

Email from Shanghai

BY SARA STRINGFELLOW

SHANGHAI IS HUGE. From the 88th floor of the Jimao building, the highest in China, Shanghai looks like a gray forest of buildings, with city stretching to the horizon. As I walked around the observatory, in every direction I looked, skyscrapers sprouted from the smog.

The view from the top is expensive- 80 yuan, and thus out of reach for most Chinese on a fifteen-minute expedition.

From the street, Shanghai still looks like a new city. Most of the time, it also looks like a European city- either with modern glitz, five-star hotels, skyscrapers, department stores, and neon lights, or in the winding tree-lined boulevards of the French Concession, dotted with cafes.

But it's dingy, too. Every air conditioner in Shanghai is apparently broken. One walks over little puddles dribbling into the street about every ten feet from the air conditioner hanging from a balcony. Much of the architecture is early-20th century American, but it's dirty and dusty. Laundry hangs from every window and across every alleyway. Occasionally one runs into one of those mysterious odors one hopes isn't what it smells like.

Chains, especially fast-food chains, overrun the city; not just McDonald's, or Kentucky Fried Chicken, but Japanese noodle chains and Kedi, a Chinese convenience store chain- they are not only ubiquitous, they are necessary.

Few travelers stay in Shanghai more than a few days. There's very little to actually do. It's just a city. With many Chinese characters.

But sometimes it doesn't seem like any other city. Sometimes one sees something, and is reminded that yes, this is a police state.

Street vendors are everywhere, with satchels full of watches, neon-glow trinkets or small plastic toys. Occasionally, demonstrating lightning reflexes, the vendors grab their merchandise, leap to their feet, and vanish almost instantaneously into the crowd. From the way they shuffle out of the way and then close up again, passers-by seem to be rooting for the fleeing merchant.

Given this dramatic reaction to the police, one must assume that selling things on the street is illegal. Or at least, selling some things on the street.

Once, I saw what happens when they aren't fast enough. A pair of policeman, both in riot gear, were shouting at a woman crouched on the ground.

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One was stomping dramatically on the goods she'd carried in a bag, while the other stood and screamed at her. Pathetically, a small kid — maybe four or five years old — was frantically trying to gather the things back up and put them in the bag, darting around the shouting, stomping policemen.

Perhaps this is normal, and nothing of much concern, but it was one of those alien moments when I thought, no, this isn't home, this is a land that is strange to me.

At times, Shanghai can feel a lot like New York. Except the beggars are not drunk, but mutilated.

Beggars crowd the tourist streets in Shanghai, especially Nanjing Lu, one of the most famous streets in the world. They latch onto foreigners, saying over and over and over again, "Hello, thank you." Under normal circumstances, I consider myself hardened to beggars. But normal circumstances mean Seattle, where beggars are mostly drunks in their forties.

In Beijing, beggars were in their sixties, wrinkled old men with faces seamed like maps, walking with a canes.

But here in Shanghai, they are youngish women with red, pock-marked faces, with small children with the same disfiguration. Or a boy on a platform on wheels three feet from the ground. Or young, exhausted-looking couples with small children hanging limp in their arms asking for money to buy medicine.

Or just a ten-year-old kid.

Some of these are scams, of course, but not all. How many of these worn people, I wonder, are illegal migrants from the countryside who can't find jobs, or earn money, and with their rural registration, can't access any kind of medical care?

I don't know.

But it's enough that I occasionally part with a few kuai.