

Essay from Expatriate in China

GOTO Takashi

1. Introduction

I was an expatriate at Hubei Henglong & KYB Automobile Electric Steering System Co., Ltd. (HKE) for about four and a half years from December 2018 to May 2023. The joint venture company (JV) was established in Jingzhou City, Hubei Province, China, to produce electric power steering (EPS) for the first time. I had been involved in the company since its establishment in the previous year, 2017. This was more than six years' work totally.

I had valuable experiences there in various ways, including the culture of a foreign country, the difficulty of expatriation at a minority site, the first overseas production of EPS, and the response to the new coronavirus infection (hereinafter, referred to as COVID-19). Some of these experiences are presented below.

2. Introduction to Jingzhou City

Jingzhou is a city about 300 km west of Wuhan city, where COVID-19 was first identified. Guan Yu, who is famous for the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, was based in Jingzhou City. A monument to Guan Yu, over 50 meters high, stood in the ancient city of Jingzhou, surrounded by a fence with a circumference of 10 km. However, it was removed in 2021 due to illegal construction (Photo 1).

Before the time of the Romance of the Three Kingdoms, the city was also a base of Chu, which

was one of the great states during the Spring and Autumn Period and is depicted in the famous Japanese manga Kingdom. The monument to the king of Chu is worth seeing (Photo 2).

Many remains from the pre-Christian era like these make Jingzhou a quite historic city, although today it is not as developed as the coastal regions.



Photo 2 Remains of the king of Chu



Photo 1 57.3 m high statue of Guan Yu

Jingzhou City is home to only a dozen or so foreigners, despite its population of over six million. In urban cities like Shanghai, many people do not know the name of Jingzhou, even if they are Chinese. People who live in a "rural" town are not familiar with foreigners. If you go to a restaurant, you will be welcomed as a rare customer. Of course, there are Japanese restaurants in town, but they serve Japanese food adapted to the local people. I almost never encountered Japanese cuisine as I expected.

The Yangtze River (Chang River), which is the largest river in China, flows through the center of

the city, and can accommodate tankers and other large ships. Jingzhou City neighbors Yichang City, where the Three Gorges Dam, the largest dam in the world, is located. In 2020, the news of the Three Gorges Dam failure crisis due to torrential rains made headlines in Japan. Although the central city was damaged by the flooding from the rain, there was no concern about the failure of the dam (Photo 3).

Jingzhou City holds a marathon competition every year as a big event of the city. More than 20,000 runners take part in the competition, supported by many local people ringing Chinese gongs along the marathon route and students cheering. I was fortunate enough to participate in a half marathon race twice, in 2019 and 2023 (Photo 4).



Photo 3 Sand beach of Yangtze River



Photo 4 Marathon competition in Jingzhou city

3. Launch of the Company, Establishment of a New Factory, and the Impact of COVID-19

The new company started operations in November 2018. Many events, including recreational activities, were held to promote teamwork with active communication between departments (Photos 5 and 6).

In September of the following year, 2019, the company moved to a new factory. The move itself was a big activity with a concerted effort by the expatriates and local employees (Photo 7).



Photo 5 Recreational activity



Photo 6 Basketball competition



Photo 7 Lunch during the move of the new company

By the end of January 2020, COVID-19 was widespread. Since Jingzhou is close to Wuhan City, I returned home to Japan two days before the lockdown began because I was informed that traffic would be blocked. At first, I thought it would be easy to return to China soon after the effects of COVID-19 had subsided in a few weeks. However, the effects spread all over world, and I had no immediate prospect of returning to China. All the nine expatriates at that time could not return to China together. They had to return in four different groups. I was in the first group to return. We took a chartered flight from Kansai International Airport and arrived in Wuhan in July 2020. I was isolated in a hotel in Wuhan for two weeks after our arrival, and at home in Jingzhou City for another two weeks, for a total of 28 days of isolation. During my stay in Wuhan, a nearby Japanese supermarket, AEON, supplied me with Japanese food. I was surprised that I could eat Japanese food, which was much more delicious than the Japanese restaurants in Jingzhou City.

