

Tales of Old SHANGHAI

A mix of words and images bringing back to life the
glorious past of China's greatest city

by Graham Earnshaw

“What does anybody here know of China? Even those Europeans who have been in the Empire are almost as ignorant of it as the rest of us. Everything is covered by a veil, through which a glimpse of what is within may occasionally be caught, a glimpse just sufficient to set the imagination at work and more likely to mislead than to inform.”

*Thomas Babington Macaulay
British Secretary of State for War
in the House of Commons, April, 1840*



AN OLD SHANGHAI CHRONOLOGY

1842: Treaty of Nanking signed, ending the First Opium War and allowing foreigners to reside and trade at five ports along the China Coast, including Shanghai.

1843, November 17: Shanghai formally opened to foreign trade as a Treaty Port.

1844: The United States and France sign similar treaties giving them similar rights as the British.

1846: First delimitation of Foreign (British) Settlement boundaries, with an area of around 138 acres.

1848: Foreign Settlement boundaries extended to 332 acres. American Episcopal Church Mission set up north of Soochow Creek, marking the beginning of the “American Settlement.”

1849: French Concession boundaries defined, with an area of 164 acres.

1851: Beginning of Taiping Rebellion.

1853: “Small Sword” rebels capture the Chinese City and hold it for over a year against an Imperial Chinese siege.

1854, April 4: Battle of Muddy Flat, in which British and American forces attacked Imperial troops to force them away from the Settlement.

1854, July 11: Meeting of foreign residents elects first Municipal Council.

1860, June: The Taiping army captures Soochow (Suzhou).

1860, August 17: First Taiping attack on the Chinese City and Foreign Settlement.

1862, September 21: Frederick Townsend Ward, American commander of the “Ever Victorious Army,” is killed fighting the Taipings.

1863: Foreign and American Settlements amalgamated to become International Settlement.

1863, December 4: “Ever Victorious Army,” under General Charles “Chinese” Gordon, takes Soochow (Suzhou).

1864, May 1: Establishment of Mixed Chinese-Foreign Court in the International Settlement.

1864, July: Nanking (Nanjing) retaken by

Imperialists and Taiping Rebellion crushed.

1874: Riots in the French Concession over a decision to construct a road through the Ningpo Guild cemetery. Shanghai Volunteer Corps called out.

1882, July 26: First public display of electric lighting on The Bund.

1883: Shanghai Waterworks opened.

1889: First modern cotton mill opens in Shanghai.

1897, April 5: Wheelbarrow riots in Shanghai as result of Council’s decision to increase wheelbarrow licenses. Shanghai Volunteer Corps called out.

1897, May 10: First foreign (British) cotton mill opened in Shanghai.

1899: International Settlement extended to cover 5,583 acres.

1900: French Concession extended to cover an area of 358 acres.

1902: First two motor cars, Oldsmobiles, arrive in Shanghai

1908: Shanghai-Nanking Railway completed. Tram network officially opened in both the International Settlement and French Concession.

1914: French Concession extended to cover 2,167 acres.

1927: Nationalists, under Chiang Kai-shek, occupy the Chinese city. Thousands of Communists killed and purged from the city.

1928: Foreign parks opened to the Chinese.

1932: First sign of Sino-Japanese hostilities in Shanghai. Japan occupies part of the Chinese city on pretext, but later withdraws most forces.

1937, August 14: Japanese war reaches Shanghai. Bombs are dropped in the International Settlement and Chinese Shanghai is subsequently occupied by the Japanese.

1941, December 8: Japanese occupy foreign settlements.

1943: Foreign powers relinquish extraterritorial “rights.”

1945, August 15: Japanese surrender.

1949, May 27: Communist troops occupy Shanghai.

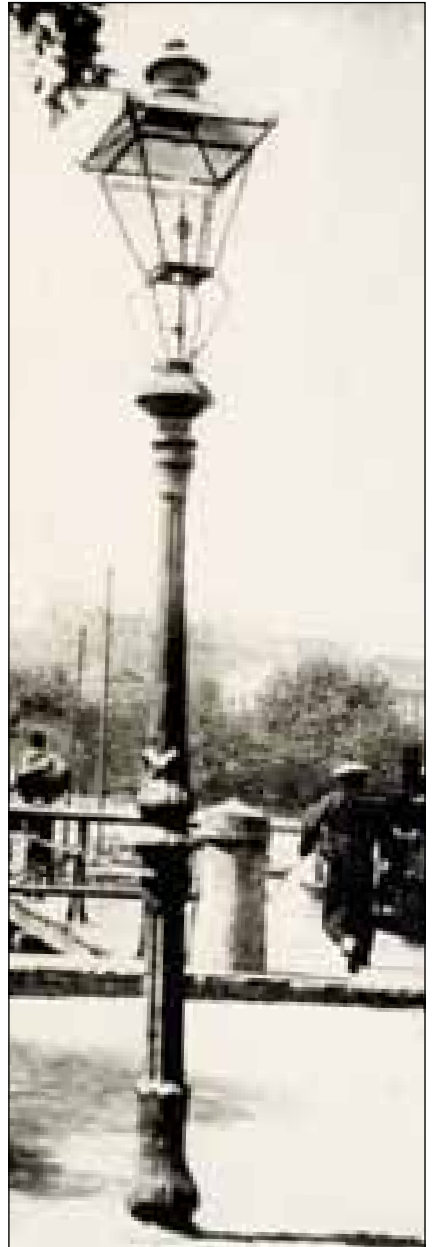
INTRODUCTION

There has never been a place like Shanghai – the layers and depth of richness that the city possesses is extraordinary. This book attempts to give a feel for the world of Old Shanghai through a collage of words and images.

