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# Shanghai suite and other poems

Glen Phillips Edith Cowan University

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# SHANGHAI SUITE & OTHER POEMS

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# SHANGHAI SUITE

APRIL-MAY 2004

#### and

# SHANGHAI JAZZ AND ALL THAT POEMS 2004-2008

Glen Phillips

2009

International Centre for Landscape and Language Edith Cowan University

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# PART ONE

# **SHANGHAI SUITE**

For Rita

#### I MELON SELLERS

I have bought you melons she said. I hope you like them. Indeed, for she was a mother even then. On the street red-cheeked country women hauling barrows showed their rosy apples, muscular hands of bananas, sloe-eyed grapes.

But she had chosen from them these four small melons. I regret I did not eat them. But I had no want of melons then.

#### II ON THE BANKS OF THE HUANGPU

From the extruded bowels of Pudong's highest tower, amazed it could be made to stand here in the vellow mud of this great river's delta, I looked down at barges, cargo boats and vessels of all breeds and origins. From this height they could be junks or sampans, they all look much the same. An immense oxbow in the Huangpu, it is part of the artery that is a Yangtse tributary, curling round its two banks separating this seething city. Its river traffic fattens the river to its high cholesterol count. Threatens to clog and deliver to that panting organ its final unctuous ritual of death. But that is the risk of making a good living, shi bu shi? Shi bu shi?

#### III YOU SHOWED YOUR HAND

You reached out suddenly to put your hand lightly on mine. And just as instantly drew it away again. Thus fate touches us, or so it seems, as the best prepared plans of man are instantly put awry by instinct now and then.

I thought to myself, 'You've played your hand whether you know it or not. Let's see where that move gets you *xiao jie*, aye?'

#### IV WHITE LIE

'Hee, hee hee!' she laughed lightly, covering her lips, 'I can't help telling my little white lies.' Were they a whiter shade of pale or were they from the nursery paint box? You have choice of French Grey, India Red, Burnt Sienna, Delft Blue, Prussian Blue and China White. 'Anyway,' she said, 'I was born in the Year of the Snake. That's why I'm always so cool.' At least she gave me fair warning. If it were true.

#### **V LONG MARCH**

The lake lay reflecting upon its spring self the peonies flowering, the snow of spring willow drifting onto grass.

They say this long causeway saved Hangzhou from floods but now tourists flood in to stroll and bask and cherish the foresight of Emperor Wu.

We walked that causeway's whole length to test our strength of mind and Wu's design.

#### VI RESOLVE

You held up your arm like something you'd found in the street. We crowded round. Even the guard from the gate came running to aid the foreign woman taken out by a hump in the road nobody had heeded before.

It's broken, you said. I'm sure. We hoped not, but you were resolved. And as it proved you knew well enough that old game even Chinese children play, presenting paper, scissors, stone. Three white coated Nanjing surgeons kindly held out their hands to take your broken bones and straining set you right again.

Only the sling of misfortune badged you after that. Was it the road's resolve to sentence you to two month's mending for its stone?

#### VII VISITING RITES

'My kid,' she said,
'I see him once a month.'
But ever since women
bled once a month to
the moon's march across
the night sky, this is the oldest
one child policy or plight:
to give each mother here
a one-in-a billion or so
chance to prove how rich
is this yellow earth. To show
each month's throw of the dice
is a visitation's holy price.

#### VIII WAKING AT NIGHT IN JUNGONG LU

It was ever a disturbed sleep: ships moaning somewhere up the foggy Huangpu; a freight train shuffling rakes of trucks; the hee-haw of an ambulance or the rising scream of police pursuit.

A chair leg shrieks across laid tiles. someone is coughing in the smoke of a past midnight cigarette, a lorry batters iron manhole lids in the comatose street. Then a door betrays a muffled departure, a walker in the road hums a sad song. There is one brief cry. Or was it a shout?

Only dogs do not bark in this night nor cocks crow in the small hours. Creaks of a bed above or below as a body turns towards the wall. Or was it mine? Sleep creeps back in.

#### IX SLEEPER IN A TRAIN

Through sodden fields this train urges along, willows just coming into leaf. Road crossings and canals flick past. Someone bends double in a field where canola already displays forbidden colour of the emperor's clothes.

Uniformed attendants who could have served some royal personage before steam rail challenged the dragon's monopoly of fire advance at intervals with wares. Buyers are few yet they perform these patient rituals of faith.

Then I see how many of my fellow travellers loll with lidded eyes. Rocked by motion of the mother train they sleep. One here with open book fallen in her lap. Another mutters in sleep. One snores.

I stare again at the racing countryside Waiting, perhaps, the sleeping giant to awake.

#### X MAUSOLEUM

Looking back from the entrance steps you see the way the crowds have come to revere the good doctor's resting place.

