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The Chinese Dream

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Iran va Jahan
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Bright lights and Big City Witness to the two faces of an Ancient Land and, The Chinese Dream

Armani, Gucci, YSL, Prada, Ralph Lauren, Hugo Boss, Chanel, Sky scrapers, nightclubs, bars, restaurants – No this is not Knightsbridge London, 5th Av N.Y., Paris or Rome. Believe it or not this is just one of the many cosmopolitan booming roads in Shanghai.

I recently returned from an awe-inspiring, eye-opening visit to this old and ancient land, which was the birthplace of China's Communist Party. In my naivety I had expected to be met by a severity of stern rigidity in a hardnosed grim and uninviting land, yet instead I encountered gestures of warmth and easy-going attitudes.

Barely a decade ago this once bashful and naked terrain started its transformation from miles of green farmland and conventional customs into a buzzing cosmopolitan metropolis, where people no longer kowtow to the old red way of life. At the heart of Shanghai is Pudong, the cities financial and business district, where you will find ultramodern gleaming and grandiose tall skyscrapers that sparkle and glisten in the sunshine. Buildings such as the Grand Hyatt Hotel, which is placed on top of the Jin Mao Tower from the 53rd and 87th floor; which boasts to be the highest hotel in the world with spectacular views of The Bund, Huang Pu River and the city.

Just across to the opposite side of the Huang Pu River where barges and party boats pass through frequently is The Bund, which is lined with turn of the century European style buildings from the old British and French colonial days. At night these buildings are lit up like Harrods in London. Was I in Shanghai? Yet, flapping in the wind, every few meters the famous red flags had been placed on top of these magnificent architectures just as a reminder of the rule of law and a conformation – yes I was in Shanghai. Indeed about fifteen minutes around the corner is the street that has the building where Chairman Mao (Mao Tse Tung) held the first ever communist meeting and the party continues to use this as one of its main base for meetings. This small stretch of road contradicts its surroundings as they like to keep the street quiet and non-eventful and just to ensure this discipline they have placed the glare of small cameras surreptitiously positioned on the corners of the building and policemen at either end of the road.

However, astonishingly at the end of the street is the lively and trendy Zen Chen Di Square, where you will find yourself surrounded with an array of busy nightclubs, bars, restaurants, one after the other, booming with loud music and all promoting their own unique attractions such as cabarets or live jazz bands. One is really spoiled for choice. As you walk through the square, passing each venue, buzzing with tourists, drinking and laughing both inside and sitting outside on the tables and chairs provided, one cannot help but notice looming in the shadows of the hustle and bustle is the presence of the police, who still keep a watchful eye on society. In fact I saw a young girl who was innocently handing out flyers in the streets in the hope of promoting a bash was suddenly snatched by the authorities quite aggressively and taken away speedily. This was quite a contrast to what I had witnessed at many of the venues that were doing the same thing with no misgivings.

In amongst the ultramodern urbanized neighborhood streets, in remarkable contrast there are still reminiscence of the old Shanghai shantytowns, with small crudely built ramshackle housing, where the unassuming people lead simple but struggling lives without the luxuries that we in the developed world take for granted, such as indoor plumbing or even indoor bathrooms. Some residents sitting outside, old men playing cards, or some just eating their noodles, a young woman washing clothes in a bowl full of used water. It was a very humbling tableau.

A twenty minute car journey takes you to Shanghai flea market where I decided to brave the charge of stall owners who run to you as soon as you step out of the car, resembling the behavior of the paparazzi to the rich and famous, although one does not have the same privileges. Struggling to make sense of the chaos and avoiding the assortment of watches and purses thrust upon ones direction, accompanied by phrases like "lookie, lookie, watchy", "looky, Burberry bag" "Give you best price". After much deliberating and reasoning I managed to master the art of bartering. During my time there I met a very delightful young 17-year-old-girl, Yu Oo Ching, who for a girl from a poverty stricken background and limited or no education had mastered the English language above all others from the same background. She was most taken by me as I her. Our conversation took me to establish a little of her family history. She had informed me that her family had moved from Anhwei province in Beijing to Shanghai because there is more work in Shanghai.

In 2002 there were 690 million Asians living on \$1 a day according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which is 223 million fewer than in 1990 (Time magazine Sep 20, 2004). China's official figures state that there are 114 million migrant workers in China, and have estimated that there will be 500 million in the next generation. To be sure the government is encouraging this influx of migrant workers who offer cheap labour in manufacturing and construction industries. Buildings and developments are sprouting like weeds in a blink of an eye. Eighteen months ago China began its successful work of building the Shanghai International Circuit (SIC) which I had the fortunate pleasure of witnessing the end result for myself. This spectacular futuristic Star-Trek style US\$300 million circuit, with a capacity of 200,000 spectators was to be the host of the first ever F1 race in China. It is the most advanced facility ever built and took 7,000 workers a day, working in rotation shifts throughout the night and day. Mao Xiaohan, President of SIC said: "We would very much like to be a test venue for Formula One teams. And we plan to host many other events here such as MotoGP and the German touring car championship. We will also organise many events for car manufactures and tyre production companies. We plan to have many commercial activities at the circuit".

Freedom Fever - A Contagious Epidemic!

And how is this new bouquet from China received in the rest of the world? In particular other dogmatic states...such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, who is not only the Bush Administrations' member of the "Axis of Evil"; but also according to NGO's such as, "Hands Off Cain" (<http://www.handsoffcain.org/>) and Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org/>); the I.R.I is in complete violation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although China remains by far the most prolific executioner, Iran, in proportion to its population, applies just as many irrational death penalties and a great deal more perverse punishments.

Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic, which has extremely huge economic problems, is somehow attempting to follow the Chinese model and I hasten to add unsuccessfully, as there are clear differences between the two. Firstly in Iran there is a large criminal society made up of many "Mafioso" type organisations like the "Bonyads" and others alike that control very large portions of the economy. Secondly, I.R.'s constitution prevents foreign investment in many sectors of the economy. Therefore, I.R. could not, even if she wanted to, implement policies such as the Chinese have. China is now days considered as following a good economic policy, particularly in relation to foreign investment. The Islamic Republic has done nothing but the opposite and therefore any hope of moving forward in this respect would require complete regime change.

Indeed life in Shanghai has undergone many changes and China is an investment destination. It is going through a process of reinvention, a kind of personality change which signals that the old ways are now for the history books. Would anyone believe that this was the birthplace of China's Communist Party? And what does the future hold for the regime? One thing is certain; the country has started its journey to the outside world and it certainly has a future as bright as Shanghai's city lights. Nonetheless the leadership appears to assume that improved living standards alone can retain its people's gratitude. Although young people crave new things they struggle with age-old political differences and are getting hungrier for more, yet there is the sweet smell of freedom lingering in the air. Will communism take a back seat in the future? Is democracy on the horizon? Will other authoritarian regimes follow suit, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, who like China's communist regime has been a repressive totalitarian system with a list of human rights violations. Do we dare to dream? **The Chinese dream!**

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