It is not a history book in the usual sense of the term. There is no need to start at page one and read through to the end. It is a jumble of items which evoke the different eras of Old Shanghai.

Old Shanghai as it is usually known lasted for just over 100 years, from 1843 when the British set up the first foreign settlement to 1949 when the Communist troops marched into the city. There were many Old Shanghais, each of them special in time and place, filled with paradoxes and clashing contrasts. Shanghai was run by foreigners but was not a colony. Most residents were Chinese but it was not ruled by China. It was the greatest city of Asia in the first half of the 20th century, completely eclipsing Hong Kong and Tokyo. It was one of the most cosmopolitan places that ever existed, full of growth and speculation, of rogues and adventurers, of color and life. And of poverty and death.

Old Shanghai was the worst and



the best of everything. It was the “Whore of Asia” and also the “Paris of the East”. It was a “paradise for adventurers”, and many other cliches, some of them true. Over the decades, it was a haven to millions of people, both Chinese and non-Chinese, who sought refuge there from war and poverty.

The city had such a bad reputation in certain quarters that it gave rise to the verb “to be Shanghai-ed”, which meant to be drugged and shipped off to sea as a sailor, a reflection of the problem ships’ captains often had when they arrived in Shanghai in putting together enough of a crew to set sail again. Or else a reflection of the reputation for mystery that the city enjoyed.



Shanghai (v.t.)

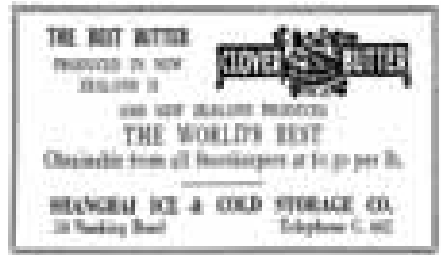
Nautical slang. To kidnap a sailor while unconscious from drugs etc; to trick into an awkward situation.

It was by far the biggest city in China, with a population that by 1927 had topped two and a half million. It was the most industrialised city in China, and it was a significant centre of intellectual activity. For bourgeois thinkers, its middle class pointed the way to the future for China, while to more revolutionary thinkers, its vast ranks of industrial workers carried the promise of revolution. Western visitors to Shanghai reported a “treaty port mentality” amongst foreigners here, while Chinese residents were prone to “Yangjingbang culture,” a term describing the foreign-influenced habits, dress and speech of many of Shanghai’s Chinese residents.



(Yangjingbang was the name of the stream which separated the International and French Concessions until it was filled in and became Avenue Edward VII and later Yan'an Lu.)

There were several Shanghais, and there was surprisingly little overlap between the different worlds. Western visitors saw a western city and foreigners living in the city had little need of contact with the Chinese around them. Very few learned to speak even basic Chinese. The world of the “Shanghailanders” was based on the classic British colonial model — there was the racecourse and the Club, and a church. There were the trading houses and the banks. There was the arrogance of racial and



cultural superiority, although not as bad as in, say, Hong Kong.

The Chinese in Old Shanghai also lived in their own world, denied many of the privileges of the foreigners but nevertheless thriving in the foreign-controlled enclave.

The ambiguities of Shanghai's situation, the legal basis on which it was founded and the support it could rely on, all started to come to a head in the 1920s. China was



A postcard from the early 1900s. British Bobby on the Bund.


experiencing internal upheaval as revolutionary forces gained strength while central authority crumbled. Japan was flexing its muscles. The certainties of the old world disappeared and the home governments were often ambivalent about their support for Shanghai.

Shanghai was above all a young city. It had all the disregard and even contempt for tradition that new cities and societies have, and a desire to be up-to-date and fashionable in all things.

It pointed the way to the future of China, but paid the price for being premature.

This book doesn't attempt to be comprehensive. It is a dragonfly dancing across the surface of Shanghai's history, touching on a few interesting bits, stressing the Shanghai of the foreigners and leaving out all sorts of great stuff. It was inevitable. A book only has so many pages.

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To make money

“In two or three years at farthest I hope to realize a fortune and get away. And what can it matter to me if all Shanghai disappear afterwards in fire or flood? You must not expect men in my position to condemn themselves to prolonged exile in an unhealthy climate for the benefit of posterity. We are money-making, practical men. Our business is to make money, as much and as fast as we can — and for this end all modes or means are good which the law permits.”

a trader writing to the British consul, 19th century

