

Shanghaied - Day 2, Part 2

Back at my room, the shower beckoned like a Shanghai lady of the night on Valentine's Day. I had noticed a plastic package containing a pair of shower slippers tucked under my end table, and bent down to pick them up. It was my first chance to get up close and personal with the carpet and, well, let's say it hadn't got cleaned up for the occasion. It wasn't completely disgusting, though I could have done without the hairs ground into the tight, close weave, but it wasn't recently vacuumed. I was suddenly grateful for the white shower slippers, and eagerly ripped them out of the plastic bag.

After my ablutions, I realised that I was hungry. It had just gone eight; time flew when you were moving in slow motion. Time for breakfast. I dressed in something slightly less heavy than a navy suit, and headed down on the lift, not bothering to look for the stairs. I had been instructed earlier by Qiao to ask for a breakfast token at reception and, obediently, I did so, holding it in my possession for a mere 17 seconds, before giving it to the hostess in the breakfast room, a ritual that would be repeated not only before every breakfast, but also at museums, parks, galleries - anywhere else where admission was granted. You could do much worse than to be the guy in China contracted to print out these ubiquitous, useless slips of paper.

But what did the ticket provide in terms of breakfast? That was the key question. My only previous experience with breakfast, Chinese-style, was dimsum, which was like Western brunch on steroids. I had the feeling it would be a bit different and, given how hungry I was all of the sudden, hoped it would be something I'd like. While there were a few disappointing aspects - the instant coffee (mixed with lukewarm water) was terrible and the Chinese version of porridge made me think of what Oliver Twist wanted more of - but overall, it was pretty darned good. Essentially, it was divided into two sections, set out on opposite ends of the dining room: truly Chinese breakfast, consisting of flat noodles, cabbage, boiled buns and salty peanuts, all topped up with four types of spicy salsa or chutney (the gruel was also part of it, but I only had it the once - terrible); and faux North American breakfast: extremely salty roasted eggs, cut in half vertically, quite tasty donut things, bland short bread-like biscuits, which would have you shot in Scotland, and some quite dodgy bacon, which I never tried. So, I stuck to mainly the Chinese section, with a couple of the donuts to trick me into looking forward to the coffee. Quite completely different from the flavours you'd associate with breakfast, but I liked it.

I had pretty much kept myself to myself at breakfast; I didn't know anyone just yet and require a wee bit of wind in my sails to strike up a conversation with a stranger at the best of times, let alone the day after a flight half-way across the world. So, I headed up to my room to find a book I had to review, and then ventured once again out into the heat. On my way back to the hotel before breakfast, I had spotted a shady spot in a wee garden which looked like a decent place to get some reading done. It was in the midst of some high-rise dormitories, the windows of which were all decorated with the weekend's washing. I lowered myself onto a concrete bench, which was sheltered by a bushy tree, and try to get into what wasn't the most inspiring of academic tomes.

After about a half hour or so, a young man came by and sat down on the bench kitty corner to mine. He was dressed in black jeans and a white tee-shirt and carried a khaki green backpack. For a while, he just sat there, looking dolefully into the distance and smoking a cigarette. I wasn't sure if he was waiting for someone or procrastinating about studying or what. After what seemed like ages, he finally picked up his backpack off the

ground, opened it up and took out a sketch pad. He held a pencil in his hand but didn't start sketching, just gazing out through the trees and then turning his eyes back towards the pad. Another cigarette was lit. I couldn't tell exactly - and he might not have been the best artist - but the face on the paper appeared to be that of a young man. Just then, the fellow turned to me as he exhaled a plume of smoke. I quickly turned back to my book, but it seemed as if my companion's thoughts were elsewhere. He stared again at the face on the page. I wondered what was going through his mind, and tried to keep mine on my book.

As much as the heat made concentrating on the book difficult, the incredibly uncomfortable bench quite literally spurred me into action, and after a couple of hours I managed to put the thing out of its misery - not exactly what I said in the review. It was nearly noon and my spicy breakfast was starting to wear off. I decided to go and look for some lunch. Without my campus card, I decided to dip into the wad of Maos that Wei had given me the previous day and head back outside the Western Gate and into the shopping area.

Without the dark-suit-sweats of the previous day, I had a better chance to look around. The shopping strip consisted of one street with another that joined it perpendicularly and then curved off in a parallel direction, kind of like an upside-down 'h'. This curvy bit also boasted restaurants on a second level, and looked promising for an evening meal. Eating establishments clearly dominated, but not many people appeared to be frequenting them at high noon, with the scorching sun beating down through the smog like a blacksmith's hammer. There were also a great number of hairdressers, along with phone stores, random electrical crap stores and a large produce market at the end of the street. I cautiously walked into the market and was blasted with the smell of a whole lot of different kinds of food starting to cook in the 35 degree heat. There were leafy vegetables of various descriptions, fruit that looked like sea creatures, sea critters that looked like fruit and a stand that had to have 20 different kinds of eggs. The odd person gazed up at me bemusedly, but for the most part people focussed on fanning themselves or chatting in a casually annoyed way with one another. I couldn't tell what they were saying, of course, but I imagined that they griped about the same things that the farmers at British farmers markets griped about: too much rain; too much sun; too hot; too cold; not enough customers; too many customers; the government - that sort of thing.

After leaving the market - if only I had been given self-catered accommodation - I felt a surge of hunger and headed straight into a little convenience store. I didn't feel quite up to the awkward social interactions that a restaurant meal would bring, so I opted for a can of iced coffee (tolerable), some cashew nuts and few sugary bits and bobs. Not the healthiest meal in the world, but it did the trick. I promised myself to try a restaurant for dinner, social awkwardness be damned, then headed back onto campus.