

# SHANGHAI AND THEREABOUTS

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## Shanghai



From the air, the mouth of the Yangtze is an enormous delta, rich farms and villages gradually clot together the closer we get to Shanghai. Should the Three Gorges dam at Sandouping, over 1,500 kms to the west, burst or be bombed, Wuhan, Nanjing, Shanghai and the delta over which we are now flying would be flushed into the East China Sea (see *Closing the Gates of the Three Gorges*). Or, perhaps more

likely, the dam will silt up, as indeed it is starting to do already, the Yangtze delta will dry up and this vast eco-system and all it supports will vanish. Pleasant thoughts for the start of our trip to Shanghai and thereabouts.

We arrive at Pudong airport at 12 noon to meet our guide for a tour of Shanghai, Suzhou and Hangzhou. We see the tour banner held high by a nice looking girl. We go up to her smiling expectantly.

‘All our tour has not yet arrived. You wait here until they come.’

‘How long will that be?’

‘Six o clock.’

‘We’re not going to wait here that long!’ It’s a Cantonese speaking tour, in which language Catherine is forcefully fluent.

‘That’s outrageous,’ I add my bit in English.

It turns out that the tour operators, ever on the lurk, had combined our tour from Hong Kong – ourselves and Jonathon, a young Chinese Australian doctor – with another tour from Chicago and yet another from Vancouver, all arriving at different times. The guide, Mabel, takes out her mobile and phones back to base for instructions, prompted with some helpful shouting on our part. It is finally agreed that the driver will take us to our hotel where we could either wait for the others, or take a taxi into town for ¥60 and look around Shanghai ourselves. More shouting, more phoning back to base. Yes, the driver will take us to town and also we are each get ¥25 to compensate for our missed lunch.

Jonathon wants to visit the Museum of Art in the Peoples’ Square, which suits us as a target for something to do. He is immensely resourceful, having brought maps with him, with which he plots directions on the run. The tour operated bus can’t take us through the



sclerotic traffic – it is complete gridlock – so we ask to be dropped at the nearest metro. The noise in the metro tunnel is ear-shattering: hawkers shrieking in competition to sell what look like identical soft toys.



The Museum is disappointing, the Square surrounded by typical Shanghai buildings: each building trying to be different from the other. Slightly more interesting is our walk down Nanjing Road to the Bund, most of which is traffic free. But only slightly: it could be a touristy shopping mall almost anywhere.

Greater Shanghai has a population of 25 million, of which 16 million are Shanghainese. The rest are refugees from the desolated countryside, begging or hawking on the streets. They push things at us: cards, toys, anything they have to sell. We are told not to talk to them or respond in any way, beyond a brusque *'buyau'* ('not want').



The most striking feature about Shanghai is the architecture. The Bund architecture, dating back a hundred years or so, boasts in one block architectural styles from Britain, France, America and Russia, where their respective 'concessions' were. The Peace Hotel was built by Sassoon of Hong Kong in the early 1900s, who ordered no building was to be higher. Next door is therefore feet lower, but the Chinese have now erected a flagpole that out-tops that of the Peace Hotel, even if it doesn't look like it from street level. The British built an adjacent building that for years bore the large sign, since taken down: 'No dogs or Chinese'.

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Across the Huangpu River is the symbol of the now Shanghai: the Pearl Tower in Pudong, a huge transmitter station for Pearl TV, two huge pink pearls bulging from a needle antenna. The bigger pearl is a conference centre for 5,000 people, the lower a conference room for a more modest 800. Further along is the 88 storey hotel of 9,999 swords ('9' is lucky, you see), the 'swords' lighting from the roof, the hotel lobby 54 stories up, the highest lobby in the world.

The tour amounts to lurching from one tourist trap to another. For the next three days, we pull up in huge parking lots already jammed with buses. The first stop next morning is Yuyuan Garden, built during the reign of the Ming Emperor Jiajing in 1559, and temple. Both are splendid, but today are just bait for a shopping centre built in a reconstructed cluster of splendidly evocative roofs, but underneath which are trashy shops and stalls.

In the Yuyuan Garden, we make another unpleasant discovery about the tour.



The three groups, from Hong Kong (Jonathon and us), Vancouver and Chicago, are going to different destinations. We overlap on Days 1, 2 and 3 of the tour but, as the minority, we Hong Kongers are to be left to fend for ourselves on Day 4. ‘You could show yourselves around Hangzhou,’ Mabel says with a hopeful smile, ‘and then you take the train back to Shanghai airport!’

Oh no, we couldn’t. Fortunately, the tour operator requires a large tip for the tour guides, to be paid at the end of the tour. ‘It won’t be,’ says Catherine, ‘if we don’t get a guided tour, as promised, and returned to the airport, as promised. Not only that, we shall tell our Hong Tour travel agent not to deal with your firm again.’

