

Notes from Shanghai

Written by Dylan Kissane

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DYLAN KISSANE, JUN 9 2013

It's a Sunday morning in Shanghai and the city is well and truly awake. The car horns – ubiquitous in this place – blare, the scooters and e-bikes twist and turn through pedestrians heading to the many shopping malls open 7 days a week and keen to accept your yuans, euros and dollars.

This is not a fast paced city – that's New York. The bustle, rush and shoving of a New York City street are largely absent here. Yet neither is Shanghai a slow, relaxed city. This is no Amsterdam or Ljubljana. Rather the pace of Shanghai is best described as 'constant': it just doesn't stop.

Since arriving a week ago I've taken a few moments to just stop and look around. The constant movement of people – never too fast and never too slow – is astounding. From the window of the classroom 25 floors up at Wheelock Square I can see an expressway with three lanes of traffic headed in each direction. Over the course of an 8 hour day this week that highway was never anything other than full. Not L.A.-style traffic jam full, just consistently packed, constantly flowing traffic heading into and out of the city centre. So, too, the metro system. The 100 metre long subway cars empty and fill with regularity and only a little pushing as the doors open. Three minutes later the next car disgorges another 1000 people while 1000 more take their place.

As a politics professor, I am trying to keep my eyes open for differences in everyday life under communist rule. So far, there has been little that has had me worried.

There are police everywhere and particularly so on Tuesday evening, the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. But this is a big city with an urban population the same size as my home country Australia. If every policeman in Australia was gathered in the same city I'd probably feel a police presence there, too.

I've witnessed police officers order a tourist to delete photos from his phone, verifying that the illegal shots have been deleted by clicking through the camera afterwards. Truth be told, though, the tourist was taking photos just in front of a big sign that explained it was illegal to take photos, and I've seen similar signs in other countries. I'm chalking that up to a lack of common sense on the tourist's part and not so much 'police state paranoia'.

The most obvious influence on the Chinese Communist Party on my visit so far has been internet access, the fabled Great Firewall of China. It's been a week without easy access to sites like YouTube, the New York Times, and Twitter. There are work-arounds, of course, with ifttt.com, virtual private networks (VPNs) and others being easy alternatives. The censorship, though, is not total: there's no Facebook but there is LinkedIn, there's no Twitter but there is Vine, there's no YouTube but there are Wimp and other video sharing sites.

And, quite frankly, given what has been emerging in the last couple of days about PRISM in the US, internet surveillance seems to be all the rage even in the freedom-loving West, too.

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