

Visit to Xi'an 20-22 September 2008

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The exchange project has been running at full throttle for a year now and we have been writing invitations, arranging visas, finding accommodation and (eventually) welcoming a stream of visiting academics from the four universities that make up the Joint Centre for European Studies. Over forty academics have stayed in Leiden for periods from one month to half a year. Now it was time to survey the results of all these efforts.



Some of our visitors at Kings Bar, Leiden

Together with Julia and Marleen, who had carried the brunt of the administration at this end, we were invited to the concluding conference in Xi'an. Of course you don't go to China via Beijing and not stop for some sightseeing. For me the high point was a visit to the Great Wall, but this time to a section where I had never been before and, from the evidence, few visitors have. Our small bus load were the only people there, and the rest was deserted – a fantastic experience.



Xi'an itself is situated at the Eastern end of the Silk Road and was for several centuries, from the third century BC, the capital of China. Today, it has a population of over 2.5 million. As a city, the impression left was one of good urban planning. Inside the ancient city walls (fully restored) the impression is of leafy roads and harmonious spatial planning, with a deliberate coherence with local styles of architecture. At the centre of the city are the Drum and Bell towers. Most of the high-rise building is confined to outside the walls. I could not help wondering how long it will survive the inexorable march of the motor car!



The conference itself “Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Sustainable Development” demonstrated the full range of work undertaken by members of the project during their stays in Europe – comparative approaches to questions of identity, regional policies and sustainable development, cultural tourism, EU policies in different areas and (interesting for me) some insight into different business cultures in both continents. All in all, a fertile basis for further development of European Studies in this part of China.



Finally, I should mention the cultural heritage for which Xi'an has become most famous. The first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, designed his own mausoleum and arranged for it to be defended by a huge terracotta army, whose existence remained unknown until its discovery in 1975. The sheer scale of the project is mind-boggling and, to think, that the main tomb has not even been touched by archeologists! For those planning a visit, one tip – don't buy the replicas until almost out of the site... the price drops thy the yard as one approaches the gate! As for Xi'an as a whole, it is a place I could quite happily imagine myself spending a couple of months.