We rest after our long climb through arch and gate of the Purple Mountains. Almost a hundred years have passed as we shake the shuttered lens to life time after time. Such a long ascent these flights after flights through leafy glades. Distant the would-be-capital's new towers, Nanjing, steeps in morning haze. Now these hills can cherish a history of success and defeat, betrayal and hope.

We enter the sacred domed room, thick with anima of living breaths. Sweat of veneration, or is it fear of fiercer futures, rolls down straining faces? The prone marble figure glistens as if with ascension's portents even now.

At last we emerge to the mountain's bracing air. A child screams to its mother to be taken up.

#### XI DOING SOLITARY

Downstairs I walked straight past the guard who wasn't looking and took in free air. Rather chill it was but nobody shouted. There were no shots and I wasn't followed.

Buoyed, I went into the open street where bicycles whizzed by. A taxi stopped for a bright young thing in red with pointed shoes. The bell rang as a tricycle delivery man for hire creaked by, his cardboard sign in characters flapping in the free breeze.

Briskly I walked on, encouraged, keeping to Jungong Road, not straying into Hai'an Road at the lights. It was up to them to pursue me when they found I had escaped. I would not try to evade, elude or dissimulate. My heart was bold.

After I passed the power station and the sewage farm I began to hesitate. Was the time ripe? Do the crime, do the time, it is said. Slowly I walked back, on the other side.

#### XII CRUISING DOWN THE RIVER

Maybe it was the last boat that day for trippers. The crew smart enough, but barely a couple of dozen going aboard.

It was a stiff breeze coming across the delta yet we still chose to sit out there resolute on the foredeck as the boat headed downriver towards the Yangtse and the sea.

On the left bank handiwork part dismantled of the old concessions, dwarfed now by glazed towers beside Suzhou Creek, once thick with smallcraft as eyelashes in a half-closed eye.

This was the division once between richer and poorer parts of the foreign plundering. Here children toiled with hands in boiling water, teasing silk thread from cocoons. Sikhs chased goats, they said, or little boys; Chinese merchants didn't like the idea of prostitutes unless under the age of fourteen; lews were active in selling opium, And the English? Ah, the British sold their souls rotten—keeping dogs and Chinese from public parks, women from clubs and children in sweatshops up to sixteen hours a day. And from the high seats of carriage or car, cursed beggars for getting in their way.

Our ferry swung in the stream to head back past the Bund and grey gunboats fluttering with the red flag flying. Now that's a turn around for the old Huangpu, like when the Europeans all turned round and scuttled out, first for the Japanese in nineteen thirty seven and then for the Revolution in forty nine.

The chill on the river decided us as we chugged upstream, we left the deck and brisk wind, turned and went inside.

#### XIII THE PIG MEN

Every morning sharp at half past five the pig men pass pedalling slow but certainly. Across carriers of both their bikes are draped the pink nakedness of pig carcasses, their trotters almost but not quite kissing again dust of the street. Where they go or from where they come retains its mystery. Only that I know I have been told that the Year of the Pig is auspicious for the birth of a man.

#### XIV FLYING

I first saw the far-flung flags in the evening sky of Pudong above the new city's monuments where a kite addict, I suppose, furled inch by inch enormous length of his black and red opera-masked beauty. But still out there strained a dozen others on tugged strings. Quadrilaterals of time-honoured hues: bats, birds of prey, warplanes and dragons. Down below, the kite sellers ranked themselves in stalls, their best ones draped like prize washing for all to see. Children hopping in delight pointed and begged while their parents eyed worriedly the length of string and wondered.

#### XV THE DOOR TO IT ALL

While having my picture taken flanking the nondescript door in a nondescript lane of Xin Tian Di. I queried the barriers, the flag fluttering crimson on the wall by that modest door. It was where the Chinese Communists first met, was explained to me. I thought, so the party started here!

Only five and half decades since their revolution plotted in this room we have no right or reason any more, it seems, to knock at that door. No one here even pauses to enter the little street.

#### XVI CHINESE PUZZLES

A big man. He stood on the stage in his pinstripe suit and addressed the ranks of eager children flanked by parents almost as eager to be impressed by the showman's puzzling trick. All craned as he took up the long paper strip, green on one side, the other white. Look, he said, making a loop, look at me snip.

We all watched as carefully he cut all along the strip but kept a portion clipped between finger and thumb. We thought, ah, that's the trick. Then he turned and quipped to the kids, I'll bet *you* can guess what it will look like when I make the last cut! Adults are no good at this. Flattered, they did their best for his sake.

After a time, one or another opined the result would be just two narrower bits. But adults eager to join in tried to offer complex theories, suspecting hidden slits or secret knots or the whole thing coming out as a one great loop with a twist. He laughed again, I told you the adults always complicate. With a flick of his wrist he showed the wise-eyed kids what he'd done. As they'd expected: just two strips out of one!

