
HORS LIGNE

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A TALE OF TWO CITIES

SHANGHAI, ASIA'S 'CITY OF THE FUTURE', IS THE LATEST CAPITALIST MECCA. BUT WHAT REALLY LIES BEHIND THIS SKYLINE OF A MILLION CRANES? LILY CANNELL WENT IN SEARCH OF THE LOST SOUL OF THE FORMER PEARL OF THE ORIENT. PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR POLITIS



Shanghai is 'full on' from the moment you board the MagLev, to be whisked from the airport, at what feels like the speed of light, and dropped at a city suburb, (the budget ran out long before it reached Beijing, its original destination) to when you step out on to the world famous Bund and face the most striking and fastest growing skyline in the world: Pudong.

Once known as the Pearl of the Orient, it could now be dubbed the Building Site of the East. The sheer pace of construction and change in the city on the banks of the

Huangpu River is breathtaking. So much so that every time you open your curtains in the morning they seem to reveal a brand new cityscape. But then Shanghai has been granted 24-hour building permits, so you wouldn't expect anything less from the city that never sleeps. "You can really feel how fast China is moving here, not just Shanghai," says Arnie Doyle, an Australian who runs an online dating site for Asia. However, big may be beautiful, but it doesn't always make for happy.

Walking through Shanghai's crowded streets, you can see that people are busy and going about their business, but they do not look particularly cheerful or excited about it. All the leading lifestyle and fashion magazines can and do brag about Shanghai's speed of growth, its avant-garde architecture, the sheer energy of the place, the emerging style, the many business opportunities and the fledgling contemporary art scene.

> BIRD AFICIONADOS GATHER ON SUNDAYS IN A SMALL PARK IN THE HONGKOU DISTRICT TO ADMIRE THEIR BIRDS, DRINK TEA AND SMOKE. THE BIRD OWNERS EAGERLY WATCH EVERY ONE OF THEIR FEATHERED FRIENDS' MOVES.

> LES PASSIONNÉS D'OISEAUX SE RETROUVENT LE DIMANCHE DANS UN PARC DU DISTRICT DE HONGKOU. ILS PASSENT LA JOURNÉE À REGARDER ÉVOLUER LEURS AMIS À PLUMES, À BOIRE DUTHÉ ET À FUMER.

But these changes are mainly enjoyed by the curious, adventurous and opportunistic foreigners with a disposable income, and little by the local population. According to Saskia Vischer, a Swiss film producer scouting for local talent, “The vibe amongst the Chinese is still a hangover of communism: poverty, hard work, mistrust and a general feeling of ‘greyness’. Arnie agrees that amongst the newly arrived expatriates it’s a different story. “There’s a really good vibe at the moment and the social life is pretty fresh with lots of people from Europe flooding in,” he tells me on his way out the door to live it up in this week’s newest bar.

54

TWO SPEEDS

Unfortunately, apart from People’s Square and the architectural gems on both sides of the river, there is not much beauty to feast your eyes on. “In fact, your time is easily spent in massage parlours, shops and restaurants,” Saskia says happily. “After working long hours there is certainly nothing more delightful than a sixty minute foot massage or a ninety minute full body massage, followed by a delicious meal in a glamorous setting and then a night-



cap in one of the trendy bars on the Bund.” The pure luxury and extravagance of today’s lifestyle is a throwback to the colonial, capitalistic period, but this hedonism is only for the select few, who happen to be mostly westerners. In its heyday in the twenties and thirties, Shanghai was also known as the Whore of Asia or the Paris of



