

Published: March 2010

Shanghai Dreams

China's global city tries to recapture the glories of its past—this time on its own terms.

By Brook Larmer

- I. The secret world of the old Shanghai bomb shelter seems to exist in a parallel universe. On the sun-splashed street above, migrant laborers slurp down rice and tofu lunches, while clusters of office workers in crisp white shirts walk past the small sign on the sidewalk. But in the dark recess behind a display of foreign-brand toilet seats, a young woman descends a staircase into a place she knows only as "0093."
- II. Passing through a pair of metal blast doors, the woman—22-year-old Sheng Jiahui, who goes by the nickname "Sammy"—moves deep into dimly lit corridors. The bunker glows an unnatural shade of green. In its perpetual twilight, 0093 still evokes the deadening claustrophobia of war and communist revolution that snuffed out Shanghai's swinging heyday, when the mingling of East and West transformed the city into the Paris of the Orient.
- III. A door cracks open, and a blast of electric guitar erupts into the corridor. Inside the small room, under a poster of guitar legend Jimi Hendrix posing as Uncle Sam, four young Shanghainese women—the other members of Sammy's punk rock band, Black Luna—are starting to jam. It is a serendipitous twist of history: The bunker, once the symbol of a wounded and cowering society, has become a breeding ground for Shanghai's music scene. The rehearsal rooms at 0093—the moniker is a phonetic combination of its street name and number—have helped incubate more than a hundred local bands, reinvigorating a culture that now, as before, blurs the East-West divide.
- IV. Sammy sheds her jacket as the band lets loose. Orange, 20, pounds on the drums; Juice, 23, shreds chords at the speed of Shanghai's maglev train. Sammy sings, and her bangs flop up and down in double time. The daughter of a traditional Shanghainese opera singer, she is taking her family's musical talent in a new direction. "We are newborn birds, but we have big dreams," Sammy cries. "Let the whole world hear us sing."
- V. Every city has a rhythm, a pulse that makes it move. In Shanghai, one of the fastest growing megacities in the world, it's easy to get lost in the relentless percussion of jackhammers and pile drivers, bulldozers and building cranes. The proliferating skyscrapers and construction sites are part of a stunning

metamorphosis that Shanghai will show off as host of Expo 2010, the contemporary version of the World's Fair, which runs from May through October. The rise of China's only truly global city, however, is driven not by machines but by an urban culture that follows its own beat—embracing the new and the foreign even as it seeks to reclaim its past glory.

- VI. Shanghai natives form an urban tribe, set apart from the rest of China by language, customs, architecture, food, and attitudes. Their culture, often called *haipai* (Shanghai style), emerged from the city's singular history as a meeting point of foreign merchants and Chinese migrants. But over the years it has become a hybrid that confounds the very idea of East and West. "In foreigners' eyes Shanghai is part of 'mysterious China,'" says Zhou Libo, a local comedian. "In the eyes of other Chinese, Shanghai is part of the outside world."
- VII. An upstart by Chinese standards, Shanghai—unlike imperial Beijing—was just a modest fishing town a century and a half ago. The city was born with a sense of manifest destiny. In the beginning it was a foreign dream, a Western treaty port trading opium for tea and silk. The muscular buildings along the riverfront known as the Bund (a word derived from Hindi) projected foreign, not Chinese, power. From around the world came waves of immigrants, creating an exotic stew of British bankers and Russian dancing girls, American missionaries and French socialites, Jewish refugees and turbaned Sikh security guards.
- VIII. By the 1930s Shanghai was among the ten largest cities in the world. But it was like no other place on Earth: a mixed-blood metropolis with a reputation for easy money—and easier morals. The British, French, and Americans carved the city into concessions, building gracious homes along tree-lined streets. Local shops carried the latest fashions and luxuries. The racecourse dominated the center of town, while the city's nightlife offered everything from dance halls and social clubs to opium dens and brothels. (At one time, Shanghai reputedly had more prostitutes than any other city in the world.)
- IX. The whole enterprise, however, rested on the several million Chinese immigrants who flooded the city, many of them refugees and reformers fleeing violent campaigns in the countryside, beginning in the mid-1800s with the bloody Taiping Rebellion. The new arrivals found protection in Shanghai and set to work as merchants and middlemen, coolies and gangsters. For all the hardships, these migrants forged the country's first modern urban identity, leaving behind an inland empire that was still deeply agrarian. Family traditions may have remained Confucian, but the dress was Western and the system unabashedly capitalist, and the favorite soup, borscht, came from Russians escaping the Bolsheviks. "We've always been accused of worshipping foreigners," says Shen Hongfei, one of Shanghai's leading cultural critics. "But taking foreign ideas and making them our own made us the most advanced place in China."

