



## **China Feature-Fascinating Shanghai**

By Kieran & Killian Walsh | 2008-10-24 | The Munster Express

### **Shanghai 1**

Visions of China can vary from beautiful mountain scenery to the Olympic stadia.

A new modern image of China is that of Shanghai and its futuristic skyline.

Colonised by the British and French in the 19th century it has a varied interest in architecture.

It is also the birthplace of the Chinese Communism brought about by extreme poverty and deprivation back in the 1920s. At the same time there were signs where no Chinese or dogs were allowed in city parks.

This is one of the most extraordinary cities that we have ever been to in terms of vitality and dynamism.

With over 15 million inhabitants, it is not even the largest city in China, this title belongs to Chending.

It is a city of huge contrasts from wealth to old apartments, where there are sometimes cramped living conditions,  
But still with modern air conditioning.

We arrived in mid summer or low season as they call it during the Olympic Games period.

We were met at the airport by Bin Bin's family a master's student at Waterford Institute of Technology.

While his parents did not speak English a relation, Candy did and she told us all about Shanghai.

The 40 minutes journey from Hongqiao airport was along a super highway right up to the city centre area and the Bund, which is the famous old financial district before it went underground through a tunnel to cross over the Yangtze River.

Later in the week we went to visit the famous Yangtze river with its barges charging up and down and bigger ships further down river, It was like an Asian version of the Rhine in Germany or Holland or Antwerp in Belgium, cities and ports so active in the shipping.

This massive river affords many parts of Southern China access to the sea, is incredibly busy.

It was the key piece of infrastructure that secured growth for Shanghai back in the 1800s.

Anxious to open up trade to China in the mid nineteenth century, the imperial rulers in China under the Treaty of Nanking, allowed the British, French and later the Americans access and ownership of parts of the city so that it could be developed for trade and shipping.

The foreigners were given residency and property rights here for small compensation in the late 1800s.

The French were there initially as Jesuits to try and convert the Chinese, but the British were there for trade in silk and textiles.

As the foreign traders prospered local Chinese merchants and workers saw opportunity and got involved.

The silk and cotton trade were especially strong for the overseas market.

## Opium

One negative trade was that of opium the British brought the dreaded opium trade from India and Iran, where fortunes were made on the hapless Chinese who succumbed to the Opiate drug. Wars were fought over it leading to Hong Kong becoming British under a long lease, after trade debts were called in.

This trade originated in modern Iran and Iraq and was brought by traders to China sometimes via the Indian empire.

At one stage it is estimated that hundreds of thousands were users in China, with much of it coming through ports like Shanghai, bringing devastation, similar to what heroin does today.

The Japanese invasion and later takeover by the Communists stopped this terrible trade.

Thus the city has some painful origins.

### Old Shanghai

Today you can still see parts of old Shanghai from ancient times to the colonial period and onto the modern Manhattan style of the financial district.

It is a city of many contrasts from the vastly modern to third world style housing and street markets.

For international business visitors and tourists there is luxury style accommodation but not far away you can still find people living in fairly sub standard apartments or modern ones.

It is a city of many contrasts that we found really exhilarating.

There is terrific energy there and a great will to work and succeed.

We felt like we had been to America or New York for the first time in our lives, the vitality of the city of Shanghai is so invigorating.

Shanghai seems less Chinese than Beijing and being a port city you get the feeling that they are more used to foreigners as it is part of their history from its days as a major trading port from the 1860s onwards.

Its reason for being is trade; the city has nothing like the ancient history of Beijing with its Forbidden City and Royal Palaces.

Yet often when we traveled on the subway or local buses we were the only white people and provoked much curiosity especially from children.

On one of the last days we visited an old town from the medieval times that had since become part of Shanghai.

### Qibao

This was a real mind blowing experience, an old town on the edge of Shanghai.

This was the real China. We took a local bus from near the Shanghai football Stadium or south train station.