#### XVII THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES

shop after shop with the racks full, sales-girls frenetic to do a deal; two gigglers and an old goat with no words to mouth his gagged requests.

measured up with tapes, trussed in too-small shirt and pants he's banished to the change room no bigger than a laundry bin.

deal done, purchases in bags, they wheel him into the supermart to search for soy sauce, dou fu, garlic, rice. ancestor worship, as good as it gets.

#### XVIII THE HONEY MEN

They say in Old Shanghai one of the choice morning sights was the indefatigable honey men.

To and fro they plied their wares earnest regular contemplative men loaded with wisdom rural and urban.

In pretty blue and white these days helping to bring beans, melons and salads truly well nurtured to your table

from the market garden farms every day, to Quyang, Anshang or Yangpu, these shit tankers have replaced the honey men.

#### XIX ABREAST OF THE TIMES

In the villa garden all was peace. Outside traffic roared at the gates, elevated freeways peered from afar but advanced no further. Here the party had commandeered a relic of colonial wealth fit for their functionaries.

Eros (or was it Venus?) coyly unclothed in marble whiter than snow perched on an elevated plinth. It seemed a background proper for the photo opportunity with her, so we stood close abreast for the digital wink.

#### XX MAY DAY

May Day. And each taxi and truck seems to have decided itself to keep the red flag flying. On national TV there is some marching between soccer games, the market's rise and fall and the latest delegation from the West seeking to forge what they call closer links. As they step from the plane, flowers are presented by smiling Chinese maids. Greetings made, the joint enterprise retires to the conference tables replete with more flowers and thermos flasks for the chrysanthemum or jasmine tea. And whom do you think, to forge this link, has brought the safety chains?

#### XXI HE POINTED OUT HAI'AN ROAD

Maybe he thought I paused at the cross road lost in space of this megapolis? Touched by the sun as I peered from side to side? So he rushed across red-faced to point to the sign: Hai'an Lu. Peaceful sea road, I knew it said for I was about to step in inferno of a dockside street where the mega trucks and motorcycle combinations, articulated trolley buses, hell-bent black cars and blind tri-cyclists came at you from every corner of the earth, even when the lights went green. I thanked him for his concern as best I could, and thought wistfully of a peaceful sea.

#### XXII THE VICE SQUAD

How many vices do they have a squad for? Old Shanghai would have known. Here now on campus fearful of concupiscence they peer behind bushes flashing lights at night. Seeking to disarm the combatants, maybe they say Comrades, make war not love!

#### XXIII COFFEE GROUNDS

Black, black coffee has a function in our lives greater than supreme unction. For all the tea in China, coffee blends fly higher, faster when the caffeine sends you above the streets and offices, floating over pearly tower, department stores, bloating trade conference edifices of aesthetic pride. You fly on, fuelled with short blacks, glide over the Huangpu, the Bund, where wei guos' ships unloaded this first secret drug dose. more powerful in the end than opiates for the people. Yes, each sack of beans creates a thousand doses, roasted and slowly dripped by Oriental barristas at Starbuck bars, equipped with Marco's espresso machines, foamed with the monkish cappuccino crowns and downed one after one until your eves burn to white dwarfs and your hands begin to shake, your laughs die of drought in your throat. Then, my friend, we remember the pact. One tribute we extend to each other over the years as sister and brother. It's the truth: one good cup deserves another.

#### XXIV A RETTER VIEW OF THE PIANO

This was posh, really posh, he thought, eveing the alabaster pillars, ceiling overarched. In the grand old days of the concessions they spared no expense to build a place where diners might take a little opulence with the evening meal. Table for two he asked the Maitre 'd, thinking to himself lions head soup, roast duck Shanghai style, pickled turnip and mushrooms...a slight cough from she by his side. He turned testily, Yes? What is it, my dear? A finger Pointed to something obscured by flowers and carved mahogany screen. Another cough and he understood. Motioning back the waiter he explained. My wife here would like another table. The waiter frowned. Look here, I'm a reasonable fellow, he told him, but the meal comes with music I understand? Then we demand a better view of the piano. His wife, number two, murmured support and he spoke more sharply, Chop, chop my good man.

#### XXV LUST ALLAYED

Hereabouts I'm told there was a custom observed in rural families. They gave their twelve-month-old a baby chick or other animal, so small the little toddler could wring its neck, crunch the life out of it somehow. And thus they forestalled violent acts in their child's coming years. You think of Red Guards. Oops! Maybe the system's not perfected quite.