- X. The curtain finally came down in 1949. For the next four decades China's socialist overlords made Shanghai suffer for its role as a modern-day Babylon. Besides compelling the economic elite to leave and suppressing the local dialect, Beijing siphoned off almost all the city's revenues. When China's economic reforms began in the 1980s, Shanghai had to wait nearly a decade before the regime in Beijing allowed it to develop. "We kept wondering, When is it going to be our turn?" says Huang Mengqi, a fashion designer and entrepreneur who owns a shop off the Bund.
- XI. Shanghai's moment has arrived. Fueled by years of growth faster than China's as a whole—and a culture now unshackled and dealing comfortably with the outside world—the city is eager to recapture the glories of the past, only this time on its own terms. Twenty years ago the European buildings on the Bund stared across the Huangpu River at low-lying farmland dotted by factories; today that same land bristles with skyscrapers, including the 101-story World Financial Center. All told, the city has added more than 4,000 high-rises. For a place once dominated by rickshaws and bicycles, the most extraordinary statistic may be not vertical but horizontal: nearly 1,500 miles of roads in and around Shanghai that did not exist a decade ago.
- XII. And now comes Expo 2010, part of a fading franchise Shanghai hopes to resuscitate as a global launching pad. It's a gamble, but the city has reportedly anted up \$45 billion, more than Beijing spent on the 2008 Olympic Games. The bulk of the money has gone into infrastructure, including two new airport terminals, a subway expansion, and a Bund makeover. But amid a global economic crisis, will the projected 70 million visitors come? Shanghai hopes to outshine rivals Beijing and Hong Kong, but it also harbors a loftier ambition: to be the global capital of the 21st century. "If any city has a chance, it's Shanghai," says Xiangming Chen, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai. "But the city can't just build its way to greatness. The bigger question is, How does it rebuild a sense of community that's been lost in tearing down the old and building up the new?"
- XIII. Jin Qijing pretends not to notice the rat scurrying across the pipe in her room. Dinner is on the table—a sweet and fatty braised-pork dish, *hongshaorou*, that is a Shanghainese favorite—and the elegant 91-year-old with a sweeping, gray coiffure doesn't want to spoil the family meal.
- XIV. Nobody needs to remind Jin that conditions in her traditional Shanghai neighborhood, or *lilong*, have deteriorated since she moved here as a teenager in 1937. Back then her *lilong*—one of thousands in Shanghai that set modified Chinese courtyard houses on tight European-style lanes—lived up to its name: Baoxing Cun, or "treasure and prosperity village." One family lived in each house, often with a coterie of servants and rickshaw pullers.

- XV. Today eight families cram into Jin's two-story home, one per room. There is no plumbing. Jin's kitchen is an electric stove erected on a rickety, makeshift balcony. Nonetheless, when Jin's grandson invited her and her husband to move into a modern apartment complex in the suburbs, she refused. "Where else," Jin asks, "could I find this sense of community?"
- XVI. Shanghai's old neighborhoods are disappearing. In 1949 at least three-quarters of Shanghainese lived in lilong; today only a fraction do. Two lilong adjacent to Baoxing Cun have been demolished, one to make room for an elevated highway, the other for a power switching station to light up Expo 2010. But Baoxing Cun's densely packed alleyways still evoke the communal feeling that made lilong the cradle of Shanghainese culture. In the morning, on her way back from the open-air market, Jin passes the shop selling *shengjian bao*, sweet, pork-filled breakfast buns. She chats with a neighbor hanging laundry on one of the poles that festoon the lane, while a man, still in pajamas, waters his plants. "I'm back!" Jin yells, as she climbs the unlit stairs to her second-floor room. Neighbors' heads pop out of their rooms to greet her.
- XVII. In the afternoon Jin and her oldest friends gather on wooden stools in the alleyway—a daily ritual they have followed for decades. With indoor space at a premium, life in the lilong spills outside, turning the lanes into public living rooms. As the women chat in Shanghainese dialect, neighbors stop by to listen, laugh, and interject: a man in an ill-fitting gray suit, a vendor walking his bicycle, an officious woman with a badge from the neighborhood-watch committee reminding Jin to show enthusiasm for Expo 2010.
- XVIII. Today the ladies' banter is darkened by speculation. "We keep hearing we're next in line for demolition," Jin says. For many Shanghainese, the decades of neglect and overcrowding have turned the lilong's intimacy into something more like asphyxiation. But Jin worries that the razing of Baoxing Cun will scatter her friends to distant suburbs. "Who knows how much longer we have?" she asks.
- XIX. Shanghai has taken more care than most Chinese cities to preserve its historic architecture, sparing hundreds of pre-Communist-era mansions and bank buildings from the wrecking ball. Yet only a few lilong appear on the list of protected areas. Ruan Yisan, a professor of urban planning at Tongji University, is waging a campaign to save these living repositories of Shanghai culture. "The government should demolish poverty, not history," he says. "There's nothing wrong with improving people's lives, but we shouldn't throw our heritage away like a pair of old shoes."
- XX. Not long ago a government work crew swooped in to splash Baoxing Cun with a fresh coat of cream-colored paint. The Potemkin makeover does little to conceal the neighborhood's dismal condition. Nevertheless, Jin is happy to know that, at least until after Expo 2010, Baoxing Cun will not be torn down. "Here," she says, as a bare-bellied neighbor listens in, "it's all like family."