Mabel, in tears poor thing, rings back to base yet again; we watch her face light up as she speaks. ‘Yes,’ she switches off and beams at us, ‘yes, you shall have your guided tour of Hangzhou on Day 4 and a driver will take you from Hangzhou to Pudong airport.’

We later discover the guides are paid only Y1,500 (\$A250) a month: the so-called tip is actually commission, but paid by the customer not the employer. Not dissimilar to what Celebrity Cruises did (see *Cruising the Mediterranean*).

Many doors in China are guarded by the ubiquitous stylised Chinese lion, even if it doesn’t look much like any lion. Mabel tells us: ‘Look carefully – these are not lions. They are called *pei yau* and they don’t have an anus. They have the face of a lion, the body of a horse, the feet of a dragon and no anus so that they can take in riches and retain them for ever.’ They have shiny heads and lower backs, because it is considered lucky to pat them – and you will retain your riches. The retention effect on Westerners is rather different. When I go to China I don’t retain my riches, but I am usually constipated.



We drive out of Shanghai through the suburbs, which extend into the next province of Suzhou: a 100km landscape of industry, tollways, housing estates in bizarre European-looking designs with turrets and attics, surprisingly many sporting solar heating units, unfortunately difficult to photograph. Interposed are small, intense farms with old style traditional houses, but they are gradually being bulldozed to make way for *faux* Dutch or Mediterranean curiosities. Most curious is the village of Thames Town, an exact replica of a section of Lyme Regis in Dorset, including the Rock Point Inn fish and chip shop, to the annoyed surprise of the proprietor of the Rock Point Inn, when he came on a visit. The architect explained to him that this was not a question of mimicking, but ‘setting an architectural idiom in a modern context.’



## Suzhou

The city of Suzhou is built along canals originally linking Hangzhou to Nanjing and then to Beijing, so that the Emperor could travel easily from the then capital, Hangzhou. Suzhou has a splendid garden, built by the Master-of-Nets five hundred years ago. We learn why so many Chinese gardens have pagodas at regular intervals: it is so that the wives of the Master can sit down and rest their aching, compressed feet. It took them two months to walk the Master’s entire garden of 28 acres.



There is a saying that one should be born in Suzhou, live in Hangzhou, eat in Guangzhou, marry in Suzhou, die in Liuzhou. Suzhou is famous for its fair-skinned, soft-voiced women, Hangzhou for its beauty (as we shall be seeing), Guangzhou for its Cantonese food, and Liuzhou for its coffins made from *nanmu* wood, which preserve the body from decaying. Mabel tells us that one should express one’s appreciation of the beauty of Suzhou girls thus: ‘Ah-ya-ya-YAAAA!’ ‘Suzhou girls fighting sound like Shanghai girls having a quiet conversation,’ Mabel tells us. She is from Suzhou and yes, she has pleasant features but she is not very fair-skinned and is not very soft-voiced. On the bus, she keeps a relentless commentary in accented Cantonese over a loud PA system, pausing for breath with ‘ah...numma...’, a



common mannerism of Mandarin speakers, then continuing with stories of her poor childhood, her brothers' underpants made from rice sacks, but now she lives according to Western values not traditional ones. A true Gen Y girl, she spends up what she has, not saving it for the future. But unlike a true Gen Y girl, she spends a lot of her money on presents for her parents, like taking them to Hong Kong for a visit. Although I learn this in translation, I find her rapid fire continuous spiel quite physically exhausting. I wonder if this is a standard script. Do the other guides tell how they as children wore rice sacks?

Another Suzhou guide, Xiao Chu, takes us to Cold Mountain Temple where she tells us the story on the monument:

The Poet is sad, he visits Cold Mountain Temple. It is a moonless night, the crows are weeping; the maple trees along the river and the lights from the fishing boats face each other in sadness. In this lonely Temple outside Goussou, the midnight bell sounds all the way to the boat along the dark river.



But then she gives us the hard sell, taking us to factory outlets for silk doonas, pearls and double-embroidered silk pictures. The Suzhou region is famous for freshwater pearls, pink, black and purple. At the pearl factory, Catherine whispers to me that she likes black pearls: alas, a salesman overhears and swift as a piranha latches onto her, but nags so relentlessly through clamped teeth it puts her right off. No sale.

