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Fear and Loathing in Shanghai?

Amid the increased political tension between Japan and China, foolhardy Westerner **Ben Lupton** and his shopaholic Japanese wife venture to the 'Paris of the East' to find out whether its safe to roam the streets.

It's a bone rattling minus two degrees as my wife, Saki, and I stumble across the wide square that sits at the front of Shanghai station. It bustles with an influx of fresh migrants from the countryside, shuffling around in a futile attempt to keep out the cold. They look as bewildering to us as we must to them – perhaps they've been lured here with the promise of streets paved with gold.

As we tumble into the warmth of the Metro station, disorientated and with no real clue as to where we're heading, I suddenly realize that we're the subjects of some very curious glances. The reason perhaps – well, I'm a towering foreigner who happens to have a Japanese woman in my arm. Are these looks of aggression – these are proud people who supposedly don't take too kindly to seeing of what could be one of theirs in a presumed tryst with an arrogant Westerner? Have we made a mistake in coming to a country still resentful about its treatment from its wartime occupiers? Or – as is most likely – am I just being a touch too paranoid?

Saki demands to go shopping (the imperative of nearly all Japanese women) so shopping we must go. Having foolishly forgotten the guidebook, we opt to venture to a place that seemed to be plastered over the city guide – Xintiandi – a block of old-style stone gatehouses renovated into an ultra-trendy entertainment complex.

Getting there is a problem though. Any pretence at sophistication evaporates down in the deep of the Metro. The train doors open – 30 people get off, 30 people get on – all at exactly the same time. It's a miracle that scores of people are not decapitated, disemboweled or suffocated.

Once on the train, the staring begins. Saki is not particularly bothered but I'm starting to feel a tad self-consciousness – mainly as everybody is focusing on me. Of course, it must be because of my exotic good looks. "You wish. It's all because your nose is so big," says a Chinese friend later. "We Chinese girls love men with sizable hooters." If I ever get divorced I'm relocating here.



Xintiandi, located in the French Concession and next to Huangpi Lu metro station, really only begins to come alive at night. Since opening in 2001, it's become the hub for all discerning Shanghaiites and foreign tourists with money to burn. The shopping isn't up to much, just a collection of cute boutiques that can be found in any other modern city, but the restaurants are all at

the top end and I catch myself dreaming of spending an evening in one of the very plush looking bars with a fat expense account for company. We eventually settle for a drink at a rocking n' rolling German beer hall, 'Paulaners', which specializes in, much to the consternation of my better half, gargantuan glasses of white Munich ale.

Walk out of Xintiandi and you can see how development is gnawing away, like a flesh-eating virus, at the last verges of old Shanghai. What is left though is a charming epitaph to the Third World – a swansong to the city's turbulent and often violent past. Ironically, this is the place where Saki and I feel the most comfortable, as people are too involved with their own comings

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and goings to think twice about seeing a Westerner with an Asian woman.

All around there are flashes of the city our great grandparents knew – laundry hanging out to dry on the trees that line the decrepit streets; ducks, dumplings and whatever lies at the darkest corner of your imagination strung up for curing; an argument spiraling out of control over a lost card game; ancient ladies gossiping the afternoon away; and the putrid contents of an emptied chamber pot slowly trickling past your feet. As I pull out my camera, Saki stops me. "Not the right place to take photos. The Chinese get very embarrassed about foreigners seeing poverty." Which is a shame because this is as close as you're ever going to get to glimpsing the real, undiluted China.

Eventually, after negotiating Nanjing Road – Shanghai's Oxford Street, a mile long stretch of department stores and hotels that is so overcrowded that you begin to think that half of the country's 1.3 billion strong population is shopping here at one time – we come to the Bund. There is no way to escape the fact that here, at the bank of the Huangpu River, is as clear cut division of the old and the new, the future and the past, as you're ever going to see. Both sides of the river hold architectural wonders – the neoclassical glories of British colonial power facing off with the gaudy Bladerunner aesthetics of China's rising star.

Saki, being the eternal coffee junkie she is, demands her hourly fix and so I can think of no better place to go than across the river to Pudong and the highest hotel on the planet – the Grand Hyatt. We decide to forgo the walk under the Huangpu and catch the Metro instead.

I'm reluctantly back on the moving goldfish bowl and saying hello to my newfound friend – paranoia. The train is heaving so Saki and I are standing. I feel something reach into my jeans pocket and wrap itself around my camera. I immediately reach down and grab a small hand. It belongs to an immaculately dressed baby-faced boy who must be barely ten years old. He shows no hint of emotion as I glare down at him and he nonchalantly swaggers off at the next stop.

"Well, they warned us about pickpockets at the hotel, didn't they," says my typically unsympathetic wife. "The thing with the Chinese is that if they can take something and get away with it, then they have no qualms about doing it." I'm not sure if this is an age-old fact or an adverse Japanese reaction to their closest rival but I do agree that wherever you go in Shanghai, you come face to face with rampant materialism and the trappings of new money. Not unlike us Westerners, they want it all and they want it now.

However Fritz Langesque Pudong looks from the Bund, nothing compares you to how desolate and depressing the 'new economic miracle' looks on the other side of the river. Sure, there are some fantastic looking skyscrapers but for the most part, development hasn't caught up with demolition, leaving swathes of wide-open spaces filled with nothing but wind-swept dirt. It's also a tourist trap from hell.

The Hyatt coffee shop is located next to the hotel lobby on the 54th floor of the monolithic Jinmao Tower. Saki and I walk in rather sheepishly, for surrounding us is quite a gathering of Pudong's high rollers, or more likely tourists pretending to be high rollers. And high rollers we literally are because the view is almost like peering down from St Peter's Gate. On a clear evening you can almost imagine that you're an intergalactic visitor to Coruscant, the city planet featured in George Lucas's Star Wars prequels.

So did we have any real problems during our stay?

No, not really. Apart from feeling very

uncomfortable on the trains, it was almost as pain-free as life in back in apathetic Tokyo. It seemed that the vast majority of Shanghai's cosmopolitan populace couldn't give a flying monkeys' who you are or who you're with as long as you've got the cash and the will to spend it. This is a city moving at light speed into the future and you'd be a fool not to board it, however short your voyage is.

DETAILS:

A three-day trip to Shanghai costs around \60,000 (depending on the season) including hotel (the Holiday Inn), breakfast and a return flight with ANA



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