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Accompanying us
was a Tulsa news crew
Oklahoma to Xiamen
turned into a coup
on a boat called the Jimei
Hong Kong to Amoy
passed flags of two Chinas
drank milk made of soy



Chapter 27 – Slow Boat to China

Hong Kong is located in the south-eastern part of China. Actually Hong Kong is an archipelago made up of 263 islands. It is surrounded on three sides by Kowloon, the New Territories, and the province of Guangdong. To the northeast of Guangdong is the province of Fujian. The city of Xiamen (aka Amoy), is located on the southeastern coast of Fujian. The distance from Hong Kong to Xiamen is only about 300 miles, as the crow flies. Today, if we want to travel from Hong Kong to Xiamen, we can choose to take a 40 minute flight or a 4 hour high speed train.

In June 1981, our only travel option from Hong Kong to Xiamen was the Jimei Cruise Ship (集美郵輪 Jíměi Yóulún), the proverbial slow boat to China. Once aboard the Jimei, it would take us 22 hours plus some change to get to Xiamen. Among the normal manifest of Chinese mainlanders and Hong Kong Chinese were six Tulsa high schoolers and a motley assortment of about twenty individuals from all over the USA. Our kids were certainly the youngest of the bunch. At 80 years plus, Abe Gurvitz, a dentist from Boston shared the senior mantle with Frankie Wu from Prairie City, Kansas. We also had a smattering of missionaries, college students, and recent college graduates along for our eight week adventure into China. Accompanying the high-schoolers aboard the Jimei was a news crew from Tulsa, Oklahoma's KJRH TV station. Reporter, Mark Nicks and cinematographer, John Ross, were never far from our sides in Hong Kong and took some amazing footage of our trip to China aboard the Jimei.

Not long before arriving in Xiamen, we passed by the island of Jīnmén 金門, which sits less than two miles off the coast of mainland China. We were amazed to see a Taiwan (ROC) flag the size of a football field waving in the breeze (much to the chagrin of the PRC I'm sure.) Just a few years earlier, Quemoy and Amoy had traded propaganda laden missiles every other day. Landmines were strewn along the beaches of Quemoy to stop an invasion from the mainland. The island of Quemoy is latticed with tunnels. Nearly 100,000 Taiwanese KMT troops were stationed in Quemoy during the Cold War with over 500,000 missiles lobbed in 1958 alone. Intermittent shelling went on until 1978, just three years prior to our arrival. When we lived in Taiwan, I used to hear stories of Taiwanese soldiers swimming over to Xiamen on a dare to watch a movie in a local theatre and come back with a movie ticket stub. Friends of ours who served in the Taiwan military told us that was crazy. Still, it makes for a good story and I can't help but wonder.

At the time we arrived, Xiamen had only been opened to foreigners for one year. The only other non-Chinese we saw there were an American teaching couple who had been living in Xiamen for 8 months. Our food was very local. Much of the produce was grown on campus. Fruits and vegetables were smallish and very unlike the perfectly shaped and equally sized produce that we were used to

in American supermarkets. The good stuff got shipped to Hong Kong where it commanded a much higher price. Even Coca-Cola had yet to reach these hinterlands. It was water, tea, a sickly sweet orange soda, or . . . local beer. I had met with Tulsa parents before leaving and had told them that beer was not illegal for their kids to consume in Xiamen and it might be safer and healthier than some of the other alternatives. Some parents signed off on that, so beer began to be served with our evening meal.

Today, things are a little different. Anyone with a passport and a Chinese visa can board a plane in Taiwan and fly to Jinmen. It's even easier in China. In Xiamen, there is an hourly "Cross-Strait Ferry" from Xiamen to Jinmen which takes about one-half hour.

厦门 Xiàmén is still called Amoy by local people who speak the Southern Min dialect of Chinese and 金门 Jīnmén is known by local Chinese as Quemoy. Amoy and Quemoy were how many journalists referred to the islands during the 1950's and '60's.

