

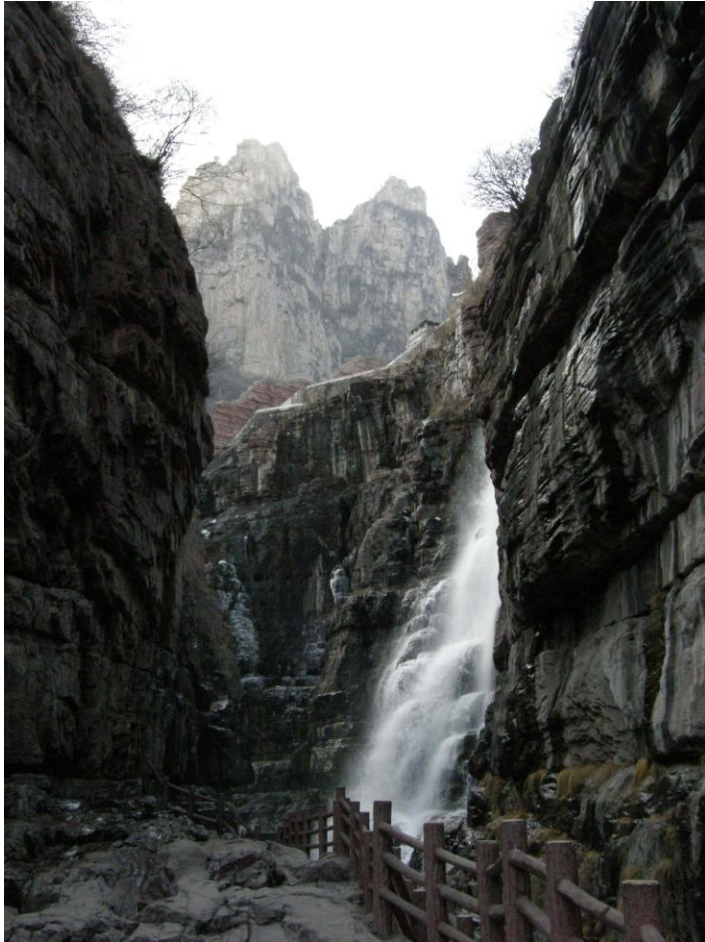
A Brief Visit to Henan and to Mt Danxia in Guangdong, late Dec 2011

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After visiting Hong Kong and Macau, we flew from Shenzhen to Zhengzhou (鄭州), the capital of Henan Province (the most populous province?) and of the Shang Dynasty (16th -11th century BC). We then made our way by bus to Jiaozuo (焦作), where the Yuntai Mts (雲臺山, World Geopark) are about 30 km away. A notable scenic spot is the Red Rock Gorge (紅石峽), with steep cliffs of red rocks, which are a rare Danxia landform in northern China. The Tanpu Gorge (潭瀑峽) is famous for its springs, waterfalls and pools. In the dry winter season, however, the waterfalls had diminished considerably, and in places only icicles were hanging from cliffs.



紅石峽



潭瀑峽

Next, the bus took us to the ancient capital, Luoyang (洛陽). This city is famous for many things, including being the hometown of many scientific inventions of ancient China such as the seismograph, paper making, printing and the compass. To the south of Luoyang are the Longmen Grottoes (龍門石窟, UNESCO World heritage site), which dated from 494 AD during the Northern Wei Dynasty. Some of the carved Buddhas are no longer intact due to weathering and/or vandalism. For example, two statues had lost their heads, which are now kept in the British Museum (sighted by our tour guide on a visit to London).



Still on a theme of Buddhism, we visited the White Horse Temple (白馬寺), named after the horses used by two monks who brought Buddhism to China, possibly as early as the 1st century AD. Luoyang is famous for its tree peonies, and one could see the deciduous plants everywhere, waiting to bloom in spring. Unable to see the real thing, I resorted to bringing back a porcelain

model of the flowers complete with delicate, thin petals. As expected, the weather in winter was grey and hazy. There was hardly any colour around, so the “winter plum” blossoms (臘梅) were a pleasant change. As it is only the second time that I visited China in winter (previously in December 1981), I was so glad to see the yellow flowers again in China after 30 years. The blossoms were distinctly fragrant, so that the saying “Out of bitter coldness comes the fragrant plum flower” (寶劍鋒從磨礪出，梅花香自苦寒來) is particularly apt when applied to this flower.