- XXI. Following the crowd has never been Zhang Xin's way. Born in a Shanghai lilong during the Cultural Revolution, the 42-year-old conceptual artist likes to jolt audiences with images of Chinese intellectuals as birds trapped in a cage—and biting critiques of her own hometown. "We suffer from the psychology of colonialism," she says. "We act proud that we were worthy of being colonized."
- XXII. It took some of her friends by surprise, then, that Zhang joined the stampede into the suburbs. Several million Shanghainese have moved out of the city's core in the past 15 years, catapulted by the destruction of the lilong and the long-suppressed dream of having a space of their own. Zhang's family lives in a three-bedroom apartment amid a cluster of high-rises with manicured lawns and a playground for her seven-year-old daughter, Jiazhen. But the American-style, gated compound lacks the vibrant street life of Zhang's childhood lilong.
- XXIII. New construction and suburban migration have eased Shanghai's congestion, more than tripling the living space per capita in 30 years. Yet the transition is tearing the fabric of Shanghainese culture. Neighbors in suburbia rarely know each other well, despite community-building efforts such as sports leagues and children's playgroups. At this stage the strongest bond among new suburbanites may be their status as property owners—a link that brought residents together last year to fight the proposed extension of a high-speed railway.
- XXIV. One casualty of urban flight may be Shanghai's local dialect. Rich and guttural, the language has been losing ground since the 1950s, when Beijing launched its campaign to unify the country with standardized Mandarin. The crowded lilong served to sustain the dialect; in the suburbs, families often retreat to their private spaces, blocked off from each other. Even so, many proud Shanghainese use the language as a secret code to signal that they belong to the in crowd—and often to ensure fair deals in local shops.
- XXV. For Zhang, the allure of the suburbs soon waned. This year the artist and her family will move back downtown. The ostensible reason is to enroll Jiazhen in a top school, but Zhang also wants to give her daughter a deeper sense of identity. "All of my best memories come from the sounds I heard as a six-year-old waking up in the lilong," she says. "The chattering on the street, the vendors selling shrimp—real life."
- XXVI. Chen Dandan spends his days suspended hundreds of feet above downtown Shanghai, building one of the city's newest skyscrapers. What gives the 26-year-old migrant worker a sense of vertigo, though, is his daily walk home down Nanjing Road, the city's glitziest shopping street. In soiled, blue overalls and a yellow safety helmet, Chen gawks at a Gucci storefront. At a place called Tomorrow Square, he ogles a red Ferrari whose price tag equals about 80 years of his \$3,500 annual income. "All these people may have money," he says, "but we are the ones who are building Shanghai."

- XXVII. As with its former growth spurts, the city's current boom would not be possible without an influx of foreign investment—and armies of migrant workers. Of Shanghai's 20 million people, a third are migrants without residency permits and some associated benefits. Many of these *waidiren*—outsiders—live in well-established communities, some with their own private schools to accommodate children whose unofficial status bars them from public education. Others, like Chen, form a floating population on the lowest rung of Shanghai society.
- XXVIII. In Shanghai's early days most migrants became part of the culture, living in lilong and learning the local dialect. Today, in an era of easy travel and communication, such assimilation is rare. Chen has worked in Shanghai for two years, but he's never considered staying permanently—and he hasn't learned a word of Shanghainese. Most of his wages go to his family in nearby Jiangsu Province.
- XXIX. At the end of his walk down Nanjing Road, Chen heads into the workers' "dormitory"—plywood rooms on the third floor of an unfinished high-rise. Across the street is the 22-story Park Hotel, the tallest building in Asia when it went up in the early 1930s—and a symbol of Shanghai's earlier global pretensions. It too was built by migrant labor. Chen may not be welcome in Shanghai during Expo 2010. In those six hallowed months, construction will halt, and most contract workers will be sent home. But Chen will be back. "As long as Shanghai keeps growing," he says, "it will always need people like me."
- XXX. When Sammy isn't underground playing punk rock, she's often perched in the 24th-floor apartment she shares with four other single women in a new tower downtown. Back in 1987, when she was born, her 28-story building would have dominated the skyline; now hundreds are taller. Looking out her bedroom window, she points past a jungle of green-sheathed high-rises under construction. There, across the Huangpu River, is the inverted pyramid that will serve as the central hall of Expo 2010.
- XXXI. Shanghai's urban explosion will continue long after the expo is over. All the tearing down and building up underscores one Shanghainese trait: its obsession with the new. Unlike other parts of China, which feel the weight of ancient history, young Shanghai is always seeking the cutting edge. Sammy's bandmates call her "the quintessential Shanghai girl" not simply because she looks abroad for her cues in music (rocker Avril Lavigne), fashion (the Japanese magazine *Vivi*), and lifestyle (her living arrangement is more *Friends* than Confucius). It's mainly because of the unapologetic ease with which she mixes new ideas with her Shanghainese style.
- XXXII. When Black Luna shot some promotional photos recently, the rockers put on flouncy cocktail dresses, with Sammy wearing a 1930s-style choker. "We wanted to capture the glamour of old Shanghai," she says. This wasn't nostalgia,

though. It was a hip Shanghainese band plundering history for a cool new motif. In this city of constant renewal, the beat pounds so fast that the past can be turned into the future. The old can be made new again.

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