



People-to-People Citizen Ambassador Program Optometry Delegation — China

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This particular adventure really began on April 25, 1985, when I received an invitation from Dr. Irvin Borish to join an optometric delegation to the People's Republic of China.

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The initial invitation to North American optometrists to assemble such a delegation had come from the Chinese Medical Association to People-to-People International, whose Citizen Ambassador Program originates from Spokane, Washington. Dr. Borish supervised the circulation of the Chinese invitation throughout the US and Canada and, to the amazement of both himself and the People-to-People

organization, no less than 58 optometrists accepted. Together with spouses and a few fortunate office personnel, the delegation actually consisted of 102 people and turned out to be the largest group ever sent by the People-to-People Citizen Ambassador Program. From Canada, there were Drs. Sadie and Jim Lampard, Doug Freeman, Norman Roach and myself. In addition, there were three optometrists from England. The balance of the delegation, including two Puerto Rican optometrists, was American.

The entire group met first in Seattle, Washington, for a very thorough briefing on our trip. We reviewed the cities we would visit and were introduced to a number of specific aspects of Chinese protocol and customs. Sunday, October 6th, we left by air for Hong Kong and promptly lost a whole day as a result of crossing the International Date Line. Strong headwinds en route created an additional loss of time and we finally touched down in Hong Kong four hours late at 11:30 pm.

We began with the luxury of having Tuesday morning to ourselves, but found that we still had to rush things such as shopping. (The men in our group, incidentally, held their own with the ladies when it came to buying, thank you.)

When we at last began our trip into China, it was by train from Hong Kong to Gangzhou (Canton). Coach trains, on time, leave Hong Kong at 1:00 pm and cross into the People's Republic of China a short 35 minutes later. Attesting to the apparent special status being accorded our tour group, we occupied the only two coaches on the train which might have been termed "modern".

As we progressed, we saw from the train a small part of China's traditional agricultural background — rice paddies, sugar cane, bananas, even fish hatcheries. In addition, we saw frequently that farmers are still making extensive use of water buffalo and the people we passed in the fields seemed to come straight from pictures of China we had seen many years ago. Here and there we did see the occasional tractor or truck (of varying ages) which, in fact, were perhaps more numerous than expected from our first impressions of the peasant farming practices.

Gangzhou itself is an ancient city, parts of which actually go back to about 250 BC. It is also, however, a large, industrial city with a population in excess of 2 million and there are many new buildings in evidence as well.

Here too, we were treated to the first

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*The author at China's most famous landmark —
The Great Wall.*

of many examples that our group was to be welcomed as special. We were housed in the Gangzhou guest house, a government hostelry, modern in every respect and set in a walled compound with beautiful gardens and armed guards at the gates. The guards, it turned out, were not posted to keep us in, but to keep the general populace out.

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During our stay in Gangzhou, we were not in the least restricted in our movements.

Some of us went for walks that night, a simple exercise which, in Gangzhou, can be quite an experience. There are no street lights and cars (many of them new and, in fact, many more Mercedes limousines than we had counted on) run *without lights*. Canadian optometrists who are campaigning for daytime running lights would find that, in Gangzhou, drivers first will have to be convinced of the merits of driving with them on at night!

As expected, we were treated to an ever changing medley of Chinese food. What we did not expect was the quantity — twice a day in anywhere from 15 to 25 courses. And whoever said this type of food does not stay with you? We all found it did. In fact, with no fibre or roughage, it stayed and stayed.

We spent the morning of the 9th at the Dr. Sun Yat Sen Medical Centre in the Department of Ophthalmology. The Centre is actually a large teaching hospital that is always filled to capacity. Patients, in fact, have to wait in shelters outdoors before getting in for treatments.

The Director of the Department met us and, because of our numbers, we broke up into five groups with an interpreter physician being assigned to each.

The hospital, sadly, reflects a negative part of the history of the country and its past inhibitions against growth and initiative — the pillage by England, Portugal and France, their

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own Civil War and, most devastating of all, the cultural revolution of recent years. There is now, however, a great endeavour to catch up and China must be regarded with a good deal of respect for her recent efforts to upgrade health, housing, etc. in addition to its current wave of agricultural, industrial and scientific endeavours.

