China Travel—Ups and Downs

It was 1949 and the Cultural Revolution had arrived in China. With it, the door slammed shut on tourism. China remained off limits for about another 25 years. It was after Nixon visited the country in 1972 that things changed. It took until the mid-70s before the country began to welcome tourists again. However, in 1973, the Chinese government allowed organized groups of American citizens into the country. These groups were mostly composed of scholars, journalists and businesspeople. There was no such thing as an individual visa or individual travel. There were no airlines connecting China and the US directly.

As a travel agent, I had several groups that qualified. One was a woman’s organization whose purpose was to develop ties with women in different countries. Since I was not a member of the group, I wasn’t allowed to join them, but I could accompany them to Hong Kong, the city from which they were to depart. They were required to make the almost 100-mile journey by train from Hong Kong to Canton (now Guangdong) to start their trip.

We had to make all arrangements with China Travel Service, the government agency. It wasn’ t easy or smooth. When we arrived in Hong Kong, I went to the agency’s office to pick up the train tickets. There were 15 ladies in the group but only 14 tickets-- of course. Eventually I returned to the hotel with the tickets in hand. At least the first leg of their trip was in hand.

It was so rare for Americans to be traveling to China that when it was known the one of the daughters of General Joe Stillwell was in the group, the press requested an interview. Very kindly she asked me to sit in. The only press interview I’ve ever experienced.

Of course, when China began to develop the infrastructure for tourism. it boomed just as the economy was growing exponentially. That is until Covid when the country shut down for three years. And still tourism is not back to what it was in 2019.