It took us a while to find the 95 bus but we made it in the end.

Locals advised us on which stop to get out and on arrival, we found ourselves in a bustling town with markets, shopping centers and canals.

Our first priority was food and my son found a cafe that sold snacks in the middle of the afternoon.

No one spoke English, nor was there any type of signs to help, we ended up with chicken blood soup, dumplings and 3 colas and water all for 2 euro for 3 persons. The soup included the heart and liver and tasted fine.

From this full on experience we explored further in what was our second last day in China and we were feeling a little sentimental.

Qibao famous for its rivers and canals as well as its cotton and weaving trade in the last century has now been boosted by Government investment in Canal frontage with new bridges and restaurants for visiting Chinese visitors as well as the occasion westerners like ourselves.

We went along streets and markets where it was rare to see white people, yet down the road, a Tesco was opening up

for workers at the nearby airport in Hong qiao, the enterprising British supermarket giant is extending into China.

Tesco see China as a country destined for major growth and like in Eastern Europe they are there early.

French supermarket group Carrefour are also in China.

McDonalds, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Papa Joes all have outlets there.

Major hotel chains like Sheraton, Hilton, St. Regis, Novotel, and Ibis are all here too.

You can even find an Irish or German pub, an Italian ice cream vendor and many more.

Despite all this the Qibao local market sold food from stands.

Fruit and vegetable stalls were everywhere in the Qibao market, you could buy live fish from a stall and were killed on the spot by the trader

When you bought them, chickens were kept in cages, meat was on open display.

Tea was sold by the weight. It was all so real and genuine that we loved it and took many photos and smiled at the people, who smiled back especially the kids.

It was a little like a souk in North Africa, here in what was theoretically still a communist country with market principles.

Bargaining was expected. Bikes and mopeds were everywhere so you had to keep your eyes open. Local police made sure things kept moving and there was no hassle. Few people argued despite the huge crowds.

Earlier in the day we had chicken blood soup, dumplings and cola for three persons all for less than 3 euro in total.

Amazing value, sign language and some Chinese ensured we ate.

Heat

Shanghai is a great city to explore on foot; we loved walking around the old French concession, or the Bund area.

Early morning or early evening is the best times.

The temperature was 35-36 degrees in summer, which is also the rainy season and only dropped to 28 in the evening

So high humidity.

Not the best weather for walking and sight seeing but with a few breaks and some water we managed well.

April and October are seen as the best months for visiting.

We were told coming there that it is a shoppers paradise so if you feel a little hot a run into a department store

Can also help you avoid the heat.

The Number One Department Store on Nanjing Road or the now American owned Sears Discount store further down are shopper highlights as are the many shopping malls some of which are underground near the People's Square.

This could be the new New York as one Tramore wag said to me following our tales of China.

After all many of the clothing items are made in the Far East so why travel to the US to buy them.

The People's Square used to be the Shanghai Racecourse up to the Second World War.

Now the old race track was opened to the public by the communists, who started off the political party in Shanghai in the early 1920s, no doubt encouraged by Trotsky and his wish for world revolution.

Famine and poverty encouraged political extremism, when it was alongside large wealth.

## Culture

The old Racecourse building now houses a fine art gallery and nearby is the beautiful Opera House, all within the old British sector and just before the beginning of the French area.

Shanghai has some Fine French impressionists like Cezanne and Monet plus the earlier Corot and Turner kept well by the old Communists they are now on display.

There is a fantastic collection of old Chinese art and calligraphy in the history museum as well as pottery giving you a glimpse of how some lived in olden times.

While waiting to get into the museum we were asked by a local 9 year old where we were from, we told her Ireland and asked how she had a mobile phone at such a young age but told us that it was a prize from her school for English

Speaking and that she was the best in the class, her able mother explained, how she encouraged her child to learn English, she herself lectured in accounting and her husband had a fashion business.

We were enthralled by their interest and they offered to show us around the Shanghai historical Museum, another welcome respite from the heat.