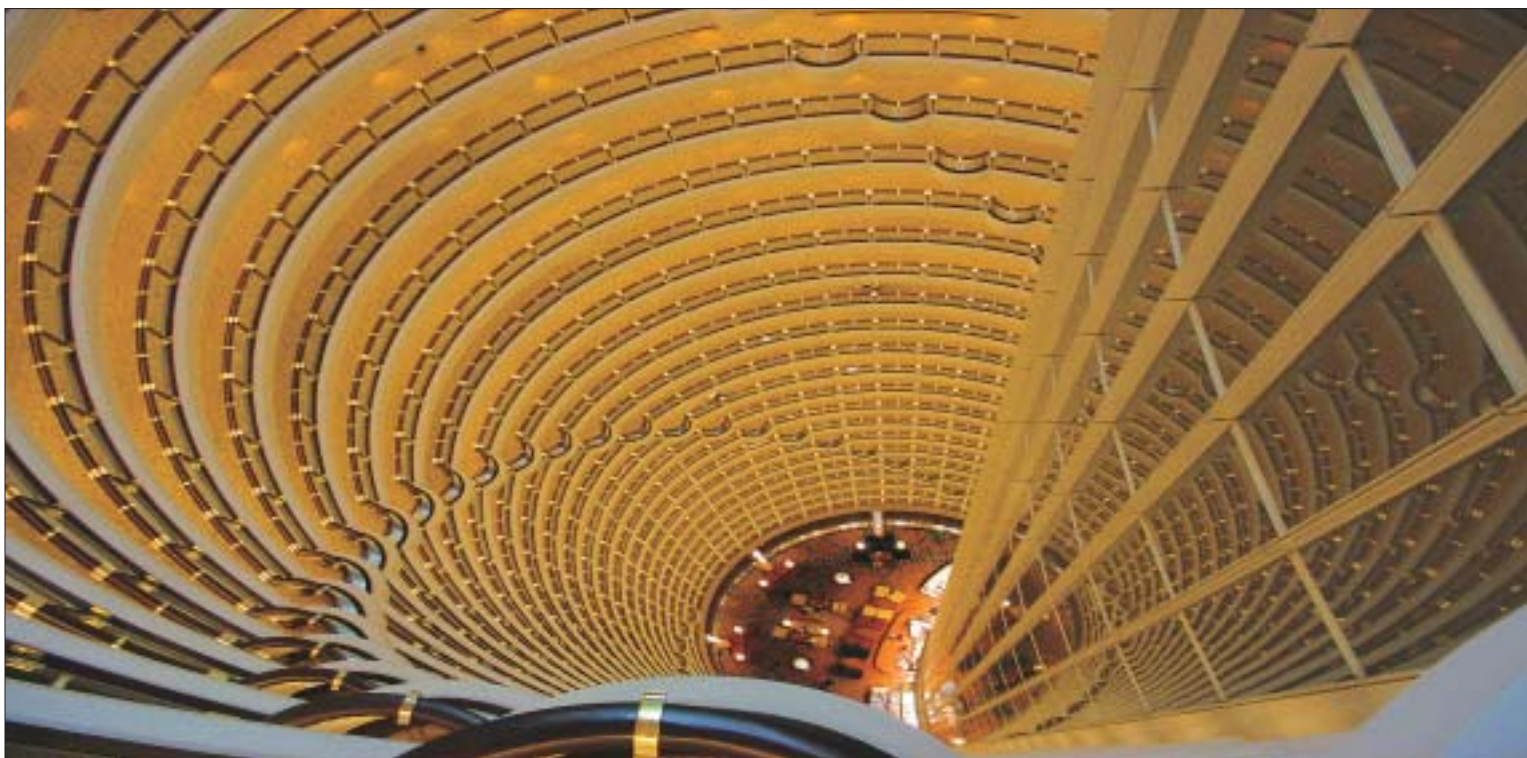
the East depending on your moral viewpoint. It was the city of quick riches, lost fortunes, pimps and ladies of easy virtue, drug runners, warlords and gangsters, socialites and crooks, skyscrapers and colonial buildings, debauchery and corruption. It had a soul then, a corrupt one at that, but a soul nonetheless. Then, in the late forties the catchy tune Shanghai was dancing to was replaced by the wail of the factory

> STUNNING PERSPECTIVE ON THE GRAND HYATT'S LOBBY, THE WORLD'S HIGHEST HOTEL. THE JIN MAO TOWER, BUILT AROUND THE FIGURE 8, A LUCKY NUMBER IN CHINA, IS HOME TO THE HYATT'S 29 STOREY ATRIUM. 36 OF ITS 88 FLOORS BELONG TO THE HOTEL.

