

The Paris of the East

Eric Li



After a ten hour exhausting journey from my scruffy and boisterous hometown train station, I finally arrived at the spacious and classy one of this cosmopolitan urban city: Shanghai. As the colonial core in the 20th century, this international oriental city has attracted vast foreign investments and absorbed the essences of western aesthetics and technologies. When I stood, the Pudong Railway Station in 2005, its neighborhood included hundreds of word-class restaurants, lounges, and hotels. Skyscrapers and the speedy elevators within them where you could experience a rapid vertical movement lifting you up to 100 floors and gave a glimpse of the exuberant skylines of the city. Compared to the dense historic atmosphere of Beijing quadrangle courtyards and Suzhou gardens, the glass and steel reflected modernity with its form-follows-function philosophy.

I travelled to Shanghai to visit my college friend, Yu, who worked as an engineer in Pudong and landed himself a residence booklet. He picked me up at the station and we took the bus No. 16 to Lu Jia Zui, Pudong downtown, where the Oriental Pearl Television Tower was standing along Huangpu River, opposite the Bund. On the balcony of our hotel, I could oversee the neon signs and street lights which made the skyscrapers gleaming and heating, producing a haze of pollution. The vehicles and pedestrians were like endless water flowing in the river; young people went out for a movie or chilled out at a bar, which was

unimaginable for a hillbilly like me who had no activities after nine. We came into an up-scale restaurant.



When I was given the menu, I lost my head because none of the names were Chinese. The waiter was waiting, but when I tried to say them, my sound stutters into unintelligible harsh croaks. Yu looked at my countryman ignorance and taught me the English names of dishes. Immediately this place began to revolt me. I could see the sneering look from the ends of everyone's hair to the nails on their toes. I became the laughing stock and begged Yu to change a place. I would rather sit in my relatively shabby office and drink the tea with my colleagues, talking about something trivial.

As the sun mounted and the vigorous late-night spirit receded, Pudong city returned to its status as an economic stanchion and the streets recovered their hustle and bustle. Although Pudong proved to the world its economic success and led the way for Chinese economics, it seemed so far and irrelevant to me who had a stable work as a middle school teacher in Jiangxi. I recalled my hometown, where everything was not as tidy and orderly as Shanghai's. Its skyline looked like a great quilt of golden, brown and green squares held together by the thick green stitching of the hedgerows. The crop and grass rose and fell like giant waves on a green ocean and was interspersed with ponds. Normally the fields, farmhouses or barns were separated by woods. However, in Shanghai, its hurtling life pace, the incessant trumpet and concrete jungles could never be compared to the leisure rural life, the clean air and the unblocked landscape.

I started to reflected on the meaning of this journey. Had it not brought me joyfulness, why bother to endure the 15 hours' unpleasant waiting experience? Why must I go to somewhere neither exhilarating nor educational or beneficial? At that moment, I recalled someone's saying about the benefits of travelling alone: "If you have to wait for someone to travel with you, you may end up waiting a life time!", so I declined my classmate's invitation and started a journey of knowing my real self.



I opened a travel map purchased from the train station, which tagged the Bund, as the hottest attraction. It featured Shanghai Museum, People's Square and Nanjing road. You could ride a boat on the Huangpu river watching exclusive restaurants, boutiques and hotels across the river; otherwise you could walk down the Nanjing Street and admired the electric splendor of Pudong district. At the end of the effulgent esplanade, you could relax at one of the night bars, sipping hand-craft Pilsner beer, West River Weizen, North Star IPA or Black Eyed Bear Stout while reading old photos on the wall.

On one evening, I took a stroll down the Huangpu River and marveled at various architectures and buildings: the Peace Hotel, Merchants Bank, and Customs House. Nearly every colonial country made and lost profits at this neoclassical area, which contained numerous banks, trading houses. I started to take an acquired liking to this city, by listening to its rhythms. In the day, I watched its people, walking in the spacious asphalt road surrounded by towering buildings with the reflected light from the windows of its skyscrapers. At night, it heard my despaired groan when I couldn't hail a taxi to take me home. This city and I seemed to share the happiness and sadness of each other.

Shanghai has bloomed into a top-notch city characterized by its combination of western Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Neo-Classical and Art-Deco styles. It also developed its Eclecticist approach to not only architecture but also economics and politics. Its liberal atmosphere, like the charming old sound from the 20th century phonograph, allured Chinese elites and foreign tourists to taste the bouquet grown by an old man in 1990. However, the most important thing to avoid straying in an unfamiliar city is to be your own guide, move through it by your decisions and minimize the impressions of others. As travel refers to personal experience and thoughts, what people say is wonderful may not meet with my preferences. One should always listen to the sound from the bottom of the heart, but not other voices.