The young girl said her wish when she grew up was to be a boss like her father and see some of the world as she visited the museum with her cousins.

This is just one example of the many Chinese that wanted to engage with us in conversation.

Students were also keen to get in touch with us and talk English and explain about their life their summer job in a

Bar or restaurant and how they would love to visit England or Ireland to learn English better.

Also waiting at the museum queue were some Dutch Olympic fans, who had flown to Moscow

and then went over land on the Transiberian Express train to Beijing, stopping in Mongolia on the way.

They described Mongolia as the best place they had ever seen.

Soccer popular

They were at the final Olympic event in Shanghai to see Belgium play Nigeria in the soccer; the latter would eventually play Argentina in the final.

The Messi led Argentinan team beat Brazil in the other semi final even with Ronaldinho being the star Brazilian.

Later we met a Shanghai student in a local pub, who spoke great English and told us how much he loved English soccer and Manchester United a team he would love to see in China.

English soccer clubs can really grow their fan base here and would be a great location for a future world cup

This would boost soccer in this country that rarely qualifies for the world cups.

Shanghai has also many foreign workers, some are teaching English in the various English schools like the Wall Street language Centre or the various English schools and universities with English departments.

The Chinese like to recruit English speakers but these must be over 25 years, they earn a good salary and live well on Chinese terms.

Other foreigners we met worked in catering, banking, manufacturing, information technology and tourism.

All were proud to be working in this vibrant but sometimes crazy city.

Traffic chaos

Crossing the road was an ordeal; a green light for a pedestrian did not mean you could cross, as taxis turn left or right kept going.

In Beijing during the Olympics the authorities and neighbourhood nannies kept a close eye on traffic violations.

The free market seems to reign supreme here and cars crossing lanes without indication is part of the scene.

We were travelling in one taxi from the station area to a subway stop; the short 2 euro taxi ride was interrupted by a minor accident as one taxi hit the other. The damage was minor with the door panel being dented.

In the matter of 5 minutes the dispute between the drivers was resolved by the payment of 30 euro for damage, no police called and traffic got on its way again after a lane infringement and short delay for those travelling behind, who were honking horns heavily as taxi men do.

A trip to the airport saw the taxi man go at 80 mph.

Slightly worrying we asked him to slow down, we are normally not squeamish having driven on German auto bahnen at high speed, but this was reckless as he beeped at traffic lights in the early morning to deter crossing traffic, Cyclists or pedestrians.

80,000 die each year on the roads of China, several times the rate of Ireland given their lower car density and car ownership.

We drive safely in comparison; except for drink driving the Irish have a good record.

If people complain about Dublin and its traffic, it is mild in comparison and the taximen safe.

We did ponder cycling but with the mopeds everywhere too we felt that we were not up to there sylte of driving, where often in the suburbs, cyclists are allowed use part of the pedestrian lane rather than the road to save on accidents.

Buses were everywhere and were a cheap form of transport too, just 30 cent to travel to outer suburbs.

You really had to keep one's wits about one on footpaths and crossing roads.

Going to a park was a welcome respite to the din of the city.

## **Shanghai 2**

Many foreigners are going to work in China for a few years and enjoy the cultural change.

Many see it as a good career step; they learn Chinese, its customs and know how to do business in Asia.

One Chinese business person joked that getting a Chinese girlfriend is the best way of learning Chinese for a young person.

The foreign worker staff liked the life in China and the culture change, but would not live here forever.

Taxes are low and so are living costs even if the wages are less.

The pollution was one of the negatives as it does get at your throat said Tom an American working for Honeywell there.

A Swedish man we met goes there regularly and like ourselves fails to tire of China even when some days the work does not go well or there is a communication problem.

The people work well, but attention to quality and details in some complex manufacture can improve he felt and will.

He was overall very satisfied to do business there.

Starting language schools and teaching English are other ways for Westerners to go there and do business.

