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INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

UNDER NEON LIGHTS:
STREET PEOPLE IN SHANGHAI

Shanghai, China
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

When one thinks of Shanghai nowadays, one seldom thinks of it as a city that has many homeless people.

For visitors who come from other parts of China, or from other countries, Shanghai stands for prosperity and opportunity. One can hardly not be impressed by the gigantic 468-meter high TV tower, which was newly built on the east side of the Huangpu River, or by the glaring and glamorous neon lights in miles and miles of department stores, hotels, theaters, restaurants, Karaoke bars, and night clubs that have made the city so vibrant and colorful.

But Shanghai's recent prosperity and progress should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the city has another side – an embarrassing side for the government. Shanghai has been incapable of helping the poor, unfortunate, and homeless, especially the migrants who have recently come from rural areas to seek jobs in the city.

Earlier this year, Shanghai's "floating population" reached 3.3 million, according to statistics compiled by the Shanghai Public Security Bureau. The term

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“floating population” refers to people staying and working in cities without permanent residence. This means that there is one migrant for every four residents in Shanghai. Many of the “floating population” have found jobs in the city, for example, about 760,000 migrants work in construction projects and others work as waiters, maids, mill workers, shop assistants, street peddlers, etc.

The rapid growth of the migrant population in the city has increased the pressure on urban infrastructure, housing, and transportation. The Shanghai government recently issued an order that prohibits any firm in the city to hire the migrants who do not have three “cards” – namely, identification card, temporary residence card, and work permit card. In addition, the government institutions in Shanghai will not offer anyone a work permit card until one month after the spring festival – the traditional holiday season in China. In previous years, China experienced a tidal wave of migrants soon after the spring festival, which almost paralyzed the railway system in the country.



Neon lights outline Nanjing Road, Shanghai.

There are thousands of shops and various kinds of commodities on this famous commercial street in the city. A few weeks ago, a Time magazine editor and I walked along Nanjing Road for about an hour and a half, seeing mile after mile of neon lights.

“I have visited many cities including Tokyo, Hong Kong, and Las Vegas,” he said, “but have never seen a city with as many neon lights as Shanghai.”

These neon lights certainly reflect Shanghai’s economic boom, but at the same time, they also obscure the serious problems of poverty and homelessness in the city.



The newly-built "Oriental Pearl TV Tower" in Shanghai.

This gigantic 468-meter high TV tower makes a 40-floor building nearby look like a tiny toy. Some people in the city have doubts about the necessity of building this tower at the expense of other more needed projects such as road construction and inexpensive housing for ordinary residents.

Experts on migrants in China doubt whether the new order can stop millions of surplus rural laborers who are converging on cities like Shanghai. The population living below the poverty line in China has declined significantly as a result of the rural economic reform in the past decade. However, Pieter Botteller, head of World Bank Resident Mission in China, believes that the opportunities for further reductions in poverty through agricultural growth and rural industries were largely exhausted by the mid-1980s (China Daily, Oct. 19, 1994, p. 4).

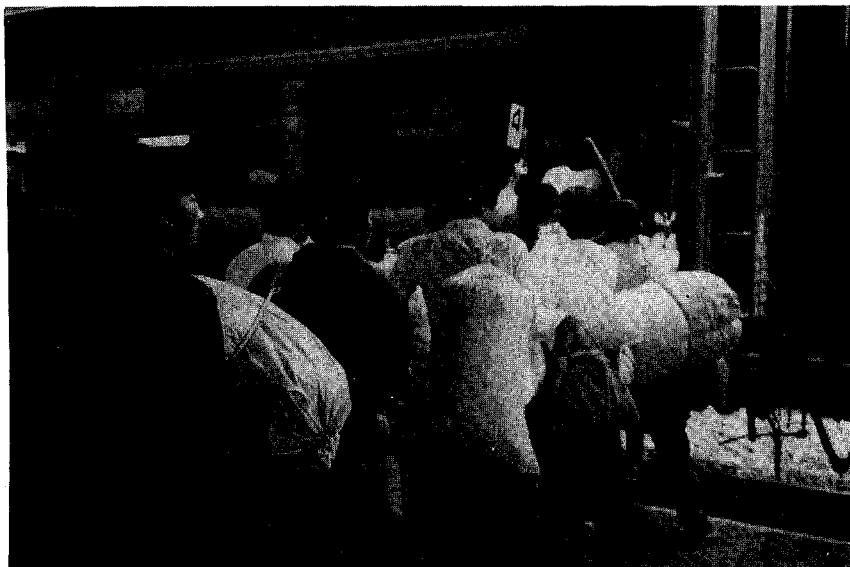
The Chinese government admits that China now has about 80 million people who live below the poverty line. Their average annual income fell below 300 yuan (35 US\$) (Cankao Xiaoxi, Oct. 31, 1994, p. 8). These 80 million poor people have no other choice but joining the "floating population" in cities.

