

John Isaacs's adventures in China by Ann Isaacs

John's work career in parts of Asia and, particularly China, only happened because he hadn't a clue where his first assignment was. Only 19 years-old and just out of his four-year fitter and turner apprenticeship, and still studying engineering night classes at Swinburne, John volunteered for a project none of his work mates really wanted.

His employer Jaques Engineering built heavy mining equipment which had a world reputation. The Chinese Government was just beginning its modernization program and bought from Jaques a new conveyor belt and crusher to upgrade a manganese mine in far western China. Bear in mind that this was 1969 and China had been a closed country since the Communist Revolution following WW 2.

The contract included a Jaques' employee to travel to China to install the equipment and train the mining staff. John was so thrilled at the opportunity for his own site job that he didn't stop to think about the location.

Getting to the site near Kashi (previously Kashgar) was an adventure in itself. Several plane trips got him to Dalian, a large northern port in China where the mining equipment was shipped and then loaded on to a convoy of military vehicles with a contingent of armed Chinese soldiers. John had to hand over his passport and was given a chit to travel overland to Kashi.

It took three weeks of travel to reach the site. The military escort prevented John from any contact with the Chinese population along the way. On arrival the mine authorities had no idea that a foreigner with new equipment was coming. No accommodation was available and being winter John slept the first few nights in a snow cat (with the engine running) that had accompanied the road convoy. The local people took pity on John and offered their homes where families slept together on a kang – a large raised platform above a stove. So John bunked in with them. The job went well and John was back home safely with passport returned.

Other work followed including two interesting projects in the late 1970s for the World Bank which had funded money to protect two of China's famous cultural heritage sites – the Great Wall outside Beijing and the Terracotta Warriors at Xian. A bonus on these jobs was that John was permitted to bring his own vehicle to China. His 1965 green Jaguar S-Type was shipped to Hong Kong and driven overland to the different sites.

At this time the Chinese did not have much thought for the remaining sections of the surviving Great Wall. Villagers along its route vandalised the wall for building materials. Parts were disappearing at a great rate. John and a small team were brought over to build 13 concrete batching plants so villagers would have building materials instead of using blocks from the wall.

John remembers trying to stop one local worker from blowing up a one-metre section of the wall with dynamite thinking he was being helpful!

The fabulous Terracotta Warriors were just being dug out from their large burial pit and once in the open air their painted decoration faded. The World Bank with help from Australia's BHP funded a protective steel roof to try to save further deterioration. John was part of the construction team and as such was privileged to see the huge number of beautifully created warriors, horses and military transport as they were unearthed.

One day, a BBC documentary crew headed by Michael Palin, turned up to film the extraordinary find. Michael Palin was

bemused to discover the S-Type in front of the site and yelled out: "John get that Jag out of camera range".

The S-Type had its own adventures in China. Petrol and tyres were scarce or non-existent but John and his minders found that aircraft fuel worked reasonably well although the substitute tractor tyres at the front weren't too elegant. The Jag also had side trips to Nauru and Fiji where John completed other projects. Obviously the S-Type was not too put out by these experiences as it is still comfortably in our garage awaiting a conversion to power steering (John's next project).

As John's experience with Chinese customs and language grew, and China rushed to compete on the world stage, he was picked as construction or project manager for longer projects including a new metro rail line in Shanghai, a large grain and port terminal in Dalian, a BlueScope steel rolling mill in Suzhou, a new BMW plant in Shenyang, and foundation and piling work for a series of bridges linking Hong Kong with Macau.

Along the way he met many different Chinese characters including a very high ranking politician now serving a life-time jail sentence for corruption who would tell his staff: "Don't talk about John in his hearing as he even understands jokes in Mandarin. Speak in dialect". So John picked up several regional languages.

Another was a hard-nosed Party boss who used to lock his Chinese crew in a large hall and harangue them for several hours (no pass-outs allowed). Fortunately John was not required to attend these sessions and he and Mr Gong became good mates.

John found out how diligent the Chinese were at record keeping when renewing a work permit in Shanghai in 2012. The immigration officer commented on how long and often John had been in the country. She looked away from her computer screen and pulled out a large tatty folder and there at the back was John's original permit that allowed him to travel across China in 1966.

The scariest time for John was when a large Chinese government engineering department invited John on a "junket" to Borneo to thank him for his services on and off over more than 50 years. It included a large group of Party officials and a batch of newly graduated Chinese engineers. With a hardly any notice John was told he would be the guest speaker to motivate and encourage the new engineers with practical advice on managing projects. This was to be given in Mandarin so all would understand. Crikey thought John I will never be able to manage this! Honour was at stake so with a few deep breaths he went out on the stage, composed himself and shared his knowledge. John felt he must have been a success as the talk was followed by twenty minutes of questions.



The bare BMW site in Shenyang before construction. Site conditions were often severe - heavy snow with freezing temperature.