There is a great hunger to learn the language.

The young Chinese do look outwards a bit like the Japanese in the eighties.

They wear western clothes and T shirts with English sayings on them.

We were amazed at how they adapt, but they still love their own culture and history.

They have mobiles and e mail addresses just like people in the west and want to stay in touch.

In Beijing, some computer teacher or head of a firm would contact us with a great knowledge of English and tell us about Life in China.

They learn what happens outside the normal news through the web and knew about the West and Tibet.

The grapevine works there too it seems.

We talk about the Government a little but they do not criticise it much and put up with it.

There is certainly less complaining that there is in Ireland, we could win a world record for moaning.

Maybe the weather has us this way.

We remarked at how the Chinese just get on with life, whether they are rich or poor, there is a will to live  
And get by.

Living in such a large population perhaps has this effect.

Family is important and people help one another, there seems to be a spirit of co-operation and less stubbornness.

The common good is important in the overall scheme of life.

Society seems less selfish and there is a willingness to help one another.

More in later editions

### **Shanghai 3**

Shanghai's Euro flavour

Shanghai is unique among Asian cities in that it has a strong European flavour.

This makes the city very pleasant for us to visit and marvel at the old colonial architecture.

Along the banks of the Yangtse River, you see all the old British bank and customs buildings as they look out on the harbour.

They face a new style of Manhattan tuye skyscrapers reflecting the current Chinese economic boom.

The Oriental Chinese Pearl Tower adds a local modern flavour as you look over at Pudong from the old harbour walls.

Local hustlers try to sell you Rolex watches at 2 euro each as you try and take in the view.

It really is the stuff of dreams as you imagine the roaring twenties in Shanghai, when money was everything and life was cheap.

MODERN stores bustled in this period as huge wealth was made on trade into and out of China.

The opium scourge was there still and poverty was dreadful.

The Japanese invaded in 1941 and changed things forever.

The old days were not to return, the British and French left.

They did leave wonderful buildings behind them.

Today it is fantastic to explore

We liked the French area best with its Mediterranean style villas, now turned into galleries, restaurants  
Hotels or apartments.

They built universities, schools and churches adding a Europe dimension to Chinese culture.

There was more of a missionary and educational goal behind the French purpose in China.

The Jesuits were strong there; we passed a St. Pater's Catholic Church.

A University in the Huashan road area Jiao Tong University was a Polytechnic University founded by the French in 1896.

This technical college, Jiao Tong was for local and foreign students and still attracts many foreign students.

On our visit to the fine campus it reminded us of UCC or Harvard the prestigious campus buildings house a vibrant

Technical university of over 5000 students, called Jiao Tong on the Huashan Road, close to the west subway line.

They say it is in the top 500 universities in the world, a great connection for Waterford Institute of Technology.

We saw the Xuhui campus where there was refurbishment work during the summer holidays but we must say we were impressed with what we saw.

A local business person recommended we visit it.

There is a recent link here between Waterford Institute of Technology and

The principals involved here are Dr Willie Donnelly and others.

Waterford links with Shanghai can only grow in the future.

Incidentally Waterford buys some chandelier steel parts from China, many American firms like Honeywell in Waterford have bases in Shanghai and Enterprise Ireland has an outpost here.

After our visit to the university we saw some of the old French area including where Chou En Lai used to live.

These fantastic residences belonged to another era but their beauty will never date.

We sheltered from a heavy monsoon like rain in a wine shop where the manager was French and the shop assistant tried his quelques mots for better effect he told us about Chinese wine, Grace Wine from the south, but how they loved European wine.

Beer is the alcohol of choice, but on a night out they might try whiskey with sophisticated Chinese trying wine or cocktails.

The French area housed not just Catholic Churches but also Chinese temples and even synagogues.

Some Jews came here to escape Russian pogroms and were the largest community in Asia, up to 1940; they were pushed into Ghettoes after the Japanese invasion in 1941. At that time more Jewish refugees had joined them from Austria and Germany prior to the outbreak of Hostilities in 1939.

