

9 – SHANGHAI

The name Shanghai (上海 – literally 'on the sea') conjures up a picture of a prosperous international seaport filled with Europeans and Chinese; words like the Bund, the Concessions, and the Waterfront spring to mind. Like many great seaports, Shanghai had developed from a small fishing village.

However, most of the bustle, colour, prosperity, and rickshaws had gone since the country had become Communist; all that was left now was the ugly Western architecture and a certain amount of industry.

I was not really looking forward to visiting Shanghai, for I felt that I would be rather disappointed by it. My first impression of it as we made our way out of the special exit 'for foreign travellers' and drove through the dark, drab streets, confirmed my misgivings, though I was determined to make the best of my stay here.

Shanghai was the first city in which we saw evidence of commercialism. Here the shop and business signs were more brash, and for the first time in China we actually saw a garish neon sign on the top of a high building. Although it appeared to be a thriving city, it did look rather scruffy. There was quite a different atmosphere here, like a dim shadow of Shanghai's former cosmopolitan self. After the whitewashed shacks of Suzhou, which I now realized were full of character, it was depressing to look at large buildings and skyscrapers built in dark brown-red brick. Everything appeared to be out of date; the prevailing style of architecture belonged to the early 1900s.

Our hotel, the Jing Jiang (formerly the Cathay Mansion), was a tall and ugly-looking building. It had an entrance fit for a mansion, with flights of stone steps leading up to the doors. Inside it was a little more pleasing to the eye. The lobby was quite large, with a reception desk and shop on one side, a small aquarium full of colourful fish in the centre, and reception rooms on the other.

We arrived here at 7.30 p.m. After we had been checked in and had been handed slips of paper with the numbers of our rooms written on them, we made a dash for the lifts behind the aquarium. The pleasant and smiling lad in our lift seemed to be delighted that I could speak a little Chinese, and was consequently quite friendly towards me.

Most of us were on the tenth floor. At first we could not discover where we were supposed to collect and return our keys; it slowly dawned on us

that things were done differently here. You just shut the door after leaving, for it was assumed that you were honest. The members of the Chinese staff always seemed to know when we were in our rooms or not, for they never disturbed us by walking in accidentally when we were there.

Our room was quite posh and very comfortable. As we noticed blocked-up doorways, we concluded that we were in part of a former suite of rooms. The main bedroom was very large and smart; the bathroom had a good shower, and there was also a small room for storing suitcases and clothing. From the windows we could look down over the city, which by now was lit up.

At eight o'clock we went up to the next floor for dinner. We were served an excellent meal – one of the nicest so far. It included rice, chicken, beef, fish, delicious chopped cabbage, and soup to finish.

After dinner I went out for a walk and met Frank Cahill, who willingly accompanied me. Although most of the shops were closed by now, there were still plenty of people about, either walking or cycling along the poorly-lit streets. For the first time in China we saw couples walking arm-in-arm. Although there was less traffic about at this hour of the day, it was quite noisy. We noticed that the streets were not as wide as the ones in Beijing or Nanjing, and that there were fewer trees to be seen.

When I returned to the hotel, I went up to my room, where I took out a map of pre-liberation Shanghai, which a cousin of my mother had posted to me from Canada. As he had been born and educated in old Shanghai, he wanted to know what it was like now. I was curious to compare the street names, for I had discovered an up-to-date map on the counter of an attendant's office on our floor. I walked to the counter, which was unattended, and began comparing the two maps, but made little progress. A young attendant, who was dressed in a loose-fitting white jacket, came out to see what I was doing and, in Chinese, told me that there was a bigger map down in the lobby.

I therefore took the lift down to the lobby, where I saw the map that the lad upstairs had told me about. I asked an elderly man at the reception desk, in Chinese, if I could buy one of these maps. As he did not understand me, I repeated the question in English. He replied in perfect English, with quite a polished accent, that they had no more of the maps for sale. He was very courteous; it was obvious that he had been educated in an English-language school in the old days. He was happy for me to compare my map to the one on the desk, which I now began to examine in detail. The first change that I noted was that the old Race Course had been changed to Renmin (People's) Square and Park. Jessfield Park, which my mother's Canadian cousin had frequented, was now Zhongshan (or Sun Yat-sen) Park. All the foreign names had been removed and the streets given Chinese names: Avenue Joffre had

been renamed Huaihai Road, Avenue Foch was now Yanan Road, the Route de Zikawei had been given various names for different parts of it, the Bund was now just part of Zhongshan Road, and so on.