> PERSPECTIVE SURPRENANTE SUR LE LOBBY DU GRAND HYATT, L'HÔTEL LE PLUS HAUT DU MONDE. L'HÔTEL ET SON ATRIUM DE 29 ÉTAGES OCCUPENT LES 36 ÉTAGES SUPÉRIEURS DE LA JIN MAO TOWER.



siren. The dancing shoes were boxed and work boots shod for the next four decades. Industrial quotas submerged its hedonism and raw energy and the legendary decadence and cocktail of cultures were replaced by communist conformity. The city lost its soul. Today's Shanghai is cleaner than the forties version, somewhat stiffer and definitely colder and it still hasn't found its lost soul. The hangover from communism lingers on, but the sufferers are mainly Chinese and sharply contrast with the mad capitalistic rush currently in progress. Amongst the expatriates and the wealthier local community there is a sense of being in the 'Wild East' with every chance to make a fortune. This 21st Century gold rush has created a city geared exclusively towards material gain and pleasure, and an ever-expanding gap between the locals and the expats. It is shopping, parties and cocktails for some, and relative poverty and simpler pleasures such as window-shopping, bird watching of a different sort and flasks of tea for others. For Arnie though, the city is moving in the right direction, "I'm sure it will become more cultural and cosmopolitan and less sterile and business-like over the next few years" he says smiling.



“People come here with a sense of adventure and throw themselves into the social and business scene, they don’t come to write poetry,” he adds before telling me all about the local dating scene. The bird watchers in the parks may disagree. These two speeds, one local, one international, could well be what skew the ‘soul factor’. Shanghai has always looked both ways and has thrived on being a cosmopolitan metropolis. A perfect example is the Jin Mao Tower, which looks like the fusion of a skyscraper and a pagoda. And perhaps it is this fusion of two distinct cultures and philosophies that gives out different vibes and perceptions of soulfulness. “It truly is the most international city I have ever been to, more so than New York even, and the energy is amazing, more than the soul,” Kara Kidman, a frequent visitor to the city explains enthusiastically. Arnie goes onto add, “There’s a good street flavour which is soulful.” But is it the realm of the expatriate too, or simply of the Chinese?

A MARRIAGE OF SORTS: COMMUNISM AND CONSUMERISM On a day-to-day basis there aren’t as many



opportunities as you would expect for the Chinese and the expatriates to mingle, especially in a city the size of Shanghai. The language barrier is definitely a constraint, but it could also have to do with it not being a student centre. It is expensive by local standards and therefore not attractive to the country’s vibrant and outgoing student population, which converges on Beijing. Perhaps a larger student body would induce more soul into

a city that glitters for a few only? As for Arnie, he’s not too worried, “As more Chinese learn English, the opportunities for foreigners to interact with them will increase dramatically.” This could be the key to finding Shanghai’s lost soul. In the meantime the investors are back, as are the entrepreneurs who are keen to tap into a market of a billion consumers. The door to the cosmopolitan Queen of the Orient is wide open, and she’s back to trading her rags for riches. And the rather unusual blend of communism and consumerism that is gripping this city on the make is thriving, embracing the policy of superlatives (anything in its way is swept away in one fell swoop of a bulldozer’s jaw). Meanwhile, the ‘lights off at 10 pm’ policy for Pudong ensures that the poor of the city can switch theirs on to cook. Shanghai could yet become a ‘soul induced product’ if the marriage goes well. For Arnie there’s no room for doubt, “They’ve definitely got their dancing shoes back on.” ■