#### XXVI GETTING OUT ON THE WRONG FLOOR

Lost in thought you sure can step right out of a lift you expect to go straight down to the ground floor. Only it has stopped for someone else to get in. Looks stupid when it disaappears and leaves you 9 floors above

no less! Yes! is comrade word for that friend? The call that, my What do you better than you. you're going to know where always seem inside. They haul you back your lapel and souls will grab in a lift, kindly to be in China

ground. However, should you happen at the time

#### XXVII IT'S A BIRD, IT'S A PLANE...

Doing rather well, I thought, the interview going like a charm. And I was my most charming self. It seemed then that something distracted. I tried harder to please, to give more than was humanly possible. At least that's how it felt until the thread faltered unravelled. I was undone. I followed the gaze directed at my left breast. Finger was pointed. A small matter had usurped me it seemeda brown stain and a blob. I think, sir, you have some marks, she said, on your chest. I knew that already and reached for my hanky. Sure enough it was bird shit. I was shot down, like a bird, like a plane...

#### XXVIII PROMETHEUS BOUND

Huo or 火 is the word for fire and you can add ch'e to it for train, chien for rocket or hsien for fire insurance. Not much use if the standard municipal response to your house burning down was to beat a big drum to scare the fire demon away! They were right in a way, but it took time—and your house!

Now as I stare out from the twelfth floor flat over the studded stalagmites of this spreadeagled city, sixteen million strong, it's all fired-up by that ass Prometheus's meddling.

# **PART TWO**

SHANGHAI AND ALL THAT JAZZ

### SHANGHAI AND ALL THAT JAZZ

On tour. It's Shanghai tonight, they say. The little band of travellers, tourists from Au Da Li Ya step heavily down from their luxury bus in Nanjing Lu and receive brass keys to colonially spacious rooms in what they now call Peace Hotel, the Bund a few steps away. Here many a famed westerner's form reclined thankfully on laundered sheets in Sassoon's halcyon days, when Coward wrote 'Private Lives' and Shaw or Chaplin sayoured an admiring glance.

But after supper our tour leaders declared we'd be entertained in the famed Jazz Bar by legend's long playing old jazz band still thumping 'Lazy River' and 'Ye Shanghai'. So we tapped a toe with a glass of Qingdao beer in hand. Found anything but peace til 2am. After all, it was 'Crippled Sassoon' who made sure the Bank of China remained twelve centimetres lower than the Peace Hotel.

### ANTICS IN A NEW GARDEN

It's an old custom here in Shanghai they say, maybe because they're an easy-going lot, a city that grew on the rump of confident Western cargo cults. Perhaps Western striped pyjamas first were seen here in French or British villa gardens where Papa or Daddy strolled in the stifling nights of tropic summer long before the Sons of Heaven came to bark and bray and behead the real Shanghaiese who dared to defy or merely got in their way.

So, in those balmier times maybe it entered the minds of the Chinese here that 'jamas' were so stylish they'd not waste wearing them merely as slumber-wear. Therefore each day, even now, we see boldness of pyjama-clad Shanghaiese wheeling supermarket trolleys around the new supermarts, popping down to the corner shop for a brace of steamed buns or a packet of prawns. Or outside their new Western style apartment blocks prop and chat in night dress and ponder perhaps movements of the Hang Seng or the Nikkei or their own Stock Exchange.

Still, when I meet, on a narrow path of a spring evening mild, some fully Bananas-in-Pyjamas-clad citizen and begin the age-old step aside, no you first, kind of dance, I recall that picture book of my youth when 'the bears wore slumber wear, even the llamas put on pyjamas' and ceremonially some creatures maybe from islands just across the sea said, 'Shall we make the tea?'

### CEMENT SLEEPERS

Thunder of guns in Jungong Road? No, only another 'artic' rumbling past, bouncing steel seatainers in its tray.

And then the lorry loads of cement in bags. Among the bags what looks like grey rags but it's a man, no.

two men lying on their backs, one with a dirty dust mask half over his mouth. They smoke or kip, it's hard to tell. One thing sure, from my own childhood years in Perth down wind of Portland Cement.

their lungs will be well and truly dusted. Lucky I got away to the South West forests where I breathed with the trees.

But these men, bedded on bags to build new docks or a subway, won't get such a break, as their tumbril takes them off.

### **EXPOSURE AT LAST**

The traffic streamed down Zhongjiaxui towards us as we gingerly stepped from one broken pavement piece to the next. Passed shop after shop with garlic and spice smells promising to make happy customers when noonday comes.

In the photographer's shop courtesy and puzzlement. Not too many come here to take their own photographs. Still he pulled down his blind, let us line up left and right right and left to be exposed.

It made me think of the shots they take of prisoners. You never can tell by looking what goes on in their minds. But we weren't facing a term behind bars were we? Unless you count that fever to spend a solitary confinement yet to come.

### GREEN FOOD LTD

The picture placard was the open steppes, meadows where sheep grazed down to drink at a pristine stream, blue skies decked with clean cloud shapes.

Daily the lorries backed and filled unloading their packaged cuts of pork or beef or flesh of those unfrocked sheep, while ant labourers stacked and culled.

Behemoths emptied, were joined again with the turbid bloodstream of dockyard streets, coagulating at cross roads where blood and grass green pulse to pause, go on.

