

Shanghaied: Day 1, Part 2

My cabin companion also said that it would be hot. I headed down the steps of the 747 and the full blast of Shanghai's summer swelter hit me right in the face. At first I thought it was just the heat radiating off the engines, but it seemed to get even hotter as I padded across the tarmac to the awaiting shuttle bus. It was a full-frontal assault, like opening up the oven when you've left the broiler on a bit too long. Two other things struck me as I approached the bus. First, was the extent of the smog, which seemingly reduced visibility to much less than a mile. Buildings on the far side of the runway were sheathed in an gauzy haze, almost mirage-like on what was effectively the horizon. I knew Shanghai had some of the worst pollution in Asia, but it was alarming to see, smell, taste and feel it all the same, crusting over my face within minutes like a second, unwanted skin.

My second realisation was much more positive, despite its rather humble inspiration. As my eyes scanned the scrubby ground that bordered the runway, they fastened upon the weeds growing there haphazardly, as runway weeds do. Now, I know what you're thinking - what could be interesting about an airport weed? Every airport has them, and most airport manager no doubt spends a fruitless fortune on chemicals to eradicate them. But these weeds were different. They were *Chinese* weeds, weeds I had never seen before, and unquestionably exotic in their shape, their colour, the delicate way they reminded me of a pagoda perched on the edge of a lotus-covered lake. I'm sure that, to most Chinese gardeners, such weeds were a ubiquitous nuisance, best blasted to smithereens by DDT, but to me, they were the first indication that I was somewhere I had never been before, that I had, in fact, made it to Shanghai.

I collected my luggage and had one last piece of luck, as the Chinese custom officials waved me through, leaving the bottle of Glengoyne in my luggage unnoticed, unopened and untaxed. I went out into arrivals to be met by my student assistant, a girl named Qiao. Qiao's name nicely illustrates some of the frustrations faced by linguistically-challenged anglophones when grappling with a language like Mandarin and, indeed, many other languages. Now, I know English is no picnic. Every rule has at least one or two exceptions, the vocabulary is extravagantly verbose and there are countless dialects and accents that can flummox those of even the keenest ears - I did mention I lived in Glasgow, right? But that doesn't mean other languages have to be equally opaque.

What really gets my goat is simple pronunciation, something that causes me embarrassment in Scotland on nearly a daily basis. In Scotland, the challenge is place names. I, for example, in a place called Milngavie. If you're not on a crowded bus or other overly public space, I challenge you to say the name of my village out loud. Done? Well, you're wrong. It's not pronounced Mil-n-ga-vie at all, it's actually M'I-guy (some pronounce it Mullguy, the lovely disembodied voice on Scotrail trains pronounces it Millguy, but most avoid that first vowel altogether). Now, I admit, that's an extreme example, but if you're in doubt, give Kingussie, North Berwick, heck, give Edinburgh a try. If you're not from these isles, I doubt you'll get them all correct. Even the stress you put on multisyllabic place names can generate blank, unknowing stares in even the most sympathetic Scots. I was chatting with my next-door neighbour a while back and mentioned taking my son on a bike ride to Lochwinnoch. Although I thought I had done a fairly good job with both of the 'ochs', I still got a furrowed brow in reply.

"Where?" he said.

"*Lochwinnoch*," I replied, rather confused.

"Hmm. Where's that?"

I started to explain when my neighbour slapped his knee and exclaimed, "Ah! You mean *Lochwinnoch*!"

You can probably grasp my frustration. I've also struggled with Allan, my neighbour, over *Loch Katrine*, *Ben Venue* and a number of others. In fact, I probably have some of those mixed up. Och aye.

Mandarin, of course, has its own alphabet, but somebody at some point had decided to transcribe the characters into words using the Roman alphabet. But for some reason, they decided to get all clever with how these letters were pronounced. The fellow who had invited me, for example, is Zhang, but you don't pronounce his name Zang. Instead, it's pronounced more like Jong, tantalisingly close to John, in fact. So, all Zh's are actually more of a J sound, despite the fact that J's are also used quite a bit, too. X's, which are everywhere, are pronounced sh, more or less. As for Qiao, her name was pronounced

Chow, or, in fact, like the Italian, Ciao, which in itself indicates how bloody frustrating languages are. Those folks in Babel have a hell of a lot to answer for, if you ask me.

