

三十七

Our leisurely train went
northeast to Shanghai
the Bund was amazing
we all wondered why
in the middle of China
the majestic Huangpu
mirrored art deco skylines
split Shanghai in two



Chapter 37 – Shanghai - Empire of the Sun

One of my favorite Stephen Spielberg movies is “Empire of the Sun.” I loved seeing young Christian Bale playing the role of Jamie (J. G. Ballard), the author of the book with the same name as the movie. I also marvel at the access Spielberg had to Shanghai as it was transitioning from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution to the boom of the 1990s. The opening shots of the film were straight from J.G. Ballard’s novel:

“Every night in Shanghai those Chinese too poor to pay for the burial of their relatives would launch the bodies from the funeral piers at Nantao, decking the coffins with paper flowers. Carried away on the tide, they came back on the next, returning to the waterfront of Shanghai with all the other debris abandoned by the city. Meadows of paper flowers drifted on running tide and clumped in miniature floating gardens around the old men and women, the young mothers and small children, whose swollen bodies seemed to have been fed during the night by the patient Yangtze.”



With its current population around 30 million (nearly 3 times that of New York City,) Shanghai is certainly one of the most populous cities in the world. Although Shanghai displays some of the world’s most modern architectural structures, it has also preserved one

of the richest collections of art deco architecture of any city in the world. The Bund (外滩 Wàitān) remains the image which comes to the minds of many Westerners when they hear the name, Shanghai. The word, “bund”, is a hybrid Persian, Hindi, English, and German word with the original meaning “embankment.” The traditional Bund is a mile-long stretch along the river in Puxi. “Pu” is short for “Huangpu” (黄浦江 Huángpǔ Jiāng), the river which divides Shanghai into Pǔxī 浦西 (west of the Huangpu) and 浦东 Pǔdōng (east of the Huangpu). Huangpu was also known as “Whampoa.” Along the two sides of the Huangpu now stand

- the 128 story, energy efficient, typhoon resistant Shanghai Tower (上海中心大厦) opened in 2017,
- the 101 story Shanghai World Financial Center (上海环球金融中心) in 2008,
- the hybrid modern/art deco 88 story Jin Mao Tower(金茂大厦) in 1999,
alongside iconic buildings from nearly a century ago
- the 10 story Fairmont Peace Hotel (上海费尔蒙和平酒店) built in 1926,
- the 17 story Bank of China Building (中国银行大厦) in 1937,
- and the iconic Cathay Theatre (国泰电影院) in 1932.

Shanghai is definitely worth visiting for its architecture alone.

The city of Shanghai is one of four Municipalities (直辖市 Zhíxíáshì) in China. The other three are Beijing, Tianjin, and Chongqing. A municipality in China operates in a similar way to the District of Columbia in the USA. Municipalities are not considered to be part of any province. Municipalities are under the direct administration of the Chinese central government.

In the 1920s, Shanghai was known as the “Paris of the Orient”, and was China’s most international city. There was opulence sitting next door to abject poverty. 周璇 Zhōu Xuán’s “golden voice” enabled her to hit the highest pitched melodies effortlessly. Whitey Smith’s Jazz Band taught the Chinese how to Swing Dance at the Majestic Hotel, the Paramount, and the Fairmont. Big Eared Du

(杜月生 Dù Yuèshēng)'s Green Gang controlled the lucrative opium and heroin trade. The latest Hollywood films showed at the Cathay Theater, and flappers wore the same outfits and hairstyles as their counterparts did in New York, London, and Tokyo.

Shanghai was also a city of politics. The first congress of the Communist Party was held in Shanghai in July 1921. Its formal name, 中國共產黨 Zhōngguó Gòngchǎn Dǎng was also established at that time. Just two years prior to that, the May 4th movement (五四运动 Wǔsì Yùndòng) had erupted in Beijing partially due to the granting of European concessions to the Japanese in Shanghai and partly to protest against the 21 demands made by the Japanese directed at China. In 1927, a youthful Chiang Kai-Shek, recognizing the imminent threat of the Communists to his Guomintang (KMT) Party, conducted what became known as the Shanghai Massacre, when he sent in his troops and conscripts from the infamous Green Gang to purge nearly 12,000 Communists from Shanghai and nearby areas. By 1934, the Communists were pretty much gone from Shanghai, with most following Mao on the Long March.

