

DAISANN McLANE

Remembrance of Things Passed

MY FEET HURT FROM walking in circles, and my head feels as if it's going to explode with frustration. For about the fifth time in the past half hour I pause at an intersection in this old neighborhood in Shanghai and fish around in my bag for the map and my magnifying lens. The Chinese writing on the map taunts me—it grows smaller and less decipherable no matter how I position the lens. Still, I try, painstakingly, to match up the teeny wiggles and strokes with the street signs and the numbers marked on the buildings around me. The place I'm looking for ought to be right here, but nothing about the area resembles the street of my memory.

Six months ago I visited Shanghai for the first time, with my friend Leslie. She travels there a lot and zips around the alleys of the city's residential districts like a local. Having a Shanghai-savvy pal as my guide was a treat; I happily followed her into a maze of *shikumen*, low-rise tenements filled with working-class Shanghai families.

One of the great things about travel is that it gives us an excuse to declare a time-out from our daily business and watch others going about theirs. In Shanghai, Leslie and I jumped into the city's river of life and rode its currents for hours. We grabbed pillowy pork buns from ladies hovering over bamboo steamers, floated through the flotsam of pushcarts and rickety bicycles piled high with curious cargo (mattresses! chickens in cages!), admired the chubby faces of toddlers peeking out from cotton slings on their mothers' chests. At last, like driftwood, we washed up in a shadowy antiques shop covered with the dust of ages. Inside, a man introduced himself as Mr. Wong. Out of thin air (well, okay, out of an old cabinet in the back) he produced an astonishingly beautiful green silk Chinese jacket trimmed with rabbit fur. Leslie purchased it without even bargaining, not wanting to spoil the treasure handed to us.

Now, back in Shanghai a few months later, I'm pounding the pavement with map in hand trying to find that marvelous place. As my cheerful whim transforms, over the course of an hour, into a

cranky determination, I begin to realize something: I'm not irritable because I can't locate Mr. Wong's old shop. I'm upset because I'm after something far more difficult—and far more meaningful—to recover: the pure joy of my first day in Shanghai.

Memory is the invisible spirit that guides, informs, and often haunts our journeys. For me, travel and memory are so entwined, I'm sometimes unsure where one ends and the other begins. When I was young, I'd create little stories about adventures to faraway lands, based on books I'd read or photos I'd seen in *National Geographic*. Decades later, when I finally did visit Tokyo, or Rome, or Australia's outback, I felt I was retracing my steps. The memories of my imaginary travels were so strong that they had the power to shift reality.

As I traveled, my travel memories—real ones, now—grew deeper and began to seem almost like living things. I'd find myself in some wonderful new place, or experiencing something extraordinary, and I'd feel the tickle of memory stirring, spreading its tendrils across the landscape. Every destination became suffused with my emotions, my personal story. Years later, when I yearned to go back in time and revisit the person I used to be—the woman thrilled to be standing at a bar sipping prosecco at 10 a.m. in the Venice market, giddily singing folk songs in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse, nursing her

heartsickness on a beach in Mexico—I only needed to travel to these places again to find her there. It never occurred to me that these places where my memories, my past selves, came alive so vividly could vanish.

Deep down I understand that change is constant, that the world does not—and should not—freeze like a snapshot so it will always match one traveler's beloved version of it. However, I figured that I'd have a few decades of slack before the world I remembered and the world of today parted company, shifting dramatically out of sync.

It used to be that if I fell in love with a café in Paris or a particular old building in Delhi, I didn't have to worry about it disappearing the next Friday. But in our lifetime, billions more people have populated the planet, hundreds of millions are traveling, and global development has ramped up to warp speed. Nowadays I head out to breakfast in Hong Kong every morning with fingers crossed that my favorite noodle place is still open for business and not

swathed in scaffolding or covered with "For Rent" signs.

The map in my hand is only six months old, but today that's a traveler's eternity. When I finally approach a passerby and show him Mr. Wong's shop address, the man points down the road to a construction site that stretches several blocks, then to a forest of hulking cranes that I'd deliberately been trying not to notice.

"Gone," says the man in Chinese. "All gone now."

I nod my thanks to the man, fold up the map, turn slowly away. As I walk, I peel my memories from this aching hole in the ground and move Mr. Wong's shop, the shikumen tenements, and the rest of this old Shanghai neighborhood to the place I know I won't ever lose them: my traveler's heart. ■



Old ways adapt to new days in a rapidly changing Shanghai.

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