After the war they left for the safety of Israel.

Shanghai attracted all types of adventurers in the early days some not the best.

There they went to earn a quick fortune and move; others showed commitment and invested in education and the arts.

There are many fine books of old Shanghai detailing the good and the bad of the city, where money and exploitation were rife and where life was cheap.

Discrimination was widespread, as local English and French kept Chinese away out of parks and some districts.

This was later relaxed in the 1920s.

There was much bitterness afterwards to British rule, as the Chinese in that city felt very exploited.

The communist party was founded in Shanghai amid poverty and disease.

Women felt that the new party supported them more than traditional Chinese ways

Today China has perhaps the best freedom for women of all countries in Asia.

Now you will see high fashion in the French and top fashion stores owned and managed by Chinese.

They have an acute sense of style and like to look good just as their western counterparts.

Many millions of people to visit Expo 2008

Next year the world international Expo will be held in Shanghai.

70 million people are expected to go to it.

This is a great opportunity for business persons and professionals to see the new China.

Enterprise Ireland will have a stand there our then Taoiseach Bertie Ahern Visited China to announce this initiative. Various themed pavilions are there plus an expo centre, a china pavilion, Expo Boulevard and a performance centre for arts and theatre.

Cities and Corporate pavilions will also be displaying their images and strengths.

This event will last for nearly 6 months from May to end October and will be held near the river at a specially built venue near the new financial district in Pudong. The venue has a total area of 5 square meters on the east side of the Huangpu River.

For those who have not been to China it is an opportunity to see how the world is fast changing And how will Ireland adapt to the new emerging world.

The innovation programmes will be on urban best practices. This is to show how quality of life can be improved in cities around the world.

This will be divided into livable cities, sustainable urbanization, protection, utilization of historical heritage and technical innovation in cities.

Perhaps there is something here for us in Ireland to learn here.

See the Expo website for more details and dates. - [expo2010china.com](http://expo2010china.com)

It runs from spring to October, the spring or the autumn is better times to visit.

When we were there the temperatures hit 35 Celsius, getting there when it is in the low 20s Is far more preferable.

We would recommend staying near the Bund or the old French Concession area for a

Feeling of old colonial Shanghai.

To visit Shanghai you will need a visa and first you must have a return air ticket and hotel paid reservation.

This is best done via a travel agent or tries ctrip.com. Sometimes the web can be misleading if a wrong site is used.

KLM, Lufthansa, BA and El Al are all good airlines to use. The latter had the best fares for one of our group via Hong Kong but the security was intrusive, but that makes it safe.

If you want to stay more in the real Shanghai where the Chinese live, there are other areas you can try out and where it will be cheaper. Remember, there is good public transport and cheap taxis

Try Pudong, where the Expo will be held or the northern part of the city for the more Chinese version of the city.

Some parts of Pudong are very modern especially near the financial district.

Hotel prices can vary from 50-70 euro in Pudong to 100-200 euro in the better districts.

But you can pay as little as 40-50 if you bargain.

Again meals at 5-10 euro can be budgeted. Taxis are just a few euros and there is a great train and bus service in the city, with the subway very manageable.

More lines to be added for the Expo, but were not yet open when we were there.

Golf

China may not have a great image for golf, but if you do the expo why not combine it with a golf or beach break too.

We are told Hainan has great beaches.

Within one to two hours drive of Shanghai there are up to 15 golf courses and over 300 in all of China. Regular business visitors often take a break from the city crowds and intensity by having a golf game.

The Shanghai tourist hotline is shanghaiour.net or shanghaiatip.net. Rather than hire a car a taxi maybe easier to use. As the traffic can be rather crazy andf hard to get used to.

Getting to the coast is not so easy and is up to 100 km away. We did not get to see it but one has

to be plan it well as we are told pollution can be a problem near the mouth of the big rivers.