At a silk factory, we are shown how single cocoons are spun onto reels of silk. When the worms are engaged in coition, their threads not unnaturally intertwine, which makes them ideal for making silk doonas, under which humans may later intertwine their threads. A woman shows us how she opens a web, taking out the worms, then forcing the fine silken web onto increasingly large u-shaped frames, forming a fine silk bag. The bag is given to four girls, who each take a corner and gently tug until the bag is tissue thin and bed sized. They then do several more and put them together until there is enough for a doona: about 10,000 silkworms per doona, or rather 5,000 copulating worm couples. We buy a doona comprising twenty thousand silkworms for ¥550 (about \$90) each, or 11c. per couple. We are told the silk threads are hollow: in



summer the air inside expands, making the doona light and cool while in winter the threads contract, making the doona dense and warm. Later, we find it is light yet warm, adequate for a Tasmanian spring, but no, it needs an extra blanket to work for a Tasmanian winter. Afterwards, we are treated to a fashion parade of silk dresses and *cheong saams*, modelled by tall, beautiful models.

An embroidery factory shows us what may be done with coloured silk threads and an obsession with detail: double-sided embroidery, the most sophisticated having different pictures on each side of the black silk background. Some pictures were photo-like in their realism, some detail requiring the thread to be divided into fortieths. There are only five silk masters, 50 teachers and 500 students in the whole of China and they all work here. They start at age 14 and retire to become teachers at 45, their poor overstrained eyes giving out on them. The elaborate embroideries are very expensive, some taking an artistyears to produce. Unfortunately, photos aren't allowed so I cheat with a cheap one we have at home.



Mabel gives us a tourist pamphlet about the city of Wuzhen, which tells us:

over quiet nights, lover heard each other fiery speech lightly, thinness vocable, in mid-lake spa shipboard coming and out frog autumn and insect low singing....brimming tick-tock raindrop as ding-dong string. At the bazaar of early morning the gurgitation of hawk is continuous as a civic happy symphony...

We arrive well after the hawk has stopped gurgitating but we do ride mid-lake spa shipboard, propelled by an old man. He, like the Venetian rowers, stands facing forward, but unlike them he uses a fish-oar at the stern, twisting it from side to side, moving us gracefully forward. Wuzhen is built around canals, but the obverse of Venice: here water was placed on land, in Venice land was placed on water. Wuzhen is only inhabited now by old people, the young having gone to the factories in Suzhou. The city survives on tourism and as a film set for Chinese movies: *Raise the Red Lantern* was shot here. We have lunch in an ancient restaurant: local dishes comprising lots of vegetables, prawns, steamed fish that tastes of bottom-of-the-canal mud, and slow cooked pork, very tender and tasty.



## Hangzhou

Hangzhou, once the capital of China, is different from the other places in that it is just short of heritage listed, and the environmental havoc wreaked elsewhere hasn't taken place here. Marco Polo called it Kinsay, 'beyond disputethe finest and noblest city in the world. Even though that was nearly 700 years ago, it's still pretty good. Tourism and green tea (China's top quality tea) are the main industries. The streets are wide and clean, the side of the city bordering the lake lined with five star hotels. Hong Kong's richest have houses here.



Lingyin Temple, which means 'heart of the soul's retreat', is one of the largest in China. It lives up to its name: the feeling of awe is enhanced as we arrive during a service, with a hundred or so yellow robed monks chanting to drum and bell. The main temple is huge, fronted like the Italian basilica with a 'baptistry'. At the rear, clambering up the steep hill, are further temples: the

repository for ancient scrolls and documents, and the temple for spiritual health. No photography is allowed, which here we adhere to, unlike in the Sistine Chapel. Perhaps the sense of the ineffable was stronger here.

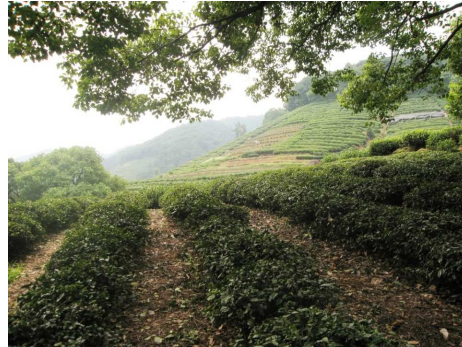


That night, we see a sensational pageant in an elaborate theme park: *The Story of the Sung Dynasty*. We are tired and nearly don't go, but we are very glad we do. It is a high tech performance of stories, dances, pageants with moving stages, waterfalls inside the theatre, laser beams, stunning acrobats and dancers. Circus Oz and even Cirque de Soleil are penny-pinched amateur productions by comparison. After, to make up for a missed meal, we are treated to another dinner, which nobody wants. But at least we are able to swap the mandatory bottle of Pepsi for another two of 3% beer – weak but palatable, and highly desirable at this time of night.



We say goodbye to Mabel here; she is off with the other two groups. Thanks to Catherine's firm eloquence, we are provided with another guide in the morning who takes us on the celebrated boat ride on West Lake, but to a Tasmanian, used to Tasmanian scenery, this is a minor excitement. What would Marco Polo have said of Tasmanian scenery?

