

OMRS HK Branch Visit to Humen and Huangpu

13 – 14 March 2019

The Branch recently arranged an “overseas” trip, the first for a long time, when over a two day period 10 members and friends visited locations closely connected with the 19th century Opium wars in China and the Whampoa Military Academy near Guangzhou.

The first day, (13 March), saw the group take the fast train (and I do mean fast!) from the HK Kowloon West Station to Humen in Guangdong. “Old China Hands” will no doubt remember making this journey by ferry from the Canton Road terminal in Kowloon. No longer I’m afraid! (I suppose that’s what they call progress). Upon arrival we met our bus and driver and made our way to our first port of call; the Naval (or Sea) Battle Museum at Weiyuan island, Humen.

This museum, located close to the Weiyuan Fort of which more later, has changed greatly over the past few years; the consensus amongst those who have visited before being very much for the better. The museum traces the history of relations between China and the West for many centuries, and compares the development of the two areas until the early 19th century. It details the history of trade between China and western countries, with particular emphasis on the part played by the British which led to conflict in the early part of the century, before concentrating in detail on the events of the First Opium War (1839 – 42) between Britain and China.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that given the location, and the current political situation in China, the emphasis on the exhibition is very much from a Chinese “politically correct” perspective. However, that does not detract from what is a most interesting and informative display of artefacts relating to this turbulent period in relations between China and the West in general and Britain in particular.

Following lunch the group then undertook the fairly steep walk to the Nanshan Fort nearby. Constructed originally in 1717, this fort was one of a number constructed by the Qing authorities during the 18th and 19th centuries to protect the Humen straits from marauders, and which were known to western powers as “the Bogue Forts.” The fort contains a number of battery sites which saw action during the Opium War, in addition to a late 19th century Krupp cannon and the remains of a military barracks – right at the summit of Nanshan. Worth the climb!

The first day concluded with a visit to the Weiyuan Fort situated right on the shoreline of the Pearl River below Nanshan, which was heavily involved in the fighting during the Opium War before being destroyed by the British.

Accommodation had been arranged by the organisers at the Grand Noble Hotel in Dongguan, and the general consensus of opinion regarding this choice was most favourable. A very convivial dinner was enjoyed by the group that evening. Day two (14 March) started smoothly with our very efficient driver taking us to the site of the destruction of the opium by Commissioner Lin Zexu in 1839; one of the principal causes of the war which broke out between Britain and China later that year. I do not propose to go into detail at this point on the actual destruction; suffice it to say that it is a fascinating subject and one which anyone interested can easily research.

In addition to seeing the actual pits where Commissioner Lin destroyed the opium, the group visited the nearby Opium War Museum. Again, similar to the Sea Battle Museum, this museum has been vastly improved during the past few years. Before leaving the location, the group visited a temple in the complex which although we know was repaired in 1800, its actual date of construction is not known. Commissioner Lin utilised this temple whilst he oversaw the destruction of the opium.

After lunch, with the rain now coming down steadily, the group made their way to the famous Whampoa Military Academy in Huangpu, east of Guangzhou. I think to be absolutely correct one ought to say “the site of the former Military Academy,” as the establishment was effectively destroyed during the Sino-Japanese War before being rebuilt. The Academy was established in May 1924 with the aim of training military officials during the period of first cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party. Leading figures in the recent history of China studied there, including both Sun Yat-sen and his brother-in-law, Chiang Kai-shek.

The group then returned to Hong Kong by train from the Lok Ma Chau border crossing.

The trip was considered a great success, and a number of participants have enquired as to the next one to be arranged by the Branch! It is highly likely that a return trip to Guangdong will be arranged; perhaps next time to visit some of the other Bogue Forts and Shameen island in Guangzhou.

Finally, a word of advice (if I may) to anyone considering a visit to the places described above. It can be done using taxis and public transport, but not easily. Far better to hire the services of a driver and vehicle – and a local guide for a non-Chinese speaker.