Back at Green Food Ltd, hordes of small vans come to load scarcely-chilled white parcels bound for the city's woks, frypans and grills. Even as they scurry, fresh loaded lorries draw in.

At the entry gates, rival stockpots wait for diners. Cooks sweat to claim footpath space for tastes: there's chicken feet, pork trotters, and sheepshank broth.

Dusk at Green Food Ltd; at last a lull, you walk past on the other side quickening to respect the dead, trying not to sniff the charnel pall.

### SHE TOUCHED ME

The oarsman slid the tourist craft down green water alleys of Wuzhen, between whitewashed houses, under arched stone bridges and past the tea house beneath stooping willows. Rain fell softly, fluttering on the boat's canopy, echoing chat of these students taking a cheerful study break.

Suddenly a laughing girl turned to my minder. "She's asking" he said, "can she have her photo taken with the grey kangaroo."

I could only agree, it seemed uncool to refuse. But her idea of a casual pose was to first rock the boat with her lunge to tug me so close in that touching moment, as her friend's camera flashed, that I knew I sensed the flame of youth.

## **HULLO, HULLO, HULLO!**

You hear this greeting from the first in every street: Hullo! Change money? Hullo! Buy Rolex?

Or just glad to meet a westerner, maybe. Half in fun half friendship. To their mates, a feat of linguistics—look at me! I dared to step out of my culture. Pretty neat?

Still I was surprised that afternoon in the corridor of the shiny new university building when out of a door popped a six-year-old: Hullo! Hullo! But then he bore me by the hand into inner sanctums where I saw his mother typing at her desk.

Presented me with smiles and more 'hullos'. She seemed taken aback, looking over her files all stacked up. Spoke sharply as one well used to her son's little wiles. Perhaps to say, boy, how many times have I told you? Shush, no denials! You're not to bring in stray pets?

Not wishing to be involved, I guess, I patted the little fellow's wiry head nodded and smiled at what she said as if I savvied. And made myself scarce.

### TIDES AND GROUNDWATER

What could kill me is the groundwater of our love which has risen as trees were cleared from the space, so we no longer stay unseen by each other, hidden in dark shadows of standing forests. Knowing wild impertinence of passion, my salt tears whiten the earth. And I tread red clay until my footprints show on this surface that grows ever more silvered than my hair will be. Is this, then, how I must learn to die for you?

That salt moon up there which shines down on the canal's lapping surfaces is drawing the dark tide into this harbour to rise among saline posts and piers until we feel its cool liquid incisions link our bodies with its drowning touch. Was our love so heated only the moon's cold power could quench fires that would consume furious hearts?

### IN MY LADY'S CHAMBER

Chairs scrape and the patter of tiny feet. The television drones on about some convention in Dalian. The tea mugs grow cold, the epaulettes have faded, the braid no longer has its old sheen. Only adverts for dish wash liquids, nutrient shampoos, body lotions and such. The patter is manic now. Before communion there must be the preparation, offertory, revelation of the Host. Bedsprings creak. Blessing bestowed, after murmurings there is sleep. In the small hours small disturbances: finally, towards morning, somewhat late the tension breaks for her. Brief moans come quickly. At last replete.

Shortly the iron gate of the outer door clangs shut. A taxi briefly slows, draws into the kerb, swings away towards another suburb. Another business trip (that's his excuse) is complete.

### **EYES AND BUTTERFLIES**

They're not chrysanthemums on my collar you told me. I looked again and could see they were indeed two butterflies.

Do you know, you said to me, that it's supposed when a mother kisses her son goodbye, another kind of confusion flutters his eyes?

But if you know boys really well your son would blush if heard by his school chums being referred to by his mum as a big blue butterfly.

It takes years growing to manhood for that boy to hear his sweetheart say such playful phrases. And the art to respond with a butterfly's touch on the lids of her closed fast eyes.

#### SHANGHAI REFUSE

Brisk walks to work bring the blood to your face in spring. Talking about early spring of course is apt when there's a fresh source of a shower almost every day and the wind can whip some way along Hai'an Road in from the sea.

So, stepping out over cracked, ugly paving stones, I see this path beside the roaring traffic stretch with the tide of cyclists, burdened buses, trucks, all on the way to work—you might recall it is work, the party says, makes them free. For if you work, then you get to eat, see? That's what puts warm food in the belly and a bottle of beer in front of the telly.

But walking on, you notice garbage out, the sort that's wrapped up in a stout black plastic bag. But, what's that stuck out the end? Something like truck tyre treads squirm. My god, it's a pair of makeshift shoes! A vagrant is there sprawled on a low wall by the verge all wrapped in a plastic strip. The urge to work is defied by this man. Now I see, resisting work is the one way to be free!