From Luoyang, we went to the Song Mts (嵩山), at the foot of which is located the Shaolin Monastery, established in 495 AD. After a 30-minute Kungfu performance by some students (we were told there are about 30,000 students studying there), we visited the “forest of pagodas”, erected to commemorate senior monks who had lived there over the centuries. A cable car took us to a valley with mountain faces that resemble Chinese “mountain and water” paintings.



嵩山

We made our way by bus to Kaifeng (開封), another old capital. I was told that present-day Kaifeng has about five layers of the city underneath it. Every time the Yellow River banks burst to bury the city with its silt, they just built a city on top! In the Song Dynasty, a millenium ago, Kaifeng was very prosperous, as captured in the painting “Qingming Festival by the River” (清明上河圖) by the artist Zhangzeduan (張擇端). Now they have tried to re-create that atmosphere of prosperity for tourists to experience in the Millenium City Park (清明上河園), complete with the Rainbow Bridge, the junks on the river and the Shangshan Gate as in the painting, etc (一朝步入畫卷，一日夢回千年). Unfortunately, the winter season brought very few tourists, so that we did not experience the bustling activity. Even the show over the river had to be cancelled because of the bitterly cold weather. Instead, we went to see the Baogong Shrine (包公祠), which honours the magistrate (from Anhui Province) around 1040 AD who dared to fight against corrupt people among the rich and powerful.



The Rainbow Bridge

A visit to Henan had to have a cruise on the Yellow River (不到黄河心不死), the cradle of Chinese civilization and the spirit that nurtures the Chinese nation. The water level was low, and you could walk on the river bed of loess in places. Hence, the hovercraft was the most suitable vehicle for the cruise, which took place not too far from the edge of the Loess Plateau (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loess_Plateau), just before the river flows into the plains. In ancient geological times, Shandong Province did not exist; it was built from sediments carried by the Yellow River. In this area, we also saw the now-disused railway bridge, which was constructed in 1905, near the end of the Qing Dynasty.



From Zhengzhou we flew to Guangzhou. A 50-minute ride on the fast train from Guangzhou, now at a restricted maximum speed of 308 km/hour (25% of the speed of sound), took us to Shaoguan (韶關) to the north of the province. Shaoguan is regarded as the north gate of Guangdong Province, gaining its present name during the Qing Dynasty because the government established passes there to collect taxes. We then travelled by bus from Shaoguan to the Danxia Mountains and a cruise along the Jin River (錦江). In 2010, several Danxia landscapes in southern China, with a general name of "[China Danxia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/China_Danxia)", were inscribed as a World Heritage Site. This type of landform derives its name from Mt Danxia, which is the most typical, being characterized by red sandstone cliffs with vertical indentations due to erosion by water. Some of the eroded mountain faces and columns resemble certain life forms, the discerning of which requires imagination to varying degrees. An example is the monkey face shown here. Two rocks resemble male and female reproductive organs, respectively. They can be seen in Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Danxia.



For some strange reason, a certain area in the Danxia Mountains produces a much higher proportion of males: about 80% of the newborns are males, hence the name “Many-Sons-Village” (多仔村).



The elevation of Danxia Mts to world-heritage status brings the tourist dollar, as well as an intrusion into the traditional habitat of the locals. To compensate the locals, each person is paid a share of the tourist dollars, about CNY 20,000-30,000 per person per year. This must be a substantial amount by rural Chinese standards. Even so, it was good to see that the locals carry on their hard work by selling traditional produce on the roadside: e.g. dried ducks, sweet potatoes and peanuts; freshly cooked corn and yam; and fresh farm produce, etc. At least, the lazy ones were out of sight, perhaps sleeping or drinking.

It was an enjoyable, albeit sketchy, lesson in history and geography for me, though I probably did not remember all the details correctly.



The Big Buddha on Lantau Island, Hong Kong