When I had finished taking notes, I wandered into the reception lounges, where I found many large comfortable armchairs, and looked at some Chinese magazines that had been left in racks for visitors to read. Curiously, I could find none in English – only in Spanish, French, Esperanto, and some other languages. In them were countless pictures of Mao, Hua, Zhou Enlai, and various other dignitaries.

I then returned to our floor and rummaged around in a cabinet containing magazines and books. Here I found Mao's *Little Red Book* in various languages, including Vietnamese and Thai. Also included were small booklets of Mao Zedong Thought, including *The Present Situation and our Tasks*, *On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People*, and *The Ten Major Relationships*.

When I finally returned to our room, I found Christopher and Donal chatting and drinking. I finally hit the sack shortly after midnight, knowing that we would have another early start the following morning.

Although cool, this morning was bright and sunny. After a breakfast of eggs and toast, we assembled at the entrance of the hotel, boarded our coach and were driven to a grim Russian building that had once been the Palace of Sino-Soviet Friendship. It now had been renamed the Shanghai Industrial Exhibition Hall. It resembled a modern palace, with wide flights of stone steps leading up to the entrance, and huge halls. A group of Chinese guides met us and we were given a short briefing about the place. Afterwards we were led into a long hall with a curved roof and, at the far end, a statue of Chairman Mao, flanked by red flags. The place was full of heavy industrial machinery, which was continually being switched on and off. Because of the noise of the equipment and the great crowd of people present, most of us were unable to hear what our guides were telling us. The hall contained large machines for manufacturing metal parts, large horizontal and vertical lathes, laser beam cutters, small hole punchers and various other pieces of equipment. Also displayed were samples of chemicals and medicines, both herbal and chemical.

In another hall we were shown textile weaving machines, which were very noisy. We then crossed a square and entered another huge area, where we saw large expensive-looking cars, tractors, trucks, cranes, and various industrial vehicles. It was obvious that our guides were very proud of these. However, as we had never seen any of these vehicles being used during our travels here, we felt that they were probably showpieces displayed for our benefit.

Afterwards, we were led back the way we had come, and taken into a room where we sat down to rest and drink tea. Following this, we were brought around some smaller halls, where we were shown examples of light industry. Included were radios, television sets (too expensive to buy for most people here), tape recorders, record players, and cameras. We also saw small solar panels that were able to turn on a transistor radio when a light was switched on. In other halls we were shown textiles, clothes, bicycles, toys, and musical instruments. Among the musical instruments, both Chinese and Western, was a shiny black grand piano. A Chinese musician was playing a piece by Liszt when we entered the room. When he had finished, I tried a few notes on the instrument, which had a rather harsh tone. In a room where we tried out a postcard vending machine, I bought a couple of albums full of Chinese stamps for just a little over £3, and two cards with special commemorative stamps for the first anniversary of the death of Zhou Enlai for about 12p.

We then walked through a long area devoted to arts and crafts; however, as we were brought through this so quickly, we saw nothing properly. It contained more or less what we had seen in the film shown to us in Suzhou. At the end of our tour, we walked back out into the sunshine, said goodbye to our hosts and travelled back through the streets to our hotel. We arrived at 11.30, and were told by Patricia that lunch would be served an hour later.

While the Tyndalls, the Brennans, Paddy Flanagan and I were chatting, a young Belgian couple made their way over to us and began a conversation that turned out to be very interesting. They were with a group of psychiatrists who were on a fortnight's trip around the country. They discovered that they were not being treated as well as we were, for their guides spoke French badly. They had come to the conclusion that English-speaking guides were the best, as the language was more popular here in China. What amused us was that the pretty young wife was not a psychiatrist but a lawyer. As she had realized that she would not be able to come with her husband on the trip if the Chinese knew that she was a lawyer, she 'accidentally' lost all her papers and passport, and procured new ones that stated she was a psychiatrist. Fortunately all had gone well and she was allowed to travel with her husband, much to her satisfaction.

