

TEDxPedition China 2009

I arrived in China around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, finding my way to the hotel with the aid of a local man at the airport. When I finally found the place where we were staying the expedition organizer greeted me in the conference room as the whole team was frantically preparing it for the next day. As it turned out the conference had an impressive line-up and ran rather smoothly; bar a few technical difficulties. The main focus of the day was on environmental issues, particularly after Maurice Strong, one of the world's leading environmentalists took to the stage a couple hours into the day. The conference lasted all day and even spilled over into the evening as we enjoyed an extravagant dinner whilst discussing many of the issues that had been brought up throughout the day. Unfortunately, the next day we had to leave Beijing for Xi'an, meaning I wasn't really able to get a feel for the city itself.



Nevertheless, Xi'an was a different story. The city has a population of over 8 million people and is one of China's oldest cities. Whilst visiting some of the more 'touristy' locations such as the Terracotta Army we also spent a day visiting an environmental project called the Loess Plateau Watershed Rehabilitation Project several hours south of the city. The project covers 35,000 km and was funded by the Chinese government and the World Bank, it transformed a previously over-farmed and problematic terrain into a fertile green landscape boosting the local economy. The local farmers now cultivate the land loaned to them by government - for many this land is their only source of income.



I was constantly aware of governments influence in China; even the biggest businesses seemed to need the government's approval. We visited a couple of very large companies whilst in China, including one of the countries biggest outdoor advertising agencies, who told us about the governments plan to reduce the number of billboards in certain areas. It seemed that their relationship with the PRC certainly

didn't have an adverse effect on their business. One of the other larger companies we visited was a green air-conditioning company, with its own town occupied by its two thousand live-in staff. The company was a real insight into the sheer scale of things in China, the town had multiple factories producing air-conditioning units the size of houses, capable of running on waste hot water or natural gas. The whole company was typified by a giant golden pyramid the CEO had installed to house a museum, clearly just one of his many eccentric decisions.

The third major place on the itinerary was Chengdu, a colossal city and the hometown of the expedition organizer. We arrived in Chengdu after our second overnight train journey on the hard sleeper, not quite the luxurious hotels we were getting used to. Nevertheless, the view of Sichuan province from the train window was breathtaking and made it all worthwhile; it

painted a portrait of 'real China' with its rural landscapes, a world away from the skyscrapers of Beijing. Whilst in Chengdu we also had the opportunity to visit the rehabilitation centre for the victims of the Great Sichuan Earthquake, which occurred back in May last year killing 70,000 people. The centre was set-up by the NGO Disaster Preparedness Centre who had built temporary shelter for thousands of families. We were able to chat with one of the NGO's employees who told us about the micro-finance project they were running in the temporary communities. The NGO gave loans varying from 4,000 to 20,000 RMB for individuals looking to start up their own small business or invest in livestock; impressively they also offered free entrepreneurship training, something that seemed particularly forwarding thinking bearing in mind the circumstances.



The last notable stop on route before Hong Kong was Shenzhen, where we caught up with the people in charge at the Shenzhen Institute of Advanced Technology. The institute was an incredibly impressive scheme that combined the engineering efforts of many major universities in the area. In many ways there appeared to be more evidence of innovation in this one institution than the rest of the companies we had met put together. With the exception of the institute it seems that innovation is lagging in China, yet the country gives you the strong impression that as the economy grows this will not last long; I think the institute is indicative of that.

Finally we arrived in Hong Kong, the last stop on the trip. The concluding conference had a much stronger focus on social enterprise than the one in Beijing. As with the conference in Beijing, this was a fantastic opportunity to network with an array of interesting people and talk over issues rarely discussed in day-to-day life. After the conference I was due to fly by to London at midnight, but instead decided to spend a couple days taking in the astonishing sites of Hong Kong before heading back to London.



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