Roots and Linkages: A Journey Through the Pearl River Delta

Part 1: Guangzhou

By H.M. LAI

It was our third visit to Guangzhou (Canton). Each time was an absorbing experience, and this latest trip was no exception.

On our last jaunt China's four point modernization program had just been launched. Now 18 months later in 1978 I was participating in a joint UCLA-Zhongshan University pilot project to study the effects of overseas emigration in Taishan. This also offered an opportunity to observe what changes had occurred in the meantime, and to see old friends and relatives.

HYDROFOIL

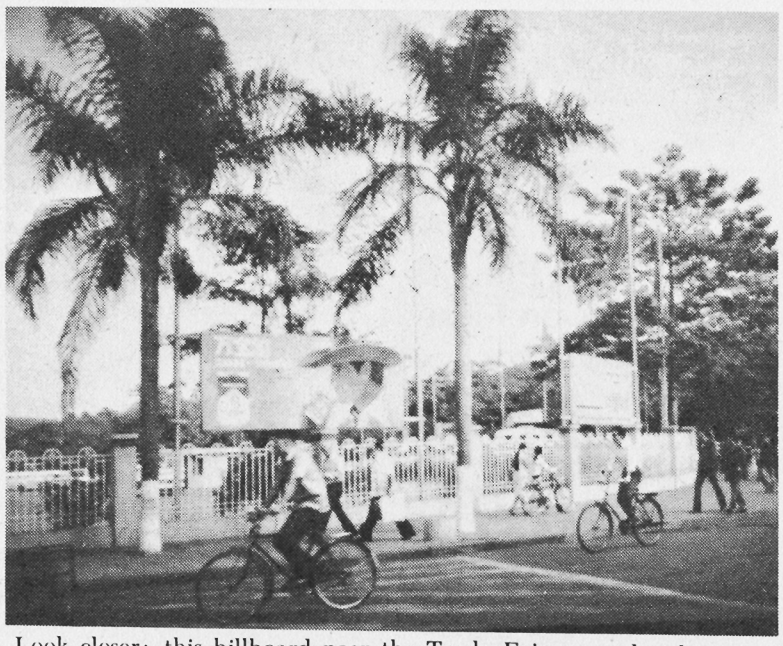
One November morning my wife and I boarded a HYF hydrofoil at Tai Kok Tsui, Kowloon. The skyscrapers and tenements of the urban skyline soon receded behind us. An hour later the boat entered Humen (虎門), the Tiger's Gate, guarding the mouth of the Pearl River. Here was where it all began in 1839 when Imperial Commissioner Lin Tsexu destroyed thousands of chests of confiscated foreign opium. Here also the British launched the first attacks on China to precipitate the opium war. China's defeat in this war initiated a century of national humiliations and embarked her on a groping, often painful, quest for modernization and freedom from foreign domination. In the meantime millions of impoverished peasants, our parents among them, have had to foresake their native land to go abroad to seek betterment of their lots.

Our boat proceeded up the Pearl and soon docked at Huangbu (Whampoa 黃埔), a name made known in Chinese history by the military academy where Chiang Kai-shek and Zhou Enlai were colleagues during the 1920's. From here it was a 20-kilometer bus ride to the heart of the city of Guangzhou.

GATEWAY

Guangzhou is a municipality of 5 million, consisting of the city (population 1.6 million) and six rural counties. For most visitors the city is China's southern gateway. The Overseas Chinese Hotel near the river is a constantly changing kaleidoscope of visiting Chinese from all over the globe. A babel of dialects-Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochiu, Hainanese, Hakka, Shanghaiese, Mandarin, hit our eardrums, and we can well appreciate first-hand the diversity and widespread dispersal of Chinese in the world today.

Visitors usually overlooked the fact that Guangzhou has a rich historical and cultural tradition. An ancient legend tells of five immortals riding goats who once bestowed rice plants to the local inhabitants and blessed the land with plenty; hence the city is known familiarly as the City of Five Goats or simply "Ears of Rice Plants" (穗). The name Guangzhou itself is also quite venerable, it having been first used during the 3rd century AD.



Look closer: this billboard near the Trade Fair grounds advertises Marlboro cigarettes. (Photos by H. M. Lai)

A restaurant in Guangzhou which specializes in wild game, dog meat stew and other exotica.

