

China Images

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Lessons from An Shang Village

An hour west of Xi'an our half-sized bus left the four-lane expressway and headed northwest through rural Shaanxi Province as it rises from the Wei River. Although I had traveled many Chinese by-ways I was newly alert. We were headed for An Shang village for three weeks, three volunteers to do whatever was asked of us, plus our U.S. leader, Jim, and two Chinese assistant directors, Baoli [baow lee] and Hu Di [hoo dee]. Our Chinese host would meet us in the village, his village. I glued myself to the bus window as we threaded into the narrow, peopled street of a small town on the way. A funeral procession led by mourners in once-white jackets threaded across our path and down a steep lane with a shoulder-born coffin. As our minibus crawled forward through street vendors, motor bikes, pedestrians and three-wheeled farm trucks, we all seemed to turn our thoughts inward.

My nerves were jangling as we reemerged into the countryside and I tried to view China from a new perspective. I wanted every minute of this experience to teach me more. I took in the terraced plantings that often used every inch of arable land, the sweep of large cornfields, the widely spaced trees, and an occasional hand-pulled wooden field cart. All things I have seen before, but now I was no longer a city sightseer being driven through the countryside by my urban friends.

Images in my memory from many train trips came flooding back to me. I thought of the brick and mud-and-straw buildings I had seen, clustered together and surrounded by fields to which residents rode on bicycles or the old two-cylinder tractors left from the 1950s. Occasionally I had seen the people moving in and out of buildings, talking with each other, carrying children. And from my insulated train window I had watched them hoeing, cutting crops, pulling weeds, picking vegetables, poling small boats among huge lotus plants in manmade ponds. A particularly striking image came back to me from one March trip north to Xuzhou [Shoo-joh], snugly tucked into the swaying railway car, a torrential rain streaming down the window as I watched the water flow along village paths and around the mud buildings which seemed as though they would dissolve before the storm let up. Bizarrely picturesque or romanticized scenes from a Western perspective, drawn I guess from images of ancient China and too many movies.

Before I could think more, we jolted off the pavement and headed down the dirt road to An Shang [ahn-shahng] village. Holding onto our seats, we bounced along the ruts and through the sticky mud left from two days of rain. A suitcase dislodged from the top of the luggage compartment, and someone lunged for it as it landed on the yellow chrysanthemum arrangement An Wei, our Chinese host, had asked us to bring for a villager's funeral. Then within seconds we heard the deep thumping of welcoming drums and cymbals, passed a few brick buildings on the edge of cornfields, and pulled up beside

two dozen village women in white shirts and dark pants and vests giving us a traditional welcome. As the seven of us clambered out onto the new concrete village road, I had no idea what was expected of us. The drums continued as we snapped appreciative photos of the smiling women, and about 25 or so other people clustered to greet us--village hosts, village leaders, and teachers from the nearby townships. We said hello (Ni hao) to each, shook hands, bending a little at the waist, all enthusiastic, all friendly. That accomplished, the band members began dispersing or coming to watch us, and we volunteers wondered what next.

An Wei [ahn way] began assigning us to houses. Vickie and I would stay at Brother Number 5's. We both reacted inwardly, but managed not to let our request to be separate from other Americans slip out. Jim, the American leader, had warned us many times that nothing was predictable. But I was inwardly frustrated. I was even more disturbed, though gracious I hope, when An Wei's Brother #5 showed us to our splendid, shared tiled room with electric fan and a Western toilet nearby. We had been placed in the main house for Project Peace, where the group's meals were served and where AnWei and Jim stayed during the project. One takes such privilege with grace, if annoyance, and Vickie and I knew we would accept it and find our own ways to get to know village life. But deep down I knew this was too modern and too privileged for a Chinese village.

I had decided to spend three weeks on a project in An Shang village, the Upper Village of the An Clan, to live among the farming population and understand a little about rural China. Seventy percent of the Chinese population are peasant farmers, and I knew I could not go on learning about China without dipping into this world. The opportunity was provided by Project Peace, a goodwill project begun by Global Volunteers to honor the short life of our Chinese host's daughter. Although the major goal of Project Peace has been to build a state-of-the-art school in the village, the SARS epidemic has brought its construction to a temporary halt. Being ever adaptable, the project has temporarily changed focus, and our task evolved into teaching English to junior and senior high school English teachers from neighboring townships seven days a week for three weeks. Most had never talked with a native English speaker before and had little confidence that they could. We all--teachers and the Global Volunteers team--lived in the homes of An Shang village families.

