

May 21st to May 24th, Shanghai: “Just Another Big Asian City”

Great news everyone! I can now report that United Airlines now offers food on international flights that is every bit as tasteless and perfunctory as their domestic offerings. Flying to Shanghai was fun nonetheless, and we arrived at Pudong airport slightly early. I made it through Customs and immigration and baggage check very quickly. I immediately hit the ATM for a wad of 100-yuan notes. My borrowed cell phone powered up and I was soon fumbling a series of calls from Dietmar, my friend Lingling’s ex-boss. I’d felt a twinge of regret when he first offered to pick me up, since I claim to love to simply plunge into the local rapid transit. But who’s kidding who? Getting picked up at a strange airport after a 13 hour flight feels pretty good. We went straight to my hotel, a bland three-star just far enough from the heavily touristed Nanjing Road shopping district. Not bad for USD 32 per night. Then we met a longtime friend of his for dinner at a “fusion” restaurant with a half-Caucasian clientele and an English language menu. The food was good regardless.

Shanghai, Tuesday May 22nd

I took melatonin for my first night’s sleep in China, so morning’s first light woke me abruptly. I was roaming the streets at 6 am. I wandered through nearby Nanshi, the nearest thing Shanghai has to an “old town”, with crowded streets and older buildings. My goal was the Bund, the city’s famous riverfront. I saw groups doing tai chi, and



saw the morning conference of the birds-sellers in the park. I was able to walk the Bund bright and early, and an Aussie tourist obligingly snapped the obligatory photo of me and the Pearl TV Tower. I’d been warned not to go to an apartment, bar, or coffee shop with anyone seeking “language exchange” lest I be ripped off by an extortionate bill. But I soon let three young women engage me. I spoke some broken Chinese, while they spoke serviceable English. After a very decent interval of nearly half an hour came the sales pitch. Would I like to see some of their artwork? Well, OK, we were downtown at 8 am and they looked like dorky children to me, not femmes fatales. We walked a few blocks, then up to a gallery on the 8th floor of an office building. I spent about USD 30 for two ink drawings of birds. My kid likes the pictures; they were great souvenirs. When compared to the abysmal wood carvings that are constantly thrust in one’s face by aggressive hustlers in the Caribbean, both the art and the sellers are downright benign. After a day of random explorations I met Dietmar and his friend for dinner in Pudong, the new side of river. We feasted on Guizhou dishes. In deference to my companions’ taste, I

refrained from ordering dog. After dinner we had a drink at the top of the 88-story Jin Mao Tower, where we enjoyed this amazing interior view:



Wednesday, May 23rd.

This was Tourist Attraction day. I rose around 7:30 and walked through a sticky warm morning to Houhai Road, which is lined with boxy new buildings chock full of internationally known retail establishments and upscale apartments. After a “reassuringly expensive” coffee at one of the many Starbucks, I walked down to People’s Square and spent an hour in the National Museum admiring art of the ages. Outside again, I was approached several times by young people in twos and threes, wanting to talk to me and sell me art. Anyone pushy I’d walk away from, but I had a few nice conversations with students from as Xi’an and Shenyang and Chengdu. I could hardly walk 50 meters, without being asked “where you from” and responding “Jiou Jin Shan (Gold Mountain aka San Francisco), ni ta na’ar lai? (where are you from).” The game was just to talk until one side or the other got bored. After a while, I got a cab and went to visit the Jade Buddha Temple, in a more plebian part of town. When I’d had my fill of incense and busloads of Europeans I started walking back towards the center of town. I was gratified to see a much better shot of this steely ... cruel ... rapacious .. *Marriott* in the movie “Manufactured Landscapes”



Soon I came to a five-story glass building, with uniformed attendants out front and neon sign at the top saying “Spa Center” in Chinese. This was not to be ignored. I went in, and was ushered to a front desk, where my spoken Chinese failed me completely. I’d forgotten the word for ‘bath’ and no one understood my pronunciation of ‘anmo’ (massage). I surrendered my shoes and was walked inside to a locker room where a teenage boy helped me hang up my clothes and don some loose shorts. He had a clipboard with a slip of paper, and motioned me to follow him, which I did, to the threshold of the largest communal bath I’d ever seen. About a meter deep, it had a row of hot-tub style jet seats along one side, and a fake waterfall. Though there was room for thirty to soak without crowding, only two men were present. I pointed to the showers, the attendant smiled and wrote a ‘10’ on the slip of paper. I gave him my shorts; he gave me a towel. I showered and soaped and showered at length to show my respect, and stepped into the warm pool. I gazed longingly at the steam rooms, but remained docile when two more young men arrived with towels. I stepped out of the pool and allowed myself to be patted dry. This felt invasive at first, but I relaxed quickly. “Anmo?”, I asked again. I was escorted to a large open area with a series of massage tables, where young men in gray pajamas worked on male customers covered by sheets. “38” my attendant wrote on the tag. “OK”. A table massage for USD 5.50, what’s not to like? After 45 minutes or so of reasonably competent shiatsu, the masseur squirted some white glop into his hand to show me. I nodded, and received a 30 minute body scrub. Finally I was done, and showered again. Attendants helped me dry off, and fumbled me back into my clothes. I was unable to actually read the “menu” poster at the door, but understood that for a couple of hundred yuan, other services were available, somewhere up the curving