TEXT BY LILY CANNELL/PHOTOGRAPHS
BY VICTOR POLITIS

«Ville du futur» asiatique, Shanghai obsède les investisseurs étrangers et chinois. Toujours plus vite, plus haut et plus fort semble être sa devise. Mais que cache-t-elle derrière cette image de nouvelle Mecque du capitalisme? Qualifiée autrefois de «Perle de l'Orient», Shanghai fait aujourd'hui davantage figure de gigantesque chantier. Le rythme effréné des constructions, en particulier sur les deux rives du fleuve Huangpu, transforme de jour en jour la silhouette de la cité. Ici, on bâtit 24 heures sur 24. Arnie Doyle, Australien et responsable d'un site de rencontres en Asie, relève qu'«à Shanghai, c'est l'essor de la Chine tout entière que l'on ressent».

Ville de tous les superlatifs et de toutes les audaces, plus grande agglomération de Chine et premier port du pays, Shanghai présente la plus forte concentration de grues au monde.

Les gratte-ciel y poussent comme des champignons et atteignent des hauteurs records. Cerise sur le gâteau: la métropole, avec ses 15 millions d'habitants, est une manne pour les entrepreneurs en quête de main d'œuvre bon marché et de nouveaux consommateurs.

Les magazines se sont empressés de vanter l'architecture avant-gardiste et l'incroyable développement de Shanghai dans leurs pages «tendances». Cependant, cette douceur de vivre célébrée – les massages langoureux, les boutiques pointues et les restaurants à la mode – semble être un privilège que seuls les plus aisés (les étrangers) peuvent s'offrir. Si les expatriés relèvent la fraîcheur de la vie sociale et l'énergie bouillonnante émanant du lieu, les sentiments des chinois sont plus mitigés. Dénuement, travail, désillusions et méfiance toute commu-

LA VILLE AUX DEUX VISAGES

niste marquent bien souvent leur quotidien.

UNE SOCIÉTÉ À DEUX VITESSES Il fut un temps où Shanghai avait une âme, corrompue certes, mais une âme tout de même. Dans les années 20 et 30, elle était le «Paris de la Chine», la ville des fortunes aussi vite amassées que perdues, le territoire des maquereaux, le fief des gangsters, de la drogue et des plaisirs faciles. Aujourd'hui les rues sont plus sûres, mais l'atmosphère s'est refroidie. Entre temps, le communisme a balayé l'hédonisme et un conformisme strict a succédé au cocktail décadent des cultures. Alors que les Chinois se relèvent péniblement de ce changement de régime, les étrangers voient en Shanghai un eldorado, un nouveau Far West où tout est encore possible. Cette ruée vers l'or permanente a contribué à bouleverser l'identité pittoresque de la mégapole.

Aux yeux d'Arnie, cette situation n'est que temporaire et la cité se tournera bientôt vers des préoccupations plus culturelles que pécuniaires. Pourtant, ce régime à deux vitesses – l'une locale, l'autre internationale – a cor-

rompu l'âme de Shanghai. La fusion de deux systèmes de pensée radicalement différents en a fait une ville à deux visages. Les expatriés lui trouvent un charme qui est devenu désuet pour les indigènes.

Les étudiants, porteurs essentiels d'identité, trouvent Shanghai trop chère à leur goût et lui préfèrent Beijing. Arnie prévoit cependant que la cité bénéficiera d'un nouveau souffle lorsque «les Chinois parleront davantage anglais et pourront interagir avec les Occidentaux».

En attendant ce retour de flamme, les investisseurs de tous bords se pressent aux portes de la «Perle de l'Orient». La progression inéluctable des buildings menace les vieux quartiers, chassant les plus pauvres. Parallèlement, la loi impose à Pudong, l'impressionnante zone de développement industriel sur la rive orientale du fleuve, une extinction des feux à 10 h afin que les démunis puissent bénéficier de la lumière, le temps de cuisiner.

C'est cela, Shanghai: un mariage improbable et détonnant de capitalisme et de communisme. Pour Arnie, décidément optimiste, cela ne fait aucun doute: le mariage se révélera fécond. ■