Before leaving the U.S., using earlier images of Chinese villages from my experiences, plus books and films, I stewed about what to take with me and how I would fare in my imagined experience. The Global Volunteers packing list was thorough enough. Sheets, towels, air mattress (optional), anti-bacterial towelettes for pre-dinner hand washing, a flashlight for bed-time reading, boots for mud. The list fit my varied expectations of simple, hospitable mud-and-straw homes with beds consisting of mats on hard, raised surfaces and lights too dim for a Westerner to read by. The Global Volunteers' contact person in Minnesota was willing to answer any questions we had, but I was reluctant to ask many. They seemed inconsequential. I worried nonetheless about such things as how to get to an out house at night without disturbing my host family and whether my knees would survive three weeks of Asian squat toilets. The program materials had said that some of the farmers' houses had indoor plumbing, some outdoor, and that it was "the luck of the draw" who got what. I bought myself a small bright flashlight that I hoped would be useful. I wondered about what kind of boots I could fit in my luggage, and how hot (or cold) it would really be. I have become accustomed over the

years to walk into new experiences, open to unexpected learning--to not be surprised by the surprises of different cultures, to think about what they are teaching me about the new culture, and to keep a sense of humor about my mistakes. So I headed for this experience in the same way. Now here I was with a Western flush toilet in the hall adjoining our high ceiling, tiled room, and the mismatch of this experience with my images of village life had begun to surface.

Later that afternoon Baoli, one of the assistant Chinese leaders, a young woman who speaks fluent English and grew up in a nearby village, took us on a tour of An Shang. The homes of the 1700 residents, three-quarters of them related to An Wei, spread into an area equivalent to about four city blocks. The main street--about two blocks long--was a new concrete slab 10 meters wide, with seven dirt roads and tracks leading from it. One long gravel-covered lane led straight from the village through fields to the bluffs overlooking the valley of the Wei River that snakes lazily across the landscape. Another, narrower and muddier, threads past fields and down into the original village of An Xia, Lower Village of the An Clan. Another continues west from the end of the concrete road to the next village where a family factory reproduces bronze artifacts. The rest lead to the houses folded in behind brick or mud and straw walls. The concrete road was constructed through the efforts of the village council, the contributions of all the villagers, and with some impetus provided by An Wei and Project Peace.

"This is one rich village" kept playing through my mind as we walked along the new road with Baoli. "No, about mid-range as villages go," she responded. "It's not the poorest, but certainly is well-removed from the more developed and better off." I kept trying to match my images of Chinese villages to what I was seeing and they did not match. Yes, there were some mud and straw walls. There were some one story brick houses, but most of the houses were two or three stories high. Brick. Some had splendid tiled entrance ways leading to their walled yards. Colorful name signs and landscapes were in-laid over the large metal, double doors that bolted shut. I have seen such entrance-ways throughout rural China, yet often they led into dirt yards, whereas here they often opened onto stone-paved yards where the harvested crops were piled to work on and the farm implements and machines stored. Not much of this fit with my images built 10 to 15 years ago.

Ten one-room, strung-together shops lined the central length of the main road. Several sold sundries combined with other services, four public phones in one and a tailor in another. Included were a welding shop and a small clinic where on sunny days we some times saw someone sitting outside receiving intravenous medicine (a standard way to give medicine in both rural and urban China). A school dominated each end of the paved road. Near the village entrance stands the current, old three-story elementary school cloaked in fresh whitewash with a paved playground area behind it. The rooms are simple, with old furniture, but no worse than many classrooms I have seen in U.S. urban schools. At the west end of the village road hunkers the shell of the large three-story Project Peace school, a symbol of possibilities. Next to it, another such symbol, is a steadily rising one-story restaurant, the idea of villagers as they wait for the new school to be finished.

My images of a village were shaken, but I was not sure how to replace them. I could not comprehend how there could be such luxurious looking homes and still be poverty or significant lag behind urban China.

We had two layers of connections in the village--the farmers with whom we lived and the English teachers who were also guests there. Our major purpose was to teach the 18 junior and senior high school English teachers from nearby townships and counties as well as others. We worked hard at it daily--breakfast team meetings at our place; then a brisk walk through the village to the school; four hours of teaching; back to An Ke Jiang's (our place) for lunch; back to school to teach; evening gatherings at various places; and then back to prepare for the next day. Time rushed by.

We learned about the teachers' lives and a little about how they taught, but much of the teaching involved U.S. culturally based topics--creating dialogues from Norman Rockwell pictures, learning tongue twisters, getting the teachers to laugh and loosen up as they tapped their large and generally unused English vocabularies. In addition we three volunteers along with An Wei and Jim took turns teaching English to junior high school students in near-by towns, to students and their teachers who came to An Shang because we were there, and also to the village elementary school classes. This pulled us away from village life.