It was November 2020 when all the expatriates had returned to Jingzhou. Until then, we mainly communicated with each other through e-mails and online meetings, and our communication gradually deteriorated. In addition, various disruptions continued to occur due to the effects of COVID-19 in China. As a result, the JV performed poorly. A gap began to appear between the expatriates and the local staff in China. The differences of opinion and culture between the two led to a lot of conflict, partly because the company was only a minority site that could not win new business and could only continue existing business with other Chinese joint venture companies.

I also had various difficulties in general life. When someone in the apartment where I lived was infected with COVID-19, the whole apartment building or even the apartment zone in the city was isolated.

4. Working in China

As a member of the research and development department (engineering department) of the JV, I was mainly responsible for promoting the sales of dual pinion EPS, which is KYB's core product, and applying KYB's technology to improve the reduction gear of column EPS, which is the JV's core product.

In the early stage after the establishment of the JV, I made presentations of these products to several dozen OEMs and suppliers in China by leveraging the strengths of KYB and the JV. Just as we were striving to expand the business a year after the JV started operations, COVID-19 hit and forced us to go through a prolonged period of difficulty.

Nevertheless, we were able to launch the first mass production of dual pinion EPS. This product won an order from a leading Indian OEM. The vehicle using the dual pinion EPS was selected as the Indian Car of the Year. I attended the event to celebrate the 1st production vehicle off the line (Photo 8). It was great that we successfully promoted HKE's technical strength there.

After the start of mass production for the order, the dual pinion EPS product also enjoyed more orders from Chinese automobile manufacturers (OEMs). Their total annual production together with column EPS exceeded one million vehicles. On the other hand, Chinese manufacturers developed products very quickly. In some cases, we had to prepare mass production for a new order in a year or even half a year.



Photo 8 1st production vehicle celebration event

5. Eating and Traveling in China

Jingzhou City is located inland, and most of the local cuisine has a spicy taste. Many local people like the typical Chinese liquor Baijiu. When many people gather to eat together, they usually sit around a circular table and toast with Baijiu

(Photo 9). Be careful when toasting in China. In general, you should not drink Baijiu at your own pace. Instead, you should take it slowly with occasional toasts. Because of the high alcohol content, you should be careful how you drink it. However, it is true that drinking together brings people closer.

With its huge area of land, China has a variety of cuisine by region. Noodles are especially interesting. Some of them are the product of fusion with Islamic culture. Many noodle dishes are popular among the Japanese. Among them is Dalian Noodle, which is said to have originated in Jingzhou City and tastes light and very good (Photo 10). Eating noodles for breakfast or lunch is very popular in China. I often ate noodles at restaurants near the company on workdays and went out to eat at a restaurant near my apartment on holiday mornings. In general, mutton was more popular than pork. Grilled whole lamb was sometimes served at the company banquet (Photo 11).

One of the famous dishes in Jingzhou is crayfish (Photo 12). It tastes quite good and is similar to shrimp. When you order crayfish dishes, you will get an all-you-can-drink of beer.

Remember that alcoholic beverages are often served at room temperature. It is important to find restaurants that sell cold beer or ask for it the next time.



