

**Link:**

A Western Perspective —  
Treading the short path in a  
changing China.  
Observation and Comment  
by Lowell Bennett

**Writer's Thoughts —**

*To me they're like two sisters. The older is elegant, cultured, proud, disciplined, reverent of her past and careful of her future. She is the backbone of the family. The younger is something of a recovering black sheep. In past times this sister was not to be spoken of in polite family conversation. She had her wild times, her disreputable dalliances. She got in trouble. At times it was all a bit too much for the older sister.*

*Times have changed. Now the wild one has settled, become more responsible. She's back in the family doing her part to make it whole and prosperous. Really, there was never any doubt that she would return to the fold. She always held a special place near the heart of her mother.*

*But, thankfully, great cities, like strong sisters, never completely discard their past. Beijing remains the more proper and more disciplined — very alluring in that more refined sort of way. As for Shanghai... well, Shanghai... she's just flat-out fascinating.*

# THE SCINTILLATING SISTER CITY, Shanghai



**A**fter an arduous traffic-impeded cab ride from the city's newer airport in the fast developing Pudong area, at about 7:00 p.m. I disembarked at the Ritz Carlton, best known in Shanghai as the Portman (or Port-tuh-Man depending upon descendency of speaker). I was promptly struck by two first impressions: This town was loaded down with vehicles and westerners.

Of course I was in a part of town particularly heavy with both. In the Nanjing Road West corridor, shoulder-to-shoulder are glitzy boutiques, glistening urban shopping malls, towering office buildings and high-priced hotels.

The Ritz Carlton Portman is one of the latter. Very up-market, it boasts rooms starting at about US\$225 a night and I wasn't staying there. I was booked at less illustrious accommodations in a less commerce-driven section of town. I first set foot on city pavement at the Port-tuh-Man due to my late arrival and scheduled meeting with an acquaintance whose very official office is located near that location.

Dr. Ira Kasoff, a graduate of Harvard who also holds a Ph.D. in East Asian Studies from Princeton, is Chief of the Commercial Section at the US Consulate General in Shanghai. His professional and personal history with China dates back more than 20 years. He speaks Mandarin like a native and has authored and collaborated on several books referencing the culture and business of China. As government point man for facilitating new US business concerns in this part of the world, he's sort of a big shot, probably a little smarter than me, and I otherwise must respectfully defer to him on all things Chinese.

His first directives were of the retroactive variety. "You should have flown into Hongqiao," the older airport closer to the center of town. I explained that due to office logistics and short notice, heading to the newer but more distant Pudong was my only option. "And you should have taken an earlier flight, avoided rush hour."

Actually, had my flight not been two hours late I would have avoided rush hour. But Ira is my senior and he does represent

the US Government. So, despite the built-up frustrations of the day, I thought it best not to rankle him with trivial justifications for my belated schedule.

Instead I stuck him with the dinner tab.

And his money was well spent. This, my first western meal since arriving China nearly two months prior, was accomplished near the Portman at Pasti, on Xikang Road, a small upscale Italian café, reasonably priced by western standards. The pasta, seafood misto and house Chianti were excellent. More important, from an observational perspective, despite there being only 15 seats in the place, it seemed like half of those were occupied by remarkably attractive stylish young women — both of the western and Chinese variety.

So within two hours Shanghai received high marks for both good food and attractive occupants.

Ira served with the US Commerce Department in Shanghai in the mid 80's, and returned as a private sector consultant the latter part of the decade. After a few years he again signed on with Commerce and over the next decade and a half he was assigned to varying posts around the globe. In 2004 he returned to Shanghai with his wife and now 11-year-old daughter. It was as if a new city had been plopped down to this corner of China.

"Things were still pretty tricky in the 80's," Ira explains. "The city had not yet begun to develop. Culturally it was somewhat insular. Doing business was not always an easy proposition and old, run-down buildings made up a good part of the area. But when I came back it was just amazing. Where once was a sort of ramshackle urban infrastructure with a somewhat insular international outlook, now there was a modern metropolis that had essentially thrown its doors open to the world."

As example he offers, "After returning, the first cultural event we attended was a performance by the Alvin Ailey Dancers, who were at the new Shanghai Grand Theatre. This was a world-class event, and it would not have been even remotely conceivable in the old days."

