

A taste of optics in the Orient

Optometrist David Shannon takes away fond memories of China

What do you imagine when you think about China? I had a vision of an old socialist country and could not shake off the 1989 image of students confronting the tanks in Tiananmen Square. How wrong I was.

You can only understand China if you see it for yourself, so when Jon Baines (boss of Jon Baines Tours) asked if I wanted to lead the study tour to China I jumped at the chance. Arriving to a gloomy Shanghai, we were met by our tour guide, John. He was confident that by the end of the trip China would have become a part of us and he was right.

Shanghai is gearing up for the 2010 Expo and looking at all the workers on the site I felt confident that the pavilions would be completed on time.

Soon I became aware of the vast contrasts in China: new and old, rich and poor. Sandwiched between some of the spectacular modern buildings are what I can only describe as shanty towns. When China wants to redevelop these "for the greater good" the local residents are out. One of the first shops I saw was Starbucks but the green tea latte looked like mushy peas and smelled like grass. Conspicuous capitalism is everywhere and in many ways the UK supports socialism in a more comprehensive way than China does.

In two weeks we covered 4,000 miles. The major sights, like the Great Wall and the Terracotta Warriors, were spectacular. However, equally memorable was the food –

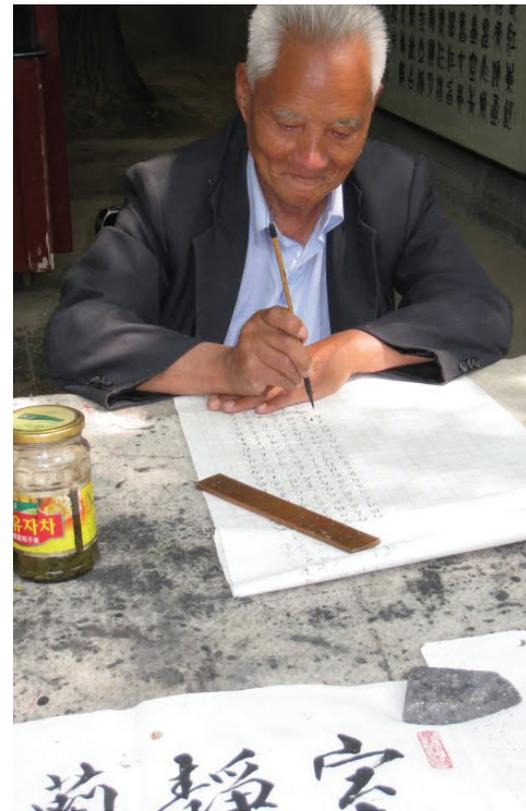
pig's tail and duck's feet washed down with snake wine anyone? Allegedly it refreshes the parts other beverages do not reach.

We also explored how optometry services were developing, including the part traditional Chinese medicine plays alongside western techniques. Over the last 20 years China has seen phenomenal growth and is in rapid transition. This is as true in healthcare as it is in other areas. On visits to hospitals, universities and factories we were made to feel like honoured guests and I felt that we could all learn from each other.

China has a population of 1.3 billion people and no General Practitioners. A hospital is the normal entry point to medical care. We visited Rui Jin Hospital, a large modern building that would not be out of place in most British cities. Upon arrival in the large lobby the first stop is the cashier where the patient registers and pays to enable them to consult a doctor. Financial arrangements completed, patients choose which consultant they want to see from a large notice board. The patient retains their medical records.

The New Vision Eye Clinic is a state-of-the-art ophthalmological facility specialising in medical eye examinations and refractive surgery. The optometrist we met trained at the Tianjin Medical University as part of her medical program. She told us that she both refracted and assessed ocular health.

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I have always thought competition in UK optics is fierce but it is nothing compared to Shanghai International Eyeglass City – four floors crammed full of optical shops each with hundreds of frames on display. Some of the outlets have an auto-refractor, chart and chair and stand in the hall. An optician here told us that he completed a technical qualification and whilst he refracted, he did not check health.

No optical tour to China would be complete without seeing its factories and we went to Danyang, known as “the city of glasses”. We were surprised at how labour-intensive frame manufacture was at Kaidi Eyewear Manufacturer Ltd, but could not fault the quality. They said they could design and manufacture any frame we wanted.

For a challenging experience, try Suzhou to Beijing on the night train – smoking, spitting and the joys of the squat lavatory. Our group seemed most relieved when I decided not to give my talk on ‘what has the AOP ever done for us?’ in the crowded dining car.

Beijing is home to the Xi Yuan Hospital of traditional Chinese medicine, the largest of its type in the world. The therapies offered are a mix of traditional and western. The pharmacy stocks items as diverse as

snake and scorpion, and therapies such as acupuncture, massage and cupping are available. The Chinese favour a holistic approach treating the main body systems as necessary but with an emphasis on prevention.

Friendly meeting

Tianjin Medical University houses the College of Optometry and Ophthalmology. At a friendly meeting, we found out that to qualify as an optometrist in China you pursued a medical qualification and progressed to optometry. It was also possible to pursue further studies and become an ophthalmologist. However, a senior optometrist could expect kudos but no extra money. A question on whether free spectacles and eye examinations were provided for children was greeted with great mirth and the comment, “how could we afford it?”

Our final professional visit was to the Shaanxi Provincial People’s Hospital in Xi’an, one of China’s oldest cities. Ophthalmologists and nurses staffed the eye department. Pre-screening included auto-refraction and air puff tonometry. When it was asked how the pressure would be re-assessed if it was high the nurse came back with a Schiottz tonometer. Although only a regional hospital, some patients travelled 2,000km to get there. Xi’an is also home to a traditional Chinese medicine market. Here you can find

copious dried flowers and ginseng but also frog, scorpion, snake, lizard and parts of animals that should never be detached. Not for the faint hearted.

China is an incredible experience, a land of contrasts. It has stunning scenery, a fascinating society and a rich and diverse history and culture. The professional visits gave us access to parts of the Chinese way of life not normally seen by tourists. Travelling with a group of like-minded people was enormous fun. Is there an unwritten law that states if you gather a group of optometrists together in a bus, eventually they will start singing? I can think of no better introduction to China.

• *The next Jon Baines Optometry Study Tour will visit Cuba in April/May 2010. Again led by David Shannon, readers should call 0207 223 5618 or email Jon Baines Tours info@jonbainestours.co.uk for more details.*