However, a few days previously she and the group were being taken around a psychiatric hospital, where some very distressing cases were to be seen. Unused to this and being rather squeamish, the lady was walking along nervously, looking at her shoes. She had been very much taken aback when the Chinese guide beside her had said, 'I don't think a lawyer like you can take all of this.' She had no idea of how the authorities had managed to discover that she was really a lawyer.

Her husband told us that it was very difficult to find out about or gain access to psychiatric hospitals here, for the Chinese liked us to think that there was no need of such places. Of course, many such institutions did exist, but the Chinese were very reluctant to bring the group to them. The Chinese doctors and psychiatrists preferred to come to their hotel, rather than having them visit their hospitals. The man and his wife had discovered that China was a country of contradictions; for example, they had been told that there was no psychiatric hospital in Nanjing, but when they arrived there, they discovered that there was. As far as I could remember, they had visited the hospital, which contained four hundred patients, from ten years old upwards.

We were interested to hear the man's views about the Chinese people. Did he think that they had all been brainwashed with communist propaganda? Yes, he said, but no more brainwashed than we are in the West, where we are constantly being bombarded with advertisements for consumer goods and services. The Chinese, he had concluded, were just brainwashed differently. Here there was little freedom of thought, and morals were a lot stricter. However, he pointed out, the Chinese do have strong sexual feelings. Lovers here do their courting in private rather than on street corners or in public. The man also discovered that Chinese girls, women, and also men, like to be complimented on their looks.

By the time we had finished chatting with these people, it was time for lunch. We had enjoyed talking to them, and decided that our conversation with them had been more worthwhile than a walk.

In the afternoon we set off for the Shanghai Friendship Store. This was on the famous Waterfront, where we saw the Bund and the ships. It was quite colourful here, though the tall brown buildings on the other side of the road were very ugly indeed. We also passed the park where a sign at the entrance had once read, 'No dogs or Chinese allowed'.

The Friendship Store, which was situated in pleasant grounds off the road, was rather small and seemed to have little of interest in it. However, I changed a traveller's cheque and wandered around. On one of the floors I found a musical instrument section. As Tom had just bought an *èrhū* or two-stringed fiddle, I asked to see one. There were basic ones and highly decorated ones. I then asked to see a smaller type of two-stringed fiddle, the *jīnghū*. I decided to buy one of these and one of the simpler types of *èrhū*, as they were relatively inexpensive. I then looked at a bamboo flute that had a vibrating membrane. Next I examined a *pípá* (the vertically held lute), but found it too large and heavy to bring home. After I had looked at several plucked instruments, which the young lady very kindly and patiently showed me, I eventually decided to purchase a *yuèqín* or moon guitar, which was the smallest, lightest, and cheapest instrument. In addition, I bought

extra strings for the fiddles, some more bridges, and a packet of membranes for the flute. The total price for these four instruments and the spare parts came to 45.78 ¥ (£15), which was very reasonable indeed.

I then bought the cheapest ink-slab that I could find for 12 ¥ (£4) and a very beautifully decorated stick of solid Chinese ink for 2.60 ¥ (about 70p), which was very nicely wrapped in a colourful box. However, when I examined the stick of ink again later, I thought that it would be a pity to use it!

At this stage, some of my companions went off for a walk around Shanghai. As this did not interest me, I went back to the hotel in the coach, arriving by about four o'clock. I spent the rest of the afternoon figuring out a way to carry my newly acquired musical instruments, reading and dozing. I joined the others at 6.30 for a delicious dinner. Patricia and Catherine quizzed me about my interest in music; I discovered that Catherine had studied the violin in the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin, but had given it up, and that Patricia had studied the piano.

