and is one of the most famous gardens in China. Just strolling along the narrow alleyways and countless stalls of the bazaar will probably stay with us as one of the most treasured memories of the entire trip. Inbetween shopping frenzies in Nanjing Road, we also found time to ascend (by escalator!) the 350m tall Oriental Pearl TV tower, which offers mindblowing views over the city, the harbour and the Huangpu Jiang River snaking its way between the scyscrapers of up to 101 floors! (And “click – click...” went the camera).

Space (or rather the lack of it) dictates that I should end this account here. There were so many more fascinating sites and scenes, so many lovable people we met, so many new friendships struck that the fortnight away from home seemed like months. Beyond the serious work and deliberations on the theme of the symposium, this meeting of ordinary people, of different cultures and nationalities, was so tremendously rewarding and utterly enriching in more ways than one, that my words at one of the presentation speeches in Nanjing ring more true than ever: The coming together of ordinary people, human beings, the exchange of ideas, hopes, dreams, feelings, aspirations and beliefs ultimately yields an understanding beyond the babble of politicians and the greed of commercialism that it may just, ultimately, lead to a more humane, a better world. For facilitating this exchange I once again would like to express my heartfelt thanks to the two people who made all this possible: Principals Hua Mingyou and Dr. Benjamin Chan.