### RAT IN MY POCKET

Born in the year of the Rat I wondered could I retrace my steps, memorise the way back to you? All these twists and turns of the daily rat race yet still I insist to find the signs you left to guide me, trusting at the windows you set in place lamps to show me this was home.

### RAIN ON BRIDGES

The sound of rain on black umbrellas in the canals of Wuzhen: it's small thunder in a day of steady downpour, like mourners broken by grief. And here people pick their way over sodden flagstones under gouting eaves that cascade on coat collars until they stumble upon arched stone bridges.

I shared umbrellas often with you in the streets of Shanghai, under surprise spring showers, walking with bicycle between us and the rain pattering on the umbrella, like butterflies trapped in a paper bag. Or is it rice shaken inside a child's toy drum? Or maybe it is a foretaste of tears falling, falling on an unopened, inkstained envelope to you?

But Wuzhen taught me about bridges; they arch over dark waters, take us safely to other shores where life starts again. You can go on, even if your skin still chills with the unwelcome touch of fevered hands; the burning breath and dry lips of a thief. For, beyond the bridge's symmetry, you find not just another row of villages houses but another land where the sun dries up the rain.

### SHARING

(for L.P.)

Suffering: it is a real woman's task to take finally the harder road while someone listens to the pipa far, far away from that music's home. They say such tunes are food for love. But what sustenance is this? When thousand after thousand ocean miles drown out the singing of plucked strings with sea's rough work of waves and howl of driven salt winds across the crests.

After the song has ended you walk on broken paths in the desert silence. Over granite rocks air shimmers as heat rises. Strange mirages show like plates of darkness, like the shapes of demons, dragons, avenging spirits of torment.

But the light changes over the land and rain showers follow. Then in warm sun brilliant desert flowers bloom.

### THE ENFEEBLEMENT OF DREAMS

Legend and literature are full of old men whose eyesight dims. You hold a chicken helpless, noticing the opaque film which moves rapidly across its eyes like a premonition of death. But it is true the cataracts in the eyes of men are indeed harbingers of the end.

Those who love, yet must live apart, find each day of separation passes another shadow between them, no matter how they strive to hold brilliant images of farewells—when tears rolled. And the last impress on lips faded. Then, day by day, impossible Arcadies of impassioned embraces darken, as they face enfeeblement of wildest dreams.

### TWO POEMS FOR A FRIEND

1

"The bright-eyed Zhejiang beauty dresses at dawn" Lu Xun

A pair of doves wait by my bird bath, the terracotta basin that stands there in my garden. Watchfully, patiently they expect their turn, while quarrelling honey-eaters, wattle birds and wrens swoop and splash and rustle feathers busily. So are they doves of peace? Should we also wait so patiently, so demure, our love silent except to us? Will we one day know it is our turn to make a splash in the bright water? Shake the silver drops among roses and peonies as, cleansed of careworn days and quietude we take wing and fly on the wind to meet the warmth of sun, freedom of the air.

11

"Solemnly the girl from Qin plays her lute of jade" Lu Xun

From the thunder of the street
I ascended the high apartment
tower in the elevator's hush.
My feet dragged me where to push
that button for the bell and wait.
While the world outside roared remote
from me, I fought the devil within,
the memories, put there by fumbling thin
fingers, the struggle to possess my lips
the arms embracing gripping for my hips.
I pushed back images of disgust and fear.
Then the door opened. A different man was there.

## ON THE TRANSFER OF GENERAL YE JAN YING FROM SHANGHAI TO GUANGDONG

Waiting for her,
I and my old veteran
of a thousand shots,
battered a bit,
crestfallen, yet the one-eyed
wonder who has dragged me through
many a hedge of thorns
to wake the soft-haired
sleeping beauty with his kiss.

And so, companion-in-arms, my little general, the one I never asked for, the one I can't retire, promote or redeploy to another province, when you prove too wilful for my own good, will you be in good form this night? Looking for her I wait and see

### ON A HIGH

(from the Sky Arena 94, Pudong, Shanghai)

The woman froze in foetal crouch in angle of glass floor and wall. Four hundred meters up we were from the old alluvium of Pudong, the real floor of the burgeoning citadel in haze that stretches long — all the way to kingdom come in our ancient nursery lore.

Face contracted with her pain and like an infant reddened at birth she writhed in terror of falling down. Over and over she'd foretold, no doubt, her free-fall plummet, a flawed bungee jump, to leave her life behind. Down to join the teeming crowds below who scurry on that live mosaic of mud.

So I obeyed her cry, 'Leave me alone! I'll be ok soon.' And I too stepped with care, keeping eyes raised from the new face of Shanghai down there, bristling with high-rise, like the stubbled cheeks or chin of some tough movie star on set. Ready to be Daring Dan, hero, who can also entice the heart.

Now, thinking of that weird pang you get in the bowel or other part when you confront insane heights you wonder is it a strange ancestral trigger, perhaps, which allies somehow with taboo dangers of sex? Or is it remembrance simply of childhood alerts? Always to respect that icy breath of death.

