



HOME FROM SHANGHAI

JAMES OTTAVIO CASTAGNERA

Shanghai is the only city I know of that is also a verb in the English language. The city and the verb have an intimate historical connection. To shanghai a sailor was to snatch him from a waterfront tavern or back alley and forcibly add him to the crew of a clipper ship in America's nineteenth-century China trade. If the vessel hailed from an East Coast port, the voyage could take months, either around the blustery bottom of South America or else via the longer but less-hazardous route eastward across the South Atlantic and Indian Oceans.

Last October, four colleagues and I made the trip from Newark to Shanghai in less than 24 hours. Our hosts in that city of 17 million were the founders of Shanghai's first private university. Sanda University—hardly more than a half dozen years old and already boasting 6,000 students on a 350-acre campus—is emblematic of its hometown. These proud academics were at pains to point out a sweeping city skyline featuring as its centerpiece a steel-and-glass spire 15 feet higher than were the World Trade Center towers.

Later in the week, we toured a General Motors plant that is even newer than Sanda's campus and that, we were told, was sending 210,000 Buicks from its robotic assembly lines into Shanghai's already-crowded, air-polluted streets in 2003. Leaded-gas fumes and concrete dust from myriad construction sites conspired to give me the kind of cough that was a source of pride in American manufacturing towns like Cleveland in clipper-ship times.

Mid-week, I watched the Chinese version of late-night TV from my hotel suite: American movies with Chinese subtitles. One film was *The Adventures of Marco Polo* (1938), starring Gary Cooper. There I sat, in the center of a city of 17 million Chinese, watching Caucasian Hollywood starlets,

their eyes tugged up at the corners by the studio's makeup department, posing as Kublai Khan's courtesans. The surrealism of the scene would have satisfied Dali.

Still jet-lagged, my shanghai'd mind pondered the juxtaposition of Chinese reality and the China of America's imagination. For two centuries, ours has been a love-hate relationship. In 1894, some 2,000 Christian missionaries claimed 800,000 Chinese converts. Six years later, the Boxers, like rabid wolves, slaughtered a substantial percentage of those Western shepherds and their Asian flocks, while laying siege to the foreign legations in Beijing.

At mid-century, General "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell led America's alliance with Chiang Kai-shek against the Japanese, only to have Douglas MacArthur provoke two million Chinese infantry into confronting the sons of Stilwell's GIs in Korea some six years later.

Succumbing to sleep, I recalled reading that Kublai's thirteenth-century court considered itself the center of the civilized world. I also recalled the recent Chinese space shot...1.1 billion people with ballistic missiles. I felt myself to be at the center of the twenty-first century's second superpower.

As I dozed off, I said a little prayer to whichever god might be concerned with Sino-American relations: "Help us—at long last—to understand and work with one another." ☞

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