A large number of migrants in Shanghai have neither jobs nor a place to live.

They usually sleep in tunnels, under trucks and buses in the parking lot, in the waiting area of the Shanghai railway station, in the shelters of construction sites, under bridges, and other odd places. These migrants have become street people in Shanghai. It is unknown how many street people are in the city. During a recent "clean-up campaign" in a district of Shanghai, policemen caught over 500 vagrants (*mangliu* in Chinese) in a single day and immediately sent them back to their home areas (*Xinmin Wanbao*, Dec. 6, 1994, p. 3).



Two beggars, one child and one adult, lie in front of an elegant restaurant on Huaihai Road, Shanghai. The adult, who is a blind man, is playing erhu, a Chinese two-string, bowed instrument. Pedestrians seem indifferent to them because this scene is becoming quite common in the city.



With cotton-filled quilts in their bags, surplus rural laborers in Jiangxi wait in line for a Shanghai-bound train.

"Do you have a job in Shanghai?" I ask a young man.

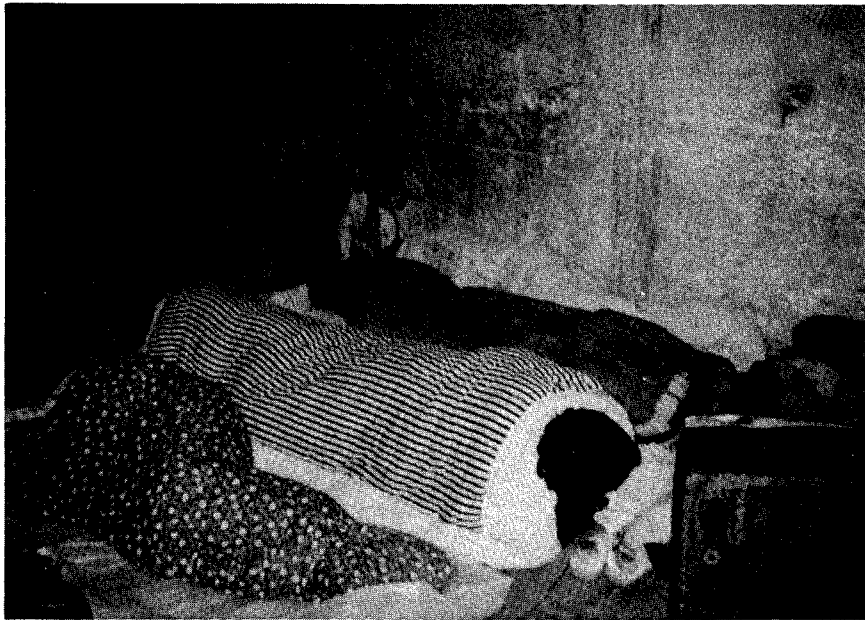
"No," he answers, "but I will find one."

"Do you know where you will stay in Shanghai?"

"I can sleep any place in Shanghai," he points to his bag. "I don't mind sleeping anywhere with my quilt."

The most vulnerable group among the homeless people are the children. According to a report released by the Chinese government, official institutions in Shanghai took in about two to three thousand homeless children annually during the past few years. The report stated specifically that "these homeless children came from all the provinces in China except Tibet and Taiwan." They made their living by various means, but most of them, 59.6%, by begging, 15.1% by working as child-laborers, 13% by being pickpockets, 12.1% by collecting garbage, and 0.4% by prostitution (Weile ertong (For the Children), No. 10, 1994, p. 26).

Wang Ping, a 14 year old boy whom I met and interviewed on Nanjing Road, Shanghai's most famous commercial street, is one of thousands of homeless children in the city. Born in the rural area of Changde, Central China's Hunan province, Wang went to school for three years. He quit school because his father had cancer and Wang Ping had to take care of him.



Some migrants have become street people in Shanghai. They sleep in tunnels, under trucks and buses in the parking lot, in the waiting areas of the Shanghai railway station and port, in the shelter of construction sites, under bridges, and other odd places.

Several homeless people sleep under the bridge on Shanghai's Suzhou Creek, near Xinzha Road.

"Did your father go to the hospital?" I asked.