We are taken to the village of Mui Wu where Lungzhen (Dragon Well) tea is made: one of the most expensive and prized in China. After a tasting, and a long lecture, the speaker, a nice, softly spoken girl, gives us a demonstration of how to pack tea in canisters. She packs three canisters – and hands them to us for us to buy. We haven't said we would buy even one and haven't been asked. But this nice, soft-spoken young girl is an old pro at the hard sell. She knows it's harder to refuse when it's there in front of you. So we buy one, expensive at \$50 AUD. Ah well, it's



supposed to be good for Alzheimer's, the liver, blood pressure, sleep ...all risk zones as far as I'm concerned, and we'll never get this quality of tea in Australia. But when we try it back home it doesn't have the strong aroma of mung bean nor does it taste as we remembered it; it's just like any other green tea. It could be a case of what happens with wine: we'd bought a bottle at the local vineyard at Vinci (see *Cruising the Mediterranean*) but on opening it in Hong Kong, we'd found it thin and sharp, nothing like what we had remembered. Maybe green tea, like wine, tastes better untravelled, drunk within sight of where it grew. But I doubt it: I think the girl at Mui Wu had done the dirty on us with some sleight of hand.

We completed our tour of Hangzhou in a 'Thai' restaurant that served ordinary Chinese dishes with a chilli added. With the meal came that standard one bottle of Pepsi and two bottles of beer, however many diners at the table. As none of us drunk Pepsi, Jonathon changed it for two more bottles of beer. That was a move that cost me dearly. A septuagenarian drinking a lot of beer just before taking a long bus trip is courting trouble. I'm taken short soon after leaving. Via Jonathon I ask the driver to stop at the first opportunity. 'Five minutes,' he grins. But five minutes turns to thirty minutes – try to find a loo on a crowded Chinese tollway – before a village of filling stations appears. I discard a plastic bag away within seconds of putting it to embarrassing use.

There's a bullet train from Shanghai to Pudong airport that covers the distance of 32 km in 7 minutes, reaching a speed 480 kph. We decide – yes! – we'd love to take the bullet train. Apart from the huge thrill, it would save a lot of time. Unfortunately, Shanghai's gridlock means it would take too long to get to the city to the rail station, so in the end we stay in our bus to reach the airport, the 200 km trip from Hangzhou taking three hours.



'Come back to Hangzhou in 2008,' our driver says cheerfully, 'there'll be a train to from Hangzhou to the airport that will take only 30 mins.'

Well, maybe.

### China Then and Now

This China is in many ways a huge contrast with the Chinas we visited in 1990 and 1995, but then again maybe not. That was rural China, Yunnan and the pre-dammed Yangtse, whereas this trip is mostly urban China, so of course there are differences.

But urban or rural, public toilets, hotels, and especially the bathrooms, were then, ten years previously, uniformly awful. Today's urban toilets are scarce but acceptable, and unlike Europe, most are free. And the hotels this trip are five star. As we arrive at our Shanghai hotel, we are most impressed with our greeting ceremony. As we step down from our bus, the staff line up and march past bearing a flag. Straightening our backs and trying to look important, we find it is not us after all, but some visiting dignitary. Oh well.

These new hotels have what seem to us to be some have bizarre copy-cat-gone-wrong aspects. All served buffet breakfasts comprising, in random order, traditional Chinese, western with cereals, full American breakfast, but some meat and veg dishes that would best be served for lunch or dinner. Is it ethnocentric of me to lay down the breakfast rules? In our

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Suzhou hotel, a Buick is parked in the football-field sized foyer. Our room is also enormous, with a huge glass desk that greatly over-anticipates any reasonable needs for passing office space. On the other hand, dinners at this and other hotels are very good regional Chinese, with music to match.



In our Hangzhou bedroom, beside the bed is a see-through window to the bathroom. You can watch your loved one on the toilet! Not only that, but an automatic light in the hallway switches on in the middle of the night as your loved one makes his/her way to the toilet to ensure you are awake to watch your lover do whatever it is she/he is doing. We in the West have a lot of catching up to do.

But now let us take our last meal in Hangzhou. The first table we sit at is next to a group who are smoking. We ask the waitress if we could move to the next table. She says she'll have to ask the manager. 'No,' he ordains, 'it is not possible.' But when our guide speaks to the manager, he re-ordains, 'Yes, it is possible.' We move to the next table, away from the smokers. While the three of us eat, our guide stands by the table. It is embarrassing. We ask him to sit down with us.

'No,' he says, 'I have to eat with the driver.'

'Well then, ask him here to eat with us.'

'No, it is against company regulations.'

But he continues standing beside our table.

'Don't wait for us,' Jonathon assures him.

'I have to,' he says. 'I can only move away when they have served three of the main dishes. It is company regulations.'

Private enterprise may have replaced state-run business in modern China but the bureaucracy is constant.

