

Postcard from Shanghai

Roy Blatchford

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*Wake up in the morning
Stretch your arms towards the sun
Say something in Chinese
And go to Paris.....
Every minute, somewhere in the world there is morning
Somewhere, people stretch their arms towards the sun
They speak new languages, fly from Cairo to Warsaw
They smile and drink coffee together.*

Anastasia Baburova

Away from its gridlocked, elevated highways the largest city in the world works. Shanghai: a modern, socialist, international metropolis.

Contrast frenetic New York, chaotic Mumbai, the bedlam of Cairo – Shanghai hums with purpose. Twenty-six million souls occupy countless high-rise towers cheek by jowl with the stylish housing and municipal legacies of the French, British and American Concessions. The Huang Pu river bends through the downtown like a proverbial dragon's tongue.

Bicycles of all descriptions, electric scooters, trams, cars, buses, pedestrians rub along politely. While 'partageons la route' is a vain exhortation sign in France, here it is practised unflinchingly. No horns, no red-light jumping, no unpleasant jostling for road space – just simple courtesies.

Spring in Shanghai reveals handsome boulevards bright with luscious cherry blossom. Parks and lakesides fill with walkers, card-players, early morning and evening Tai Chi groups, grandparents match-making their grandchildren. By night, the competing colours of the iconic tall towers, neon adverts and laser beams illuminate the Pudong skyline.

The foods on offer from China's diverse provinces are eye and mouth-watering, served up in enticingly named restaurants. Lost Heaven features Yunnan cuisine; Crystal Jade specializes in Cantonese dim sum; Guoyuan has super spicy Hunan

dishes on the menu. All this is an increasingly cashless society. Even the few street beggars can accept a contribution through WeChat the ubiquitous, multi-purpose messaging app.

Shanghai hums to the tune of a global future, rooted in a colourful history of welcoming peoples from anywhere and everywhere.

Like Russian dolls, new cities rise up annually within the megalopolis, each larger than a combined Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds. I visit four schools in the new urban developments to glimpse China's dazzling educational frontiers.

Where once the Chinese middle class sent their children to famous boarding schools in the UK and US, now those distinguished brands have come East, spawning hundreds of local for-profit and not-for-profit competitors. To meet the demands of the exponential growth in international and bicultural schools, Shanghai and Beijing alone need an additional 100,000 English speaking teachers over the coming decade.

The medium of instruction in lessons alternates between English and Chinese, frequently blending the two: humbling bilingualism at work and play. The country's thoughts, culture and traditions properly lie in the core curriculum, just as they do in India and Arabia.

A student-led assembly invites teachers to share extracts from their favourite books in English and Chinese. The Principal is welcomed to the microphone to present a few prestigious awards won by students in recent pan-Asia competitions. In turn he challenges students to speak 'English only' on the corridors in the run up to the exam season. British and American English compete for students' head-spaces. The anglophile, bilingual Head of Maths tells me she speaks fluent Chinglish and demonstrates in style.

Cambridge IGCSE reigns supreme in these impressive schools where student attainment is high, where IB scores are at their global best, where the students are MIT, Yale, Zurich and Oxford bound. I reflect on the political mugging of IGCSE in England.

And Shanghai Mathematics is self-evidently in operation here, a reminder that context is everything, that a curriculum model cannot be readily imported in the way naïve UK politicians have contested.

In another school I encounter The Brain and The Oxygen Bar, attractive airy spaces for independent study. A number of classrooms have smart sofas and bean bags in part of the room, enjoyed by small groups of senior students to peer mark essays and plan oral presentations. QR codes are posted on doors for students to offer feedback to teachers and BYD (bring your own device) is embedded practice.

The co-curricular programme in a fourth school takes your breath away. Recent months have welcomed a world-class harpist, an international choir, national poets and artists of distinction. British leaders are pioneering an innovative, bilingual 'head, hand, heart' curriculum, fusing the best of Western and Eastern cultures for the 2 – 18 age range. And tasty lunch menus are something else: stir-fried baby cabbage, pickle and egg soup, sautéed duck fillet and pepper.

The education market booms like a Californian gold rush. Entrepreneurs are in their element, Supermarkets proclaim Kumon Math, Saturday schools, tutoring agencies, university crammers. Education, anywhere and everywhere, is *the* investment the current generation makes in the next. In Shanghai there is no mistaking that imperative.

Teeming, urban China – through its young people – thoughtfully, optimistically modernizing without Westernising. The long march of the Silk Road continues.

Roy Blatchford.