### SHARING A SLICE OF PIZZA

I battled through so many days to sit here amused with a slice of pizza in my hand. While you mirror me hand also poised and say 'this is good,

the mozzarella is so good.' Yet I travelled over freeway arch and thrust, passed by pagodas ancient as those long stone walls

that trace precise capilliaries on the land's flesh, crossed swart rivers lined with boat and barge. Stopped to climb step after step of Buddhist monasteries

high on Chengde's hillsides, or paused on pale lenticular bridges in palace pleasure gardens among herds of deer. By green pools where

crimson fish clustered to feed, I longed to be home with you. But must journey on through more fields of spent cornstalks and fresh cabbages.

On over brown mountains where bright persimmon lanterns light up leafless trees like multiples of the late autumn's dying suns. And ochre

corn cobs are laid to dry like precise imperial carpets on roadsides or the flat roofs of farmhouses; then heaped in farmyard corners.

Almost at the last we left behind the scimitars of beaches where warships once shook the waters with spouting salvoes.

And here now the air cuts my face sharper than pruning knives in orchards

of apples and apricots. For in Yangpu the air courses up river past Pudong.

It gathers leaves at kerbs and gateways, shakes the last green weeds beside broken masonry as cyclists wheel by. That wind has joined me here in my search.

And you have come finally in greeting reluctant or tentative as a sparrow that darts from out shrubbery to take almost forgotten warmth of a winter sun.

#### WAITING

'It has been long since I said to him good-bye. When shall we be together again?' (Xu Zaisi—Yuan Dynasty)

Days pass, the road grows longer. I trip on high kerbs, step over every cracked unmarked fissure, cross to right or left, the seeker always of a better way. You linger in your youth, distracted ever by a bird's song or pretty flower.

But my youth has long ago gone and winter threatens to be done with me. Yet I persist. And turn to wait for your light step alone. It is your high spirits soon to be shared for which I yearn, as I sit waiting on this bench of stone.

### WHEN YOU CAME TO ME

All that evening, hedged between toasts in Chinese to mutual friends I fumed and brooded. You chose other company. Declined vacant place offered next to me. Was this rough justice? Your head bent towards others, you seemed just one more of the other many wives who politely joined the evening's celebrations wishing to be elsewhere, at their own hearth fire with family, perhaps. I tried to plan to begin another life, in some parallel universe. But could not still the stupid turmoil raging within; distract myself with this next dish or that. I made myself converse pleasantly with my fellow celebrants. Rattled my glass on the table with unfelt Christmas cheer.

Then you did come, when you judged it was time. Or so it seemed. I was so glad of your greetings for they sent despair flying from that prisoning room. Like an addict or patient desperate for relief, I cared not your reason to rescue me from that clamorous company. For I must believe it was for past times you came to me. And gave my soul ease.

### LOS/T

So I say a prayer for you in Shanghai's downtown dockside clutter of streets and burgeoning new flats.

Humanity has its flow and ebb. You never know for sure which way the tide, or the Huangpu, flows. And we ebb and flow but never stand still.

Each day or week, another change as we grow like old friends, old in the ways of love; sometimes, like newlyweds, eyes bright, or more as children who unwrap their new year gifts in sudden delight.

Sampans on the river's cluttered creeks show families you never knew going about their busy lives: rice stuffed down from a bowl; wash dish swirled and emptied overboard; clothes strung as faded flags from a wheelhouse.

You look closer and then you see this is our own family puttering past. Somewhere we must have boarded another craft; leaving them sailing on, unaware, maybe. Had we lost out?

### BY BUBBLING WELL ROAD

If you look into this old Yangpu River where it flows past wharf and pier, past creek and bridge and tower, you see in its darkness the floating weeds the murk of muddied lanes and streets, the spent humours of the multitudes who have endured dynasties on these banks.

The delta's drainage meets the ocean's tides and the outflow is all the ends of lives. Nearby waits the great Yangtse's flood that spends its strength through highland and gorge, tumbling from distant tributaries.

When morning's eastward paleness lights the pall over all these sprawling suburbs, I think of fresh mountain streams that plunge among the rocks and have so many thousand

Yangtse miles to run. Such young torrents have no patience for the last slack reaches of an indolent river. Darkened waters resist embrace of open seas; measure time's vast stretches passing swiftly and forever.

### **EXPOSURE AT LAST**

The traffic streamed down Zhongxiasui towards us as we stepped from one broken pavement to the next passing shop after shop with cooking smells promising happy appetites when noonday arrived.

In the photographer's shop courtesy and puzzlement. Not many think to come here to take their own photographs. Still he pulled down his blind, let us line up left and right right and left to be exposed.

