

Searching for History Amidst the Ever- Changing

A Study Abroad Journey of Discovery

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I enjoy transitions and experiencing new surroundings. Starting a job or joining a new team leaves me searching at first, but I quickly find my footing. Even leaving my small, private high school to begin life at UNH was smooth. It wasn't until I arrived in Shanghai that I experienced the sensation of being immersed in a totally new environment.

Living in Shanghai was a full-frontal assault on my senses. Trains rumbling through metro stations; flashing neon signs on every building; old, Shanghainese men arguing about fish prices—all happening around every corner, at all hours of the day. Living in Shanghai, a shining, metropolitan city, growing at breakneck speed, gave me the unique experience to see life in modern China.

Studying abroad for four months, I lived the life of a true international twenty-something woman. Every weekend held a party on a different rooftop bar overlooking the gleaming lights of the historic Bund or the skyscrapers of Pudong, the constantly construction-filled business district. As an editorial intern for *Time Out Shanghai*, a magazine dedicated to what's going on in Shanghai, I had my hand on the pulse of the city. I knew where the best drink deals were. I knew the newest restaurants, the hottest clubs, and the locations of obscure exhibitions. On any given week, I could point my friends to a place that catered to their interests perfectly. The best of modern Shanghai was at my fingertips. Yet despite the glitz and the glamor, the life of a carefree youth wasn't enough. What I wanted to see was what life in Shanghai was like before westernization hit.

On regular occasions, I would take a break from my homework and internship and walk the area around my school. Mostly hotels, parks and malls, it took me awhile to find my way out of the norm, the flashingly modern. The best surprises came when I accidentally stumbled upon a gem of history, tucked between new structures.

One wrong turn on my way to get coffee one afternoon put me in the middle of a housing complex, one of the few that weren't erected in the last ten years, a real rarity in this city of progress. Small rooms stacked on top of each other, packed tightly together, preserved the sense of community that used to permeate the city as a whole. Men sat in plastic chairs and smoked cigarettes outside of their single-floor homes. Women hung clothes to dry out the window while children ran from one front door to the next, playing tag.

Occasionally a man would look at me, curious about the lone, pale, blonde girl walking through the neighborhood, but then turn back to the card game or tiny television on his lap. Away from the cars and construction, I earned a peek into how Shanghai used to be from this community that is trying desperately to hold on to what they love. Much too soon I came to the exit gate, stepped away from history and back into the new Shanghai, a Starbucks on every corner.

A small demographic of Shanghainese still cling to the way things used to be. Old women gather at Hongqiao Park every evening wearing wind pants and sneakers, ready for their daily exercise. Pop medleys and traditional songs blending together, the women did their choreographed dance numbers. Sitting and watching the women dance fascinated me and I felt an overwhelming sense of calm from their repetitious movements. I could stay for hours in the crisp evening air while the ladies twirled and

stepped and waved their arms. The beauty of the gray-haired ladies represented history, community and connectedness. This is Shanghai. To me, this is China. A world I will never get to truly see, but desperately hope will remain. I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sadness in my chest knowing that this practice will someday die off. The daughters and granddaughters of these dancing women won't know the special joy gleaned on a cool evening in the park.

If I ever return to Shanghai, I'm sure the street I lived on will again be foreign to me, with all new restaurants and stores. Nine-story malls will still compete for top billing next to shiny business offices and large hotel chains. Amidst the ever-changing, I'll always go back to my favorite park at dusk and wait, hoping the ladies will come out for their evening dance.

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