

Shanghai, Fall 2003

A View From The Middle Kingdom In A Shanghai Longtang

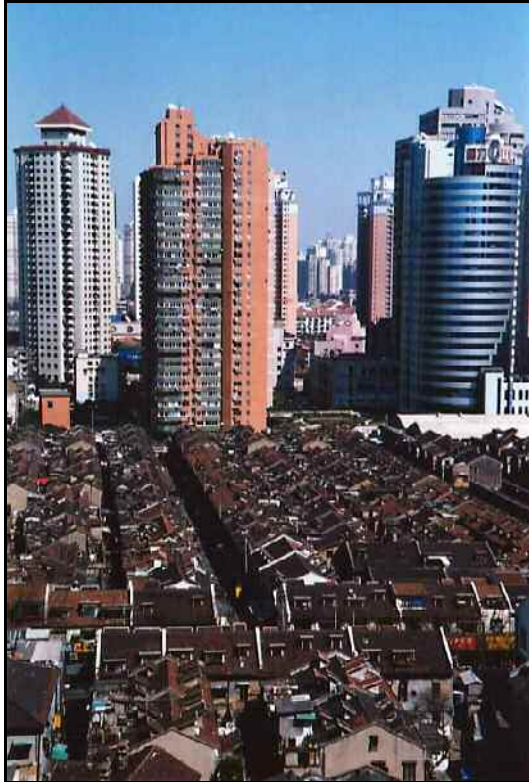


My apartment building is in the midst of a traditional one-hundred-year-old plus Chinese neighborhood called a 'longtang'. The buildings are

two and three-story brick buildings joined in rows forming a honeycomb of alleyways for many blocks, the street level being small businesses. Everything from bakeries to bicycle repairmen, tailors who will copy any garment you bring to them, fruit seller's stalls, herbal pharmacies, hairdressers, and newsstands with uncountable fashion magazines. I even saw a mobile phone store open at three in the morning and stopped in for a phone card – so much for regular business hours – if you can



Destiny



wake up the owner, he'll sell you what you need! One can literally wander for days through the thousands of shops and

和

Harmony

markets and swarms of people and vehicles on the streets and never encounter a Caucasian face.

But in a Shanghai Longtang it's hardly important where you're from; what matters is where you're coming from. Stopping at the shop of a woman doing some ironing, I handed over my two new pairs of blue jeans for her to hem. For fifty cents she had them done when I came back in an hour, and judging by her smile, I know she made money from me. If I didn't know better I'd say this is the





best example I've seen of Free Enterprise, with so many folks operating their own small businesses, maybe the way America used to be before Wal-Mart and other giant corporations came to dominate most every type of business.

In the daytime I bicycle through

narrow alleys and streets flooded with produce, garments and people taking their time doing their business.

氣

Energy

I've seen bicycles delivering items ranging from six five-gallon water bottles, four huge baskets of eggs, a five foot sheet

of window glass, twenty-four boxes of shoes, rooms full of furniture, old people and children, and towing an upright piano! With so many people moving about the quiet is almost eerie; the gliding of bikes and low conversation is a sweet contrast to





因 心

Grace

downtowns with their
constant rumbles –

though not without some car horns for punctuation! Occasionally you may witness a heated argument taking place with two or more people yelling and waving their arms. A small crowd gathers in amusement and the conflict is eventually settled on the spot. Or you might even see a number of people on the sidewalk walking in a circle around burning cardboard replicas of things to be taken to the next world, for a departed loved one. Around sunset I pass by the park on Renming Road every night and hear the sound of a waltz coming through loudspeakers; about a hundred seniors and young people are practicing ballroom dancing, no matter how cold the evening may be.

After dark, riding in a taxi feels different. Often the driver will be absorbed in the radio dramas that I am dying to understand, the feeling



is reminiscent of American late night radio from decades ago, but all in Chinese of course. If the driver is

仁

Benevolence

talkative the most frequently asked question is 'where are you from'. An answer of "Mei guo"* gets thumbs up. Regardless of how anyone may feel about the U.S. role in

world affairs, America is admired as



the model of modernity.

Tonight I slide by the Buddha Bar on Maoming Road. The dark, cavern-like interior is cozy with candles providing the light, and soft cushions on the low benches. A large Buddha in the back watches over the scene with equanimity, a presence that seems as appropriate in a neighborhood music bar as in a temple. The look and the music are trendy and the people friendly.