red-carpeted stairs. As for me, I'd had an hour and a half of mute luxury for eleven dollars.

Now it was time to find the hip gallery district. I hailed a cab with the only talkative driver in Shanghai, who took me to Moganshan Road, whose redeveloped warehouses and new loft buildings make up the artsy epicenter of Shanghai. I enjoyed the gallery stroll (see the Picasa album) but I was a little disappointed when the open dance rehearsal I lucked into turned out to be a white girl doing flamenco. For this I flew 6,000 miles? Ah well.. By way of a cozy night off, I had a leisurely dinner at the Japanese place near the hotel. I could make myself understood in Japanese and sip sake among the pale wood tables and the TV monitors with NHK news. By the way, just what is this echo of Hiroshima doing in Shanghai?



Thursday, May 24th

This solitary morning was a gift not to be wasted. I wanted more casual conversations to buttress my limited “Cave-Man-darin”, but alas, due perhaps to the cloudy and threatening weather, no passersby approached. Instead I went to the Shanghai Art Museum. I was blown away by Xu Xiao Yuan, a painter from Western China. Her art centers on images of change and destruction. Her huge canvases convey harvested fields, drainage ditches, highway construction sites, all rendered in a unique and painterly fashion that recalls Impressionism without imitating anything.



I then strolled over to Xintiandi. This is an international shopping zone, quartered in a reconstruction of vanishing Shanghai “shikumen” architecture. It’s an exhibit of what used to be, but gutted, sterilized, and lined with pricey restaurants. Were I an upper-middle class local, or an expat, much of my social life might take place there. But as a funk-seeking tourist, I was not impressed. It reminded me of Singapore’s Boat Quay, a posh restaurant strip made up of imitation-traditional Singaporean shop-houses. They were designed by the same firm. It figures. Asia-land all over again, as old as Time and as new as next week. Before you get all weepy over lost architectural gems, please consider that almost all of Shanghai has been built, and re-built since it became a treaty port in the mid-19th century. Vermin-infested tenements look simply smashing in sepia photos, or in sterile tarted-up malls for that matter. Wrapped around stacks of miserable humans, not so much.

That afternoon Dietmar took me out to Zhujiajiao. This “water town” is built around canals and bridges. It typifies Chinese architecture from the Tang dynasty, and tradition-seeking Chinese as well as foreigners love to visit here. We had lunch overlooking the water and even bought souvenirs. I got me a Chairman Mao lighter. Eventually we returned to the city and enjoyed all you can eat teppanyaki and swapped bad Japanese puns with our tablemates. Over beers Dietmar warned me of the alcoholism and divorce that plague the expat community. Not like I hadn’t noticed this elsewhere in Asia, but it’s good for my own mental balance to hear this warning from a successful long-timer married to a Chinese professional.

Friday, May 25th

I rose early for a final walk through shabby old Nanshi, where hundred-year-old reinforced concrete buildings totter towards the sky. I located and photographed a traditional neighborhood bathhouse, just like in the movie “Shower”, but was too shy to go in.



With only an hour to go before I had to get a cab for the airport, I had time for a quick foot massage in a shabby storefront. The cute, stocky, curly-haired masseuse was happy to chat and giggle with me in her Shanghainese and my fractured Putonghua, while the proprietor dozed in a neighboring recliner. As I picture her smile and her button nose now, I imagine she might have some Russian ancestry. After a few minutes, a man left the back room, stepped out, and sat smoking in a folding chair on the sidewalk. A moment later a skinny sallow woman came out with a few small bills in hand. A rapid conversation ensued between the proprietor and his two employees. All I could follow was the cadence of occasional laughter. I paid my 20yuan (\$2.75) and went off to get my cab out to Pudong airport with a spring in my step and my virtue intact.

See my Picasa Web Album at

<http://picasaweb.google.com/bcarasik/ShanghaiMay21To242007>