Although I hadn't even mastered the Mandarin versions of yes, no, please, thank you or anything else, I had figured out that Qiao was not pronounced Kee-oh or Ki-ay-oh, or something else, but in fact Italian for see you later. This seemed to impress her a great deal as she met me at arrivals holding a sign with my name on it, which gave me a cheap thrill in turn. Qiao was there with a friend and after some embarrassing smiling and giggling we headed out to the taxi rank. Amusingly, but also tellingly as I would discover, Qiao offered to take my luggage, despite the fact that my suitcase was loaded down with bottles of whisky and two weeks worth of clothing, and that I probably weighed more than Qiao and her friend put together. I demurred and proceeded to ignore the cab door she opened for me as well. I could've blamed the jet lag, I suppose, but then again, people don't tend to open doors for me very often.

The taxi ride to Shanghai University, located on the opposite side of the city as Pudong Airport was long and hot, but also interesting. Qiao's spoken English, it appeared, was not miles better than my Mandarin, a bit of a surprise for me, since her emails were relatively comprehensible. After a few awkward attempts to communicate about the weather, the flight and the political situation in Xinjiang province, I contented myself gazing out the window at Shanghai. There was certainly plenty to see. The flat expanse of southeast Shanghai was cluttered, as most of it is, with a riotous profusion of buildings interspersed by an infinite number of cranes, seemingly intent on cramming more buildings into whatever empty spaces were left. I had read somewhere that more than half of the world's cranes were in Shanghai, and on first blush that mad calculation appeared not far from the truth.

As far as the buildings themselves, they were a mix of high rise apartments festooned with laundry, glittering shopping centres and gritty little retail shops and restaurants. For buildings that had likely been built fairly recently, many appeared fairly shabby and run down. I figured the laundry hanging out of the windows contributed a good deal to this impression, but on closer inspection, there was a good deal of wear and tear. Paint faded here, wires exposed there, water damage and cracked foundations, these places certainly seemed lived in. Or just poorly constructed in the first place. Even stranger were large

complexes that had either been left unfinished or had been abandoned altogether. Maybe space wasn't at a premium here after all.

After about an hour or so of fairly clear motorway travelling, we took a tunnel under the River Huangpu River and exited onto a more local road. Shanghai appeared even more haphazard from ground level. Tiny little shops selling door knobs or clothes pegs were situated right beside flashy clothing boutiques or car dealerships. Out in front on the pavement were hawkers selling street food and tarps laid out on the floor marketing everything from vegetables to USB drives. On the street were plenty of grubby cabs, like the one I was in, but also expensive SUVs, buses, coaches, dump trucks, ancient mopeds, and ramshackle trucks and bicycles loaded up to the gills with foam from sofas, scrap metal or bits of wood, moving glacially along.

Eventually, we made a left turn and Qiao informed me that we were nearing Shanghai University. It didn't look much like a university neighbourhood on first glance. Shops and restaurants that one of my American colleagues would describe as "scuzzy" littered road, and a plethora of grim traffic moseyed along Jinqiu Road. After making another left turn, however, we entered the campus proper through the North Gate. Although the South Gate was the official entrance to the University, the North Gate was five yards from the metro line and, as such, was the primary entry point for most. A slight, white-helmeted security guard waved us through and, all of the sudden, I was somewhere else: a modern, leafy university campus scattered with students.

After thirty seconds, the cab pulled up in front of the Lehu Hotel, an impressive building that was fronted by a pleasant - and fairly natural-looking - little river. The river was lined by elegant willows on its banks and birds about the size of thrushes chased each other through the tall rushes. A footbridge spanned the water, leading to what looked like another green space. Seeing that the only green thing I had seen since leaving the plane had been those weeds, it looked quite promising, actually.