Despite being devoid of all but the essentials and despite lacking in much of the diagnostic and treatment equipment that we in North America take for granted, the care given to patients in hospitals is good.

Examination rooms for vision care still leave much to be desired, but in this area, too, the Chinese are seeking improvements. In virtually all of the clinics we visited, a Snellen chart at the end of the room and a trial set were in evidence. We also saw a Chinese made slit lamp in one hospital and, in

another, a Topcon automatic refractor (whose findings are used more as a guide in what are purely subjective examinations). We saw ophthalmoscopes only occasionally in the examination areas and retinoscopes were almost non-existent.

We were shown some Chinese laser equipment, similar to older models in use in North America. "Technicians", trained by ophthalmologists, we were told, perform most of the vision examinations but without regard for possible pathology.

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Most of the spectacles we saw did not incorporate a correction for astigmatism. In fact, for the most part, the Chinese citizens of Gangzhou wear glasses of a ready made variety, vended on the street. We did find, however, a few optical outlets where frames and lenses are made up to prescription.



Gangzhou street vendor and his wares.



Acupuncture treatment for optic neuritis.

In the Sun Yat Sen Medical Centre, some of the treatment procedures incorporate traditional acupuncture therapy. We witnessed its use in one case of optic neuritis and, another time, in a case of optic atrophy. We were also given a demonstration of the eye exercises that school children perform each day to avoid stressful conditions and to try and avoid myopia. Since glasses are expensive, one pair of spectacles may actually be a shared appliance among several students in a class.

While we did not ourselves see contact lenses being fitted, we were told that, at present, PMMA lenses are being used because "soft lenses cost too much". (One refracting room did have an AO ophthalmometer.)

American Hydron, however, is opening a plant in Shanghai. We found this to be so when we arrived in Beijing and were the guests of Hydron at a banquet. In this country of contrasts, after our tour, which included some outdated and ill-equipped hospital facilities (although

also some modern, well-equipped ones), we found our banquet was in a revolving dining room on the 24th floor of a thoroughly modern hotel.

Beijing is a city which, like China itself, is evidently undergoing many changes. Not the least of these is the large scale building of new housing. Construction cranes are everywhere atop new highrise dwellings, all of which are owned by the government. Rental, however, is nominal and the city's older and more squalid areas are being eradicated, but only very gradually.

We were also told that, among young couples, the one child per family edict is in force and is being well observed. With China's population of 1.2 billion people being added to at the rate of tens of thousands per day, and the limited resources available for such a population being ever more reduced, strong controls on parenthood are understandable.

The next day, we spent an entire morning at the Number 3 Teaching Hospital in Beijing, giving lectures and

discussing vision care methods with our hosts.

It had been our intention from the very beginning to introduce them to Optometry. We took advantage of every opportunity to touch on the many aspects of optometric training and the primary role which optometrists serve in vision and eye care.

We also toured a modern glass lens plant, spending much of an afternoon there, where we noted that spheres were the order of the day.

That evening (October 11th) was perhaps the most memorable of the many special evenings of our trip. Our delegation was honoured with a lavish banquet in the Great Hall of the People's Republic. We saw but a small part of the building. In contrast to the earlier part of our trip, we were restricted to a very specific portion of the Hall and the security was extreme. At the front door, no invitation meant no entrance.

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There are several elements in common to all such banquets in China and they are these — lots of food, potent drinks, few speeches and no more than two, or two and a half hours for the proceedings to conclude. Toasts may be proposed by anyone (after those from the head table are completed) and protocol requires that every toast proposed must be drunk by everyone in attendance. At our Great Hall banquet, every table had seated, as a host, at least one member of the Chinese Medical Association. Despite some language difficulties, we managed to enjoy a thoroughly congenial evening.

There were several days when we had some time for sightseeing, visiting the Ming Tombs, the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, etc. Only twice did we see pictures of Mao, one of which was in the Tien An Nen Square where 1 million people can assemble!

After the day of sightseeing which followed our banquet in the Great Hall, we checked out of our lodgings at Fragrant Hill — whose name, we discovered, becomes painfully obvious

as you come down off the hill — and drove into Beijing 25 kilometres away to the airport for a scheduled flight to Nanjing. When the moment came to board, however, we were advised that the flight had been cancelled. Nanjing, as it turned out, has no facilities to bring an aircraft in during either rain or darkness and so, despite the best efforts of the Chinese Medical Association to maintain our schedule (even to having chartered the aircraft in the first place), they were unable to get us to Nanjing for our meetings the following day.

