

Cultural Daily

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My photo trip to China 1981

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, April 11th, 2018

While the US is in the middle of a trade war with China, initiated by Trump in March, I remember fondly my amazing trip to China in November 1981, and I share some photos.



Beijing, China. Tianamen Square (c) Elisa Leonelli

At the time individual tourism was not yet allowed in China, but special interest groups were welcomed. So I joined the first Photo Workshop tour organized by [Dennis Cox](#) for [ASMP](#) (American Society of Magazine Photographers). Our instructor was Norman Snyder.



Ming Tombs, China. Great Red Gate (c) Elisa Leonelli

The itinerary started in Beijing, where no hotels were yet available for foreigner visitors, so we stayed at a state guest house used for official visits. We explored Tiananmen Square, with its huge portrait of Chairman Mao. Chinese tourists were having their picture taken as warriors in front of the Imperial Palace, or with fancy cars that no one was allowed to privately own. We took trips to the Great Wall of China, built in the 3rd century BC to protect against invasions, and to the 15th century Ming Tombs.



Ming Tombs, China (c) Elisa Leonelli

At each stop of our trip we were assigned a guide, but as soon as we arrived at a destination, we would spread out in all directions to take our photographs, paying little attention to the official speeches. A sign of individual independence that baffled our Chinese hosts.

We traveled to Hangzhou and to Nanjing, where we visited a school. The English teacher was our guide. He was very proud of his blue uniform that every Chinese was obliged to wear, with the exception of children, who were allowed colors, and soldiers, who wore green. He told us his mother had made it.



Guilin, China (c) Elisa Leonelli

We took a boat ride down the misty Li River among the rounded hills of Guilin, depicted in traditional Chinese paintings. We stopped in a rural village, where I practiced my non-verbal

communication skills to borrow a bicycle from a local man and take a ride around.



Guilin, China (c) Elisa Leonelli

We flew to Shanghai, a busy commercial port where ancient Chinese junks sailed next to modern ships. I walked the streets enchanted by their vibrant activities. I would travel to Shanghai again 20 years later in 2001 to cover the Film Festival, only to find a modern city modeled after Hong Kong or Tokyo, with expensive restaurants and luxury shopping.



Shanghai, China (c) Elisa Leonelli

We ended our journey in Hong Kong, still under British control. After 3 weeks of Chinese food for breakfast, lunch and dinner (no bread, no cheese, no cutlery, only chopsticks), I enjoyed eating at Italian restaurants. I stopped in Tokyo for a few days, where I would return in 1986 for a longer stay to document the fashion choices of Japanese teenagers.



Shanghai, China. Countryside (c) Elisa Leonelli



Elisa Leonelli in Shanghai. December 1981

For the complete photo series, click on the links below from the [Elisa Leonelli Photojournalist Collection](#) at Claremont Colleges Digital Library:

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This entry was posted on Wednesday, April 11th, 2018 at 10:15 am and is filed under [Photography](#), [Discourse](#)

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