Photo 9 Circular table



Photo 10 Dalian Noodle

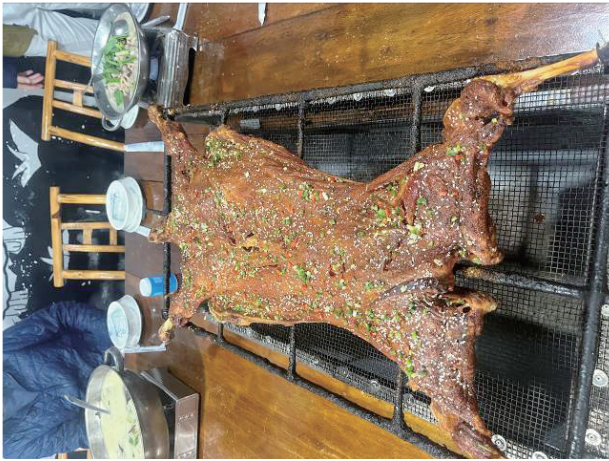


Photo 11 Grilled whole lamb



Photo 12 Steamed crayfish dish

Due to COVID-19, I was required to take a PCR test every day in China. Foreigners had difficulty traveling in the country for a while because they had to prove negative with another PCR test application on their smartphone every time they entered a new city. Actually, it was not easy to move around due to movement restrictions, even though I was an expatriate in China away from home. Therefore I bought a bicycle. I joined a local cycling team and rode 100 km or more in a day with the team members (Photo 13). I also enjoyed several other unexpected hobbies, including camping (Photo 14).



Photo 13 Cycling team in Jingzhou City



Photo 14 Camping on the Yangtze River beach

I was able to do some limited travel despite the restrictions of COVID-19. I had one trip to see the Terracotta Army that was placed around the tomb of Shi Huangdi of the Qin dynasty. This was the last sightseeing trip during that period.

In December 2022, the number of people infected with COVID-19 increased dramatically throughout China. I was also infected and had a high fever of 42°C. After that, the movement restrictions were completely lifted. From January to May of 2023, I visited various sights as much as possible during one holiday and consecutive holidays. It was a really good experience for me to visit Wulingyuan, which is the model of Avatar, the pandas in Xi'an, the Silk Road ruins in Dunhuang, the Great Wall, Tibet, and other places. Of these, Tibet was the place that moved me the most. Tibet is an autonomous region that requires visitors to obtain an entry permit. Initially, due to COVID-19, no entry permits were issued to foreigners. In April 2023, just before my repatriation, the restriction was lifted. I was then able to visit on Labor Day in May.

Lhasa, the capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region, is at an altitude of nearly 4,000 m. The center of the city is as high as Mount Fuji (Photo 15). The first day I was fine, but after the second day I suffered from altitude sickness and the headaches did not stop. I tried medicines for altitude sickness and oxygen absorption, but they had little effect.

Nevertheless, Tibetan Buddhism, Potala Palace built at the "roof of the world" (Photo 16), and the magnificent scenery (Photo 17) were all overwhelming. The trip to Tibet was full of excitement.



Photo 15 At an altitude of 5190 m near the Himalayas



Photo 16 Potala Palace



Photo 17 Fantastic sky and lake

6. In Closing

In retrospect, it was a very short four and a half years of expatriation. Although I had many difficulties, I would like to use what I experienced there to continue contributing to the company.

I would like to express my gratitude to those who supported me during my expatriation and sincerely wish HKE further growth and success (Photos 18 and 19).

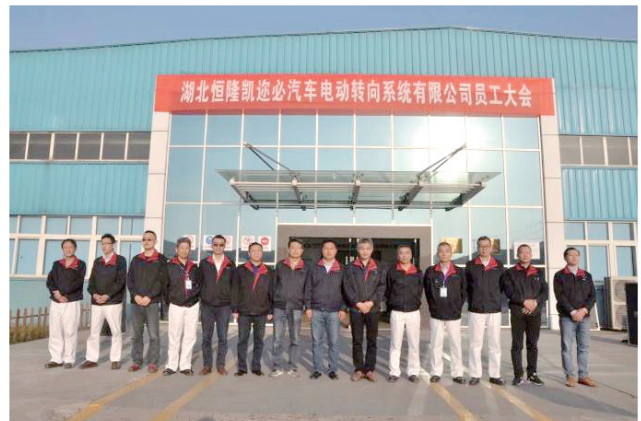


Photo 18 Commemorative photo of founding of the new company



Photo 19 Commemorative photo of repatriation

— Author —



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Dedicated section manager,
Overseas Marketing Dept., Global
Business Unit, Marketing Div.
Taken present post after working in
Steering Engineering Dept., Product
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