Beijing's bustle during a business day is a condition any Canadian city's Chamber of Commerce would envy.

Returning to our hotel, we found that the unscheduled rain which had forced the cancellation of our flight had created a few more difficulties — our hotel rooms had vanished. (We did manage, however, to get into the Beijing Hotel — to sleep on a restaurant floor. Although a somewhat discomforting circumstance, it was lessened considerably by the cashmere blankets we were issued.)

We took full advantage of our extra day in Beijing. It was our own and everyone toured the city. Beijing's bustle during a business day is a condition any Canadian city's Chamber of Commerce would envy. The streets and the stores were all jammed. The demand for imported consumer goods has greatly increased in recent years, forcing the Chinese government to come to terms with the growing pressures on the economy. Among those problems, the Chinese reluctantly admit to talk of corruption, black markets and a growing crime rate, all related to this burst of consumer demand.

We left Beijing on the 14th, aboard our chartered aircraft (the weather over Nanjing having cleared up). Nanjing, like Beijing, is another ancient city but, unlike Beijing's obvious success with its urban renewal programs, shows substantially less progress in this area.

Nanjing's hospitals on the whole seem rather bleak and barren and,

while every attempt is being made to produce good health care in the city, facilities simply cannot keep pace with the demands placed upon them. There are shortages both of space and trained health care manpower. Certainly we were impressed with the skill exhibited by the surgeons we did witness at work but we felt, too, that they were performing under conditions which we in the west would generously label less than ideal.

We noted also the absence of all but the most limited means of providing vision and eye care services.

The Chinese have many skills, however, and not the least of these is the evident engineering miracle of the bridge across the Yangtze River at Nanjing. Given the tools and the means, they are unquestionably capable of achieving a great deal, but at the risk of sounding repetitive, the obstacles are many, particularly in health care, and perhaps the greatest of these barriers to modernization is the present dearth of trained, professional manpower.

We must be prepared to assist the Chinese when (and if) they request help in setting up their health care programs.

Throughout our visit to China, our discussions on health care with our hosts focussed repeatedly on the primary care services provided by professions like Optometry and how such a role could serve their needs. I for one had the feeling that our message was well-received, a feeling reinforced by the depth of the questions we were asked.

In the final analysis, we must be prepared to assist the Chinese when (and if) they request help in setting up their health care programs, particularly, as optometrists, those programs designed to provide adequate vision and eye care to their people.

Our trip was winding down, but still the occasional bug in the system reared its head. Despite all the plans, for example, we never even got to Zuchow, the next city on our itinerary. As it turned out, our hotel had been fully taken over by the President of the Italian Communist Party. (Previously,

in fact, our hotel in Nanjing, the "Jinling", had been unavailable to us for dinner one evening for a similar reason.)

Our last evening in China turned out to be one of contrasts. Dinner this time was accompanied by entertainment — Peking opera, dance, orchestra, etc. and I seriously suspect that a mere handful of people can include among their life experiences eating beef stew with chopsticks while listening to a Chinese tenor sing "O Sole Mio" in Italian! It was a fitting end to our visit to China and, early on the morning of the 18th, we boarded a train again, this time for a six hour trip to Shanghai and thence, by plane, to Hong Kong.

A full evaluation of this delegation's visit to China would take six months and more paper than *The Canadian Journal of Optometry* runs through the presses in a year. However, our initial impressions are that we gave our hosts what they sought — a frank and in-depth appraisal of their existing vision care system, together with our indications of what we feel their needs to be, now and for the future.

In so doing, we discussed with them the wide range of services that Optometry provides and left them, we feel, with the desire for much more information.

The results, and any measure of the success of our visit, will be measured by the extent and the nature of any follow-up by the Chinese.

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Optometry in North America, however, should not wait only for movements on their part. To be represented professionally in the most populous nation on earth is the *minimum* goal to which Optometry should aspire. The leaders in our profession on this continent should continue the efforts instigated by this delegation and perhaps a few of their own by offering to provide professional assistance and consultation when and as requested.