It made me think of the shots they take of prisoners. You never can tell by looking at them what goes on in their minds. But we weren't facing a term behind bars were we? Unless you count that fever to spend a solitary confinement yet to come.

### EXPRESSING LANE

(eight items only)

Picture a shiny supermarket in a Shanghai suburb's street amid rubble of exploits now long past and new fervour of blossoms in cement and steel. Still the many melon sellers and the trinket men crowd the old footpath of puddles leading to the grand new-paved concourse to 'take-away' spoils.

Inside the aisles tremble with glittering trolley loads of packaged noodles, tins of beans and bamboo shoots, sauce bottles, clothes pegs, sweets. I fast-forward. I dart from row to row, my chariot stacked and stashed and ready to go.

My bee-line to the check-out checked I veer right to a queue that looks the shortest, below a bilingual sign that I choose to ignore for the nonce, replete with my victory over this temple to consumption's speed.

A tall gent taps me on the shoulder, points to the sign I wouldn't read and says in perfect English, 'Chum, can't you read? It says eight items only, savvy?' I search hastily for a tongue to pretend I'm Spanish, French or a Lithuanian. And sheepish go through, while the whole queue stands and stares and the lass on the till registers my error without the blink of an eye.

# LOSING THE WAY: a warning

You say you do not know these streets.
That you always somehow in these streets lose the way. We search down these streets and up another way for book stores. These streets lead us all the by-ways of Shanghai. These streets lead us by autumn leaves to books.

You say you do not know the pages of these books, these bookleaves. But the pages of books are like streets in writers' minds. The pages are like days, falling like leaves; the pages mark the end of spring and summer, the pages you get lost in, searching the writers' ways.

# YOU ARE LOS(T)

New cities have new freeways, fly-overs or curving underpasses all for the love of getting there or getting away. It seems you have one eye on escape these days. Signs of panic too at the worst scenarios. So where is love of the old in all this? Is it a new exit I missed? The signs are big enough but so big maybe I forgot to read them, and am I now where the freeway stops?

### HOW TIME FLIES IN SHANGHAL

Opposite us, the bamboo scaffolds reminded the rush of shafting high-rise towers which cost life after life of displaced peasant workers, come here from distant provinces. They'll have no papers but are measured like the bamboo's notched bones. So easily rendered by the master painter, whose ink-soaked brush pauses, kisses and strokes the silk again with consummate touch.

But this side of the crammed street was for repasts. Workmen crowded into the little eatery where the linen was used at least twice and sweating hands urged stools closer to the tables when the *pi jiu* foamed into every glass. Chopsticks poised then pounced as dish followed dish and the steamboat bubbled centre of their jollity. Meanwhile above in the yellowed plastic chandelier a proletariat of flies poised for the moment of descent.

Buzzed happily over bare arms and full plates while the waitresses, bursting from too-tight blouses, swatted and struck to no avail. Better just to endure them perhaps? I voted we should wait till later for our meal. Let the flies have it. So we left.

### THE BUND IN SPRING

So this is the river which you cannot step into twice? Huangpu flows slow and steady toward the sea; and the tourists pause as if to agree that since in the Bund the foreign park is gone with its insulting sign (like dark days of winter). They find themselves to be the guests now of spring sunshine, see the plum and cherry trees explode in smoky blossoms along Zhongshan Road.

Across the turbid waters that throb with barge and tugboat, where ferries bob and weave among river traffic, witness the ambition of a many-towered metropolis. Pudong furrows and fields have woken from centuries of seasonal toil, forsaken trust in ritual tillage and household gods for new gods of glazed pride for the crowds to gape at—bookleaf spires and startling globes of azure and rosy pearl. Graphs of fiscal probes map futures markets, follow seasonal trends of GDPs, upward thrusts for spring-like ends to financial years. The market is blowing through glass ceilings, hurtling with flowing indices like cornucopias. No matter, you too will soon celebrate with bottles of cola foaming out, as in telly ads, all over hands, like human kindness milked from glands.

O the Bund! In spring it promises so much, yet when we turn from the prospect, lurch towards Nanjing Road and the press of flesh, we see rain again on streets glistening afresh. If spring has come, can winter then be far behind? We raise umbrellas in subdued hurrah.



# Edith Cowan University Faculty of Education and Arts CREATEC

The Shanghai Suite was written during a two month period in early 2004 while I was a visiting professor teaching a course in 'Western Culture' at the University of Shanghai for Science and Technology. This was also part of the research for my PhD in Creative Writing. During and after those months, I composed most of the poems about Shanghai and that region of China. These formed one third of the poetic component of the degree. As well, I researched material for a novella based on the Japanese attack on the Chinese quarter of Shanghai in 1932. The novella Afterwards also formed part of the prose component of the PhD.

Some other Shanghai poems have been written mostly in subsequent years for I became a regular visitor to USST and other universities in the Zhejiang, Shandong and Jiangsu provinces.

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