TEMPLES

The oldest building complex in the city, dating from the 5th century AD, is Guangxiao Monastery 光孝寺 It is said that Bodhidharma, the founder of Chan (Zen) buddhism once stayed here. We found the grounds barred to visitors as the buildings are occupied by families of employees of six different institutions. Officials told us that efforts are being made to induce them to move so that the monastery can be opened as a historical site. In view of the acute housing shortage in Guangzhou, we may have a long wait. The nearby 1,400 year old Monastery of the Six Banyans 六榕寺), with its famous landmark, the "Flower Pagoda" (花塔) is in the process of restoration prior to opening to the public. However, to the south the 8th century mosque, Temple of the Cherished Saint 懷聖寺, with the well-known "Bright or Bare Pagoda" 光塔 is already open to coreligionists. The presence of a large number of moslems in the neighborhood reminded us that Guangzhou was one of the earliest cities to which Islam was first introduced into China by the Arabs.

TOWER

At the northern part of the city is Yuexiu Hill 越秀山 with the imposing Ming dynasty landmark, "Tower Overlooking the Ocean" 鎮海樓 or as the Cantonese called it the "Five-Storied Tower" 五層樓 This structure now houses the Guangzhou museum. We were taking a casual stroll through the museum exhibition, when we caught sight of a familiar name—Fung Joe Guey 馮九如 This pioneer Chinese American aviator had died in an airplane crash while demonstrating in a Guangzhou suburb in 1912 and his story is featured as part of the city's recent history. Indeed, as we were to find repeatedly on this trip, numerous links exist between this region of China and the Chinese Americans!

There are many reminders of the active role Guangzhou played in recent Chinese history. We strolled on the 18th Ward十八甫 the famed street in the western part of the city, where allegedly a vengeful Manchu army of conquest stormed the city in 1650 and was finally halted in a bloodbath after killing more than 700,000! Not far away is the Street of the 13 Hongs (十三行 a name harkening back to the Chinese trade days when western traders dealt here with Chinese hong merchants. Along the river front opposite Shameen Island, a monument and June 23rd Road commemorate that bloody day in 1925 when foreign police on the island opened fire on Chinese demonstrators protesting imperialist domination of China. Going further to the northeastern part of the city, there is the Tomb of the 72 Martyrs. The mausoleum is still crowned with stones donated by Kuomintang overseas branches including one from San Francisco General Branch. Various personages prominent in the nationalist revolution are buried nearby and we were told that eventually the bones of Fung Joe Guey will also join them.

MARTYRS

Coming back toward the heart of the city we came to the beautifully kept Mausoleum Park of the Martyrs of the Revolution, where the remains were buried of 5000 executed by the Kuomintang after crushing the Guangzhou commune of 1927. In one section a beautiful pavilion commemorates the fight against the U.S. armies in Korea during the 1950's, while opposite it another structure eulogizes long-lasting Sino-Soviet friendship. We cannot help but reflect how drastically international relationships have changed in 30 years!

Here in Guangzhou is the original source of inspiration of much of what we consider "Chinese" in American Chinatowns. In spite of the fact that Mandarin has been the national language since the 1920's, Cantonese still is the mother tongue of the great bulk of the people. Instruction in most schools below university level for all courses except *yuwen* 語文 language), is given in the Cantonese dialect. However, most of the populace, especially the younger people, usually understand and speak Mandarin, although not necessarily with great fluency.

MUSIC

Cantonese music and especially opera, which Jiang Qing (Chiang Ching) once dismissed scornfully as "soft and weak" have been restored to good grace. As we strolled along the streets and alleys we often heard its minor strains in the air. Compared to 18 months ago, more operas were being presented. Many were of the traditional type with magnificent costumes and painted faces, playing to appreciatve audiences.

This is not to say that works with contemporary themes are not presented. Indeed, one of the most popular operas, "Disturbance in a Mountain Village" 山鄉風雲, is based on an incident during the War of Liberation. However, the number of such creations have been unable to keep up with the demand. We did not notice any performances of the *Yangbanxi* or model operas. But perhaps it is just as well that audiences are allowed a respite from the wearisome monotony of repetitious performances of the same few works, meritorious as some of them may well be.

The concluding part of this article will appear in the next issue of East/West. — *Ed.*

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