I walk home from my music gig about one thirty and there is still a lot of life going on. Red paper lanterns announce tiny restaurants with two tables open to the street, great smells wafting out of the kettles. Card games are in progress at the teahouses. Sometimes I get a wave from a vendor asking me

美

Beauty

to come over and pick out the ingredients I'd like in a soup. "Try my pancakes, the best in town!" she sings with a smile. "Lamb skewers,



cooked on my charcoal fire!" he calls out for all to hear on Shunchang Lane. I can see in the low windows to families playing mah-jongg with the neighbors. The clothes



hanging from the low trees and outside the windows like an overabundance of flags are the day's laundry left out overnight to dry. No worries, it'll be there in

the morning.

The street intersections are not quite the way we are familiar with, the buildings forming ninety-degree corners. Each building faces the center at a forty-five degree angle, forming the eight-sided feng shui octagon.

川順

Gentleness

In each block there are two or three twirling barber poles that indicate massage parlors – usually

someone's front room with three or four big easy chairs. I stop in one or another of them

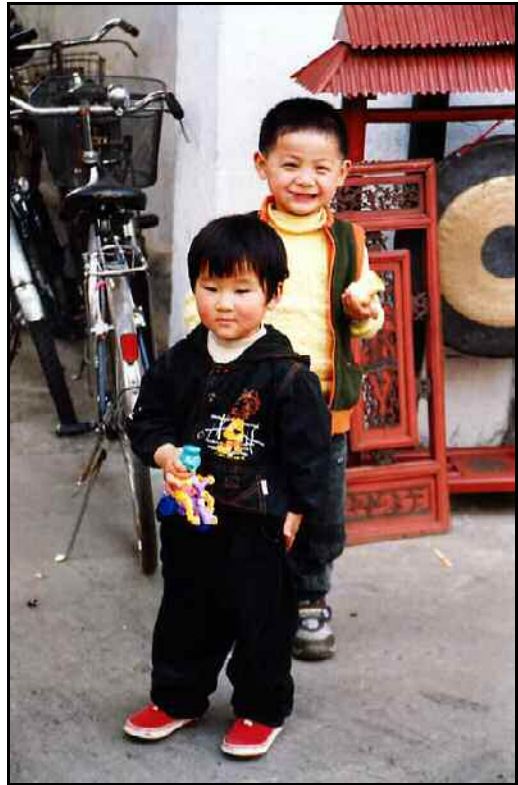


about three times a week, where the world's best foot massage artists

福

Happiness

are at work for less than four bucks for an hour. Massage is a standard part of life here, so what if I just had a massage last night! It's great on these crisp autumn nights; they bring out the steaming hot water with herb tea bags and soak your feet to start. Throughout the massage neighbors may drop in to play cards and gossip, sometimes with fresh snacks and pastries. There's no knock



on the door, they just stroll in and make themselves at home. They smile as they ask me where I'm from and offer me green tea and a 'Double Happiness' cigarette, or maybe a 'Golden Deer'. 'No thanks, I'm trying to quit!' The big television is usually on quietly, showing soap operas of modern life in an up-to-date suburb, traditional sword and sorcery epics, commercials for hair/ beauty products and chewing gum, MTV Asia, dubbed foreign movies or the day's international



soccer match.

Shanghai people still love to set off fireworks any old time. Almost every day I hear giant strings of them crackle and pop for minutes at mid morning,

followed by several aerial bombs that reverberate off the surrounding highrises. They still do this for the original ceremonial purpose, to scare off the bad spirits, dispel bad vibes and celebrate with a Joyful Noise. European merchants were first introduced to gunpowder in the thirteenth century, in it's bright red wrapping paper with calligraphic figures. The invention was developed to attain superiority in warfare, and the rest is, History.

平

Peace

In some coming year in Shanghai, any of these 'longtang' blocks will be scraped from the earth by the cranes and earthmovers to be replaced by forty story apartment megastructures with central heating. It's the way of Shanghai's bodacious redevelopment scheme that will transform it into the New York of Asia, and a way of life will pass. It seems deathly sad to our way of thinking until you realize how many times it must have happened in

China's long history, maybe even on this same soil; the essence of China continues.



Literal translations

Zhong Guo "Middle Kingdom/Land" – China

Mei Guo "Beautiful Kingdom/Land" – America

Shanghai, Fall 2003

Please also visit:

<http://www.mechanicalarts.com>

"The music and art of Donald McCrea and Bob Mocarisky"

bobmomusic@hotmail.com

Copyright 2004 – Bob Mocarisky – All Rights Reserved