At home, in Brother #5's house, we slowly learned the routine of our hosts and had a glimpse of their responsibilities and daily rhythm. An Ke Jiang [ahn ku ji-ahng] was attentive to our every need. The plumbing was kept working with long strips of bamboo acting as a snake; a light bulb in the 15-foot high ceiling was replaced instantly when needed; he escorted us every time we went out at night (even when we tried to tiptoe out). A steady supply of hot boiled water was on a table in the courtyard. Li Qing Gui (his wife) and two other women prepared meals for the whole team, kept the beautiful tile floors spotless, and, to my embarrassment, cleaned my muddy shoes every morning before sunrise until I remembered to do it at night.

Vast expanses of cornfields surrounding the village were being harvested by our hosts and neighbors. An Ke Jiang and Li Qing Gui [lee ching gwee], while tending to us, went daily to their 2 mu of land [about 1/3 acre] to harvest and gather vegetables. By our second week they began returning to the courtyard pulling/pushing their efficient wooden field cart laden with dried corn. And every night under a bright light bulb outside our splendid room, they husked corn until 10 or 11 p.m.. By 5 a.m. Li Qing Qui was preparing meals for us and any family relatives who came and went from their home. Electricity seemed ample and we learned that a new power system had been installed village-wide in the last two years. The water system was strained, however, and by afternoon nothing remained in the central village tanks. In addition, buildings were unheated (the norm for that part of China) and, in fact, Global Volunteers discontinued its An Shang program during the winter months because it is too cold for Westerners.

These separate worlds of teaching and living seemed to dilute my learning about rural life as did our modern accommodations. And yet in the end, the teachers became one of the keys for me in learning about the village.

In the long run, our instruction about village life came from the combination of living in the village, learning the teachers' reactions to and about their host families as well as their own lives, and listening to An Wei's and Baoli's interpretive descriptions. As these threads entwined, the complex reality of village life began to emerge. It became obvious that the modern and the rural are being woven together daily in China and that many of my previous images were much too simplistic. They needed to be radically reformed.

Many of the teachers, all college-educated, had also been placed in splendid new housing, much to their surprise. Baoli, concerned that the teachers get to know their host families, suggested that I give them homework to find out about their family's lives. The project began slowly. Many of the teachers seemed reticent to talk much with their hosts and others were shy to talk in English about what they had learned. We began with simple questions: How many in the family? What was their education? and moved to family histories, experiences during the cultural revolution, opinions about education and the one child policy and so on. At the end of the three weeks, the teachers gave a ten-minute talk about their families. As a result, I learned more than I could imagine possible, and they spoke more English than they imagined possible.

Host family after host family had told the teachers about how hungry they were until 20 years ago. They had had to walk 5 km for drinking water and had only vegetables to eat which grew at the mercy of the rains. They lived in mud and straw houses and caves, and had few clothes to wear. Then came a reservoir that provided drinking and irrigation water. As more crops developed and younger people also went out to find jobs in towns and cities, life improved. Children began completing more grades of school. (Most of the men 45 and older have an elementary or at most junior high school education; most older women have at most a primary grade education.)

As we all lived among the farm families and watched the corn harvest come in and the winter wheat planted, snippets from the teachers' own lives emerged. As I marveled at the beautiful golden corn strung to dry from every building, hung from walls and eaves and drying racks, they and Baoli talked of husking corn until late at night with their mothers pinching their ears to keep them awake and on task.

As I learned more from the teachers I looked closer at the village. I found the caves carved into the dense loess banks in a hollow just off the main road and the crumbled walls of the old mud huts. I noticed for the first time the irrigation ditches running through the fields and the earthen ridges in the fields to guide water. The goats picketed around the village took on more meaning as did the small morsels of meat, the eggs and plentiful supply of tofu that accompanied each of our meals. I began to realize that one floor of each of the three-story homes housed drying crops and farm implements. Perhaps more important, I realized that as I have ridden trains the last several years I have been disoriented by the three-story tile and brick houses I have seen sprouting out of the village clusters. I have wondered who on earth was moving in and building there. Now I know they are indeed farmers' houses. I recognized that a fifth grade class of 32 children was a major accomplishment even though only a percentage would go on to middle school in the next town. An Wei gave us the numbers of students entering college next year and Baoli pointed out the few clusters of boys pedaling toward the county seat one Sunday night where they would stay for classes all week. And of course we learned much more.

As we bounced back down the road from An Shang at the end of three weeks we knew we had just scratched the surface, but I also knew that my earlier stereotypes and ignorance were simplistic. My images before I came and my disappointment at the too-modern accommodations were grounded in an antiquated view of China and a lack of imagination to recognize that although rural China is poverty-bound compared to the Chinese urban dynamic, it too is changing, becoming shiny and tiled and gaining a more comfortable and healthier life.

What I learned of course--yet again--is that reality is complex. There were in the village both effects of the modern and of the poverty of the recent past. What I learned is what I learn time and time again--that my images are often wrong, that they smack of the romantic notions we tend to have of places, and that people's lives are complex webs of complicated trajectories.

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