

Shanghaied Day 2 Part 1

Day 2 almost started way, way, way too early. Just as the cock crowed twelve, my eyes sprung open as if they were spring-loaded and for a few minutes, it seemed as if I was going to really struggle to lull myself back to sleep. You know how it is when you're travelling across multiple time zones. You pick the right flights, sleep a bit on the plane, don't drink too much, attempt to trick yourself that night is night and, regardless, your body says, "Screw that! It's wakey-wakey time!"

Thank heavens to Betsy, I managed to knock myself out again. I think the thought of enduring late-night Chinese TV for 6 hours did the trick. When the alarm bells of my body clock rang again at 4am, however, I was screwed, mainly because I hadn't drawn the blinds and it was as light as day in my room. I checked my watch again, then compared it to the room clock. Yup, 4am. And yet it was light. What the hell? I cast my mind back to the night before. Sunset seemed to be at about 6:30 or maybe 7pm, which had prompted some fireworks, if I hadn't dreamt them. This seemed pretty early for mid-June, even at a latitude that was relatively close to the equator - at least by Scottish standards. It didn't make sense. Surely, they could push the clocks forward 2 or 3 hours and establish a more civilised sunset and sunrise. What were they thinking? China was weird already.

I dragged myself out of bed and had a look out the window. The sun was not the only thing that was out; the street out in front of the hotel was busy with honking cars, trucks and motorcycles, and people of all ages were strolling down the sidewalk. Maybe they all forgot to close their blinds, too. I furrowed my brows as deeply as they could go and made a profound mental note to myself. I swept the gold faux-silk blinds closed with a curse and plopped onto my bed and stared at the ceiling for 90 minutes.

At 5:30, it was still light. Sadly. I opened the window and had a gander down to the street. A furnace blast sent me scuttling me back into the air conditioning, shutting the window behind me. It may have been 5:30 in the morning, but it was goddamn hot. And it would only get hotter. I decided to go for a walk.

The sliding glass doors of the New Lehu spread open wide and I tiptoed down the steps and into the University of Shanghai. What can I say -it was buzzing. Yes, at 5:30 in the bloody am. No wonder they're taking over, I thought, they simply get going earlier. By the time I got down the four steps that separated the hotel entrance from the road, I was

already glowing. I realised that if I were ever to write up this trip as a travelogue, I would really have to get creative when it came to synonyms for sweat, not to mention simply get used to it for a couple of weeks. I crossed the road and walked onto a small, ornate footbridge that spanned a verdant algae-covered river. Despite the green coating, the current was fairly quick and the same birds I'd seen the day before flitted back and forth, from one bullrush to another. Fifty yards down an ugly grey pipe was belching some kind of exhaust into the air in metronomic time. It kind of ruined the scene, but I figured the pipe had something to do with air conditioning, I forgave it. Damn, it was hot.

I lumbered over to the main drag, the ring road that circumnavigated campus. Dozens of people, mainly middle-aged or older, were perambulating, probably getting their daily constitutional over with before they spontaneously combusted. Within minutes a couple in their seventies passed me, which didn't make me feel particularly fit. I soon approached a running track bathed in bright sunshine, where even more people were exercising. One guy was walking backwards. Another clapped his hand vigorously and shouted something every ten steps or so. A woman, dressed in polyester slacks, a long-sleeved white blouse and slippers jogged along at an even slower pace than I was managing, her face blithe to the heat or her lack of progress. Another elderly lady, clearly cut of some other kind of cloth, grunted out a few chin-ups on a rusty old framework.

On the other side of the track I heard some music that sounded like a cross between Billy Ray Cyrus (would that be Miley's dad? He must be so proud) and the sound track to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Sure enough, a group of ladies, including some women about my age, were doing what looked to be a mashup of country line dancing and tai chi. I wondered if Ang Le had ever bumped into the man behind *Achy-Breaky Heart* at some Hollywood dry cleaners.

Not all of the senior citizens I saw, however, were up at 6am to get jiggy with it, Chinese style. In roughly similar numbers to the dancers, chin-uppers, and backwards-walkers were dozens of elderly gardeners, toiling under the sun with secateurs, spades and these brooms that were actually just branches with a particularly brush-like clump of twigs at the end (they did seem quite effective, in fact). Dressed in loose-fitting garments in pastel colours and wearing conical hats that looked as if they were more suited to a rice paddy somewhere, these gnarled old gardeners worked tirelessly clipping, digging and sweeping, pausing briefly to stare at the sweaty Westerner plodding by. It occurred to me that I did

the kind of work they did fifteen years ago, and not in this kind of heat. I wondered how much they got paid.

They certainly had contributed to a pretty campus, in its own way. I found out later that the site, to which the University had moved to about twenty years ago, used to be a dump, helping to explain why some of the trees seemed to struggle. Apart from this, there were beautiful gardens everywhere, and plenty of tempting ponds and lakes teeming with golden koi. Architecturally, all the buildings were white and marginally more attractive than most post-war university buildings I'd seen. Some looked a little worn for wear, as buildings painted white tend to be after a few years, but others were plainly impressive. The library, in particular, was a stunner. It stretched up at least ten stories high and curved into a pleasing arc, with bright red flowers gracing the daunting steps leading up to the front door. There was certainly a certain majesty to it, or perhaps simply showiness, but since it was a library, I get it the benefit of the doubt. I took a quick photo and made a mental note to send it to some librarian friends of mine; here was a place where libraries mattered. And that could never be a bad thing.

I strolled back to my hotel, spotting an nice shady spot to do some reading later. The blast of air conditioning as I entered the lobby was merciful, however it costed the earth. Feeling guilty all of a sudden, I smiled blandly at the clerks as they stared ahead, looking bored. Being on the 6th floor, I wondered whether I should take the stairs. Seeing that I was even too tired to look for them, let alone bounce up them, I inwardly shrugged and pressed the button for the lift.