A classic 1920's mansion, Shanghai's Jinjiang Hotel (锦江大酒店), formerly the Cathay Mansion, was the site of the historic 1972 meeting between US President Richard Nixon, and Premier Zhou Enlai where the Joint Communiqué of the USA and the PRC aka the Shanghai Communiqué, reopened the relationship between the US and China.

Before the Treaty of Nanking (Nanjing) in 1842, both Shanghai and Hong Kong were fishing ports with largely undeveloped harbors. That all changed when China was defeated by Great Britain in what became known as the 1st Opium War. In the "unequal" treaty which followed, China was forced to open up five new treaty ports and foreigners were no longer limited to trading with the Chinese Co-Hongs in Guangzhou. The treaty ports which were opened included Guangzhou, Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo, and Shanghai. Hong Kong Island was also ceded to Great Britain "in perpetuity." Subsequent to the Treaty of 1842, an "extraterritoriality" addendum was added in 1843 where "extraterritorial rights" were conceded to certain foreign powers. Under these treaties the nationals of the treaty powers residing in China were not subject to Chinese law, but remained under the protection of their own national laws, administered in China by their own national officials." Also the 1844 Treaty of Wangxia became the first formal treaty signed between the U.S. and China and it replicated many of the key terms of the Treaty of Nanjing - including the right to extraterritoriality.

There has always been a friendly rivalry between Shanghai and Hong Kong. Both cities are worldly, wealthy, and cosmopolitan. The population of Hong Kong is about 7.4 million and that of Shanghai is more than three times that many. In terms of transportation, Hong Kong is much easier to navigate than Shanghai. For people who are not able to communicate in Chinese, Hong Kong is by far

the easier place to live. Services of all kinds and signage are easily accessible in English and Chinese all over Hong Kong. That is not to say that all Hong Kong people speak English. Actually the second “language” in Hong Kong now is “Putonghua.” The first is Cantonese. That said, it’s much easier for an English speaker to get around in Hong Kong than it is in Shanghai.

If I were a young, single American trying to decide which of these two cities to live in for the next 10 years, I’d probably go with Shanghai. It would put more pressure on me to learn Chinese. It’s not as comfortable or as easy as Hong Kong, but in many ways, it’s edgier. Even though there seems to be video surveillance everywhere, and there’s not a lot of due-process if you are accused of breaking the law, exciting things are happening, and I think there may be more opportunities for someone who is not averse to risk.

That said, Hong Kong has been interacting with foreigners for much of its history. It was a British colony for 150 years. Hong Kong has more easily accessible western style medical care. There are hiking trails latticing Hong Kong, Kowloon, and the New Territories, and biking paths are on the increase, and there even nice beaches and public parks which are accessible by public transportation. The internet and media are much more open in Hong Kong than they are in Shanghai. Education, banking, and business are more accessible. Although, Hong Kong’s bureaucracy can be frustrating, for the most part, laws are codified and officials are willing to accept responsibility for decisions they make.

Covid in 2021-22 was a disaster in Shanghai. China’s domestic economy is struggling right now, and the one-child policy is biting China in its nether regions. Talk about a “sandwich generation,” it is not uncommon for a young married couple to be the sole support of both the husband’s and wife’s parents (and sometimes grandparents) in addition to their own children. Couples are being encouraged to have two or more children, but many young people in China who plan to marry are opting to marry later and some are choosing not to have kids at all.

I am very optimistic that China will recover from its current slump and I believe that Xi and the current U.S. President have the potential of setting a positive course for the relations between our two countries. The USA and China are physically almost exactly the same size, but China has over four times the population as the US with about ½ of our arable land. In addition, prior to 1978, China was one of the poorest countries in the world. In the four decades that followed it has become the 2nd largest economy in the world. China needs the US. The US needs China. And they both need Taiwan.