During dinner Ira went to his mobile



Shanghai Nights.  
by Zheng Xianzhang

Nanjing Road Pedestrian Street.  
by Zheng Xianzhang

trendy bars. Bicycle-bound local entrepreneurs contest for road space with their Mercedes-ensconced cousins. You can depart the generic interior of a Starbucks, cross the street and experience a gritty basement-housed live seafood bazaar — where for decades fish unknown to western palates have been chopped and prepped upon sale.

You can one moment be hiking down a hyperkinetic ultra modern commercial corridor, sidestep into a narrow pedestrian alley and 15 seconds later you are in another world. Insulated from the noise, congestion and booming commerce, the quiet neighborhood life of a residential back alley goes on

much like it probably has for a hundred years. Housewives dry their laundry outside, beat carpets and take more than a few breaks to gossip and laugh with neighbors. An intruding westerner does not warrant much attention. He is perhaps granted a smile, then ignored.

Back out on the main drag traffic is thick, but the streets upon which it eventually flows are modern, smooth and clean. Compared to most US cities, police presence is relatively light. And that works out fine, because by all counts this major metro area is extraordinarily civil.

On one point, however, a westerner

phone multiple times to check in on his daughter, who is “11 going on 16,” according to him. Ira’s wife was also out and his daughter was being minded by the nanny — an *Ayi* (auntie) in this part of the world. I got the impression that Ira may be a bit of a dotting dad.

I asked how it was, raising a family in a major Asian metropolis far from the States. “Fortunately, Shanghai is an extremely cosmopolitan environment. My wife loves it here and it’s a great experience for my daughter,” he said. “At an early age she is gaining tremendous exposure to the world, she’s picking up the (Mandarin) language, has a lot of friends and the city is very safe — if you watch out for the traffic. About the only complaint she has is that we won’t allow her to buy knock-off DVD’s.”

After dinner Ira happily returned to his family and, after a brief stop at the hotel, I continued out into this dynamic, complex and very expansive urban environment.

Shanghai is huge. The largest city in China, the geography spans 6,340 square kilometers (2,400 square miles) and accommodates a population of more than 13.5 million. That’s about eight times the size of New York (309 square miles), population of about 8 million. In two short days one can not even fantasize about skimming the surface of the landscape or culture. But on a single weekend you can get a feel for the immense transition that has occurred and the evolution that continues.

Massive new office buildings and booming commercial zones wrap around intimate and traditional pocket neighborhoods. Fashionable locals and well-heeled western expats are elbow-to-elbow in upscale cafés and

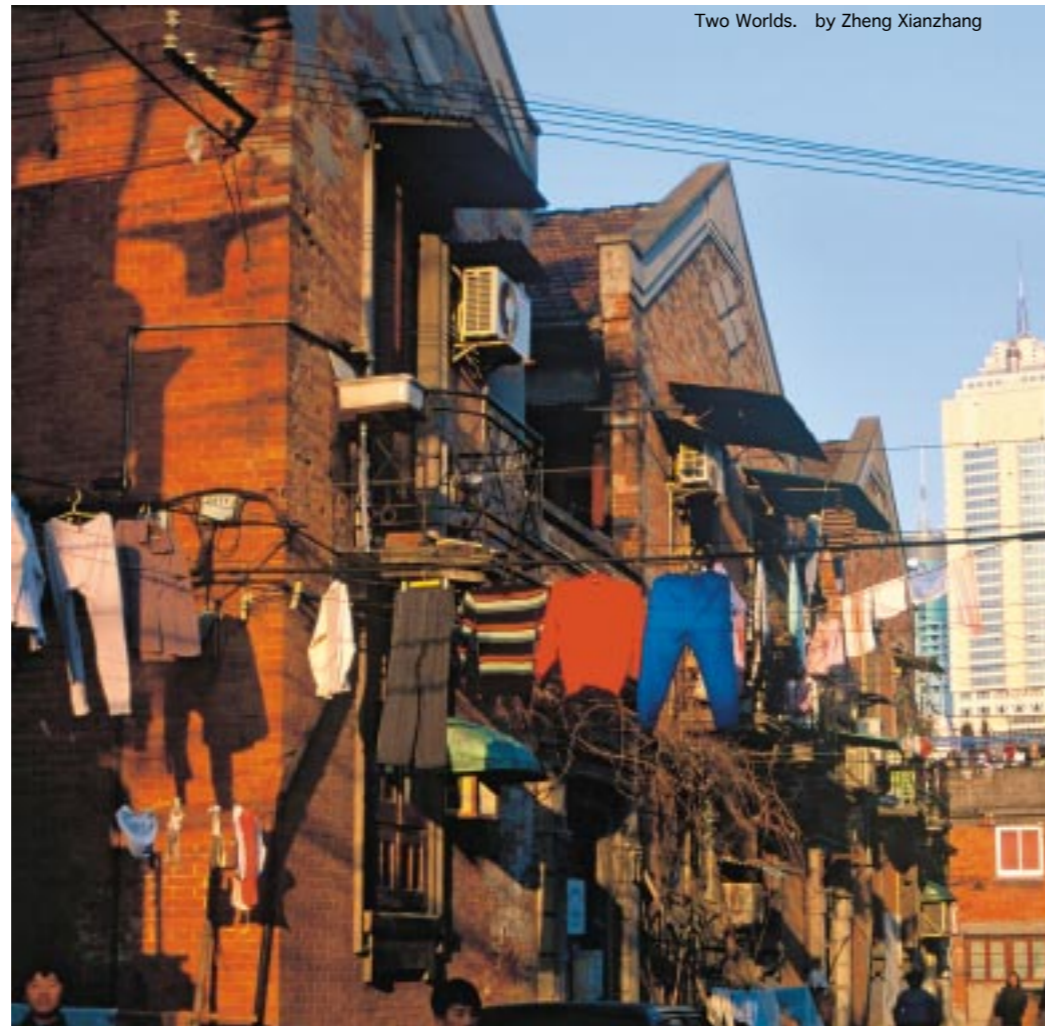
The fast-developing Pudong area. by Zheng Xianzhang