An hour later we were driven to the Shanghai Opera House for a performance of a dance drama entitled 'The Small Sword Society'. This meant that we would be treated to a performance of dancing and acting to music, without any singing or spoken dialogue. As before, the Chinese people stood back for us when we entered. We discovered that there were other groups of Europeans in the audience. The theatre was larger than the one in Nanjing, and was more sophisticated. None the less, it looked old and could have done with a few fresh coats of paint. The place was packed. I later discovered that the most expensive seats cost only a few pence. The audience was noisy, but they quietened down once the performance started. Again we had surtitles projected on to the walls on either side of the stage.

The show was more lush, sophisticated and classical in style than the one we had attended in Nanjing; also the music was less brash and noisy. We all enjoyed this performance thoroughly as there was no translation to follow. Although the plot was revolutionary (there was no escaping this), we were almost able to forget about this aspect, for we were transported back to the closing years of the Qing dynasty – to 1853 to be exact. Because of this, the costumes were superb and the settings were more classical.

The story took place here, in Shanghai. It began with Chinese slaves lugging huge wooden crates of opium from a ship in the Huangpu River, while people were being whipped and taken away by the 'cunning lackey of the U.S. imperialists', Matthew P. Yates. The Small Sword Society then appeared, leading the 'angry masses', who were ready to stage an uprising. One of the society's leaders, who managed to beat Yates, was arrested. An uprising then ensued, and we were treated to more fantastic stylized fighting, complete with acrobatics.

In the next scene, the leader was about to be tortured by the Qing court. Just as the Emperor was about to have him flogged, a priest appeared. Holding a bible and blessing everyone in sight, he indicated that the bible did not allow such a thing to happen, and the Emperor gave in. Members of the Small Sword Society ran in to rescue their leader, and the Emperor and his men fled. A lively scene ensued, during which the 'priest' threw off his disguise and revealed himself as the evil Yates, who had been conspiring to buy the leader over. However, the Small Sword Society captured the local magistrate and took over the county seat.



'The Small Sword Society', Shanghai (PF)

The following scene took place in the British Consulate. We now found ourselves in the lush surroundings of an impressive English house, and when the orchestra began to play a gentle waltz, we saw beautifully dressed Chinese men and women in classical English costumes dancing and bowing to one another. However, the dancing was interrupted by the arrival of the magistrate, who begged the 'imperialists' to help stamp out the Small Sword Society uprising. After he had signed a treaty of national betrayal on the spot, the orchestra struck up once again and the dancing continued. The

magistrate's hopeless attempt to dance with one of the ladies was quite comical.

In the middle of this scene, the dancing was again interrupted – this time by the arrival of some Small Sword Society members looking for the runaway magistrate, who had managed to hide behind a curtain. The British consul denied that he was sheltering him. The Society members left, ready to fight.

During the rest of the dance drama, we were shown how the Shanghai county seat was then besieged by 'Chinese and foreign reactionaries', which resulted in the members of the Small Sword Society, who were deprived of food, becoming hungry and weakened. Nonetheless, they managed to attack the enemy's headquarters and retrieve the grain that had been taken from them. Included was a dream sequence, in which one of the female leaders of the Society fell asleep, and dreamt of Taiping Heavenly Kingdom army men coming to the rescue. This was very imaginatively done using clever lighting and choreography. Loud gunshots woke the lady up and we were immediately transported back to the original scene, in which a battle was being staged. The fighting resulted in the death of the evil Yates and, although many members of the Small Sword Society were wounded, they were able to claim victory.

The acting in the dance drama had been first class, and we all agreed that the production had been superb. We left like VIPs, with the Chinese people holding back for us, and drove to our hotel in our coach, with the horn blaring. When we told our guides that we had enjoyed the performance, they informed us that the Gang of Four, under the leadership of Mao's widow Jiang Qing, had banned this production on the grounds that it was 'too reactionary'.

On our way back to the hotel, I chatted to a pleasant young guide who was wearing a loose-fitting light blue jacket. I had noticed that he spoke English excellently and had a predilection for using slang and out-of-the-way phrases. He was well acquainted with American slang, which we laughed about. I got on well with this young man and enjoyed talking to him.

We reached the hotel at 9.30 and, as I was tired, I went to bed an hour later.