Upscale Streetside. by Lowell Bennett



Two Worlds. by Zheng Xianzhang



Commerce changed and unchanged. by Zheng Xianzhang

could be excused for misinterpreting a sometimes bothersome habit. The urban Chinese drivers love to hit their horns. In both Beijing and Shanghai the cacophony is nonstop. Unlike the west, where going to the horn is often tantamount to bellowing an insult, here it is all about caution — mostly. Mostly, because the onus of caution is not so much on the lane changer, but more on the driver whose lane is being changed into. Similarly, crosswalks are not necessarily considered pedestrian safe zones. Thus you get a lot of “be-careful-I’m-over-here” type staccato toots. Then there are the “look-the-bloody-hell-out” sustained blasts—most often used by fast moving drivers to discourage more assertive pedestrians.

On the other hand, westerners hiking the streets here will see signal of safe passage to the culinary habits of the west — coffee. In this nation of green tea drinkers, locating a dose of quality liquid caffeine is not always the easiest proposition. Not so in Shanghai. Fronting the wide sidewalks and boulevards, many independent cafés and shops offer the stuff and (like it or not) the Starbucks are expanding out from the downtown areas.

The first morning in town I picked up a

nicely strong café Americano at a little Bohemian place that also offered a free wireless hotspot for laptop-equipped patrons. The next morning I was closer to the hotel at an upscale bakery tea/coffee house. I had a try at their “House Deluxe,” which turned out to be a very well made frothy double espresso. Across from me sat a stylish woman, her pot of tea kept warm at the table. She worked intently at her late-model laptop. I may as well have been in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco — which officially happens to be Shanghai’s sister city (an arrangement seemed designed solely to supply taxpayer-funded China junkets to San Francisco mayors).

It was early Saturday evening the next day when I was exploring the boutique, café and club district on Dongping Road, a few blocks from my hotel in an area still quaintly referred to as the French Concession — a holdover from Shanghai’s western dalliances in colonial days past. Killing time waiting for the sun to fully drop, I happened by an English-style pub nicely housed in a well-restored brick building. This is the sort of place to which a cocktail-hour inclined westerner is drawn like Halliburton to oil.

And it was a good move. “Oscar’s,” just off Dongping at the corner of Fuxing Road and Baoqing, is an exceedingly civil and stylish establishment equipped with well-ensconced, well-read expats. Over the course of a couple of hours and a few Jack Daniels (no ice), I enjoyed a lively collective conversation with a fellow American, an Aussie, a Canadian and an Irishman, ages 30-ish to 62. These were smart gents and about as well informed on world affairs as any group I’ve come across. Making an exception for the stranger arrived at their corner of the bar, they dropped their usual prohibition on discussing world politics and we went at it.

Surprisingly, though the political leanings of this five-man cocktail summit included a range of ideologies (or lack thereof), on the subject of Sino-American dynamics, strategic maneuvering and the varying domestic and international merits of those respective governments, we were in complete agreement.

And here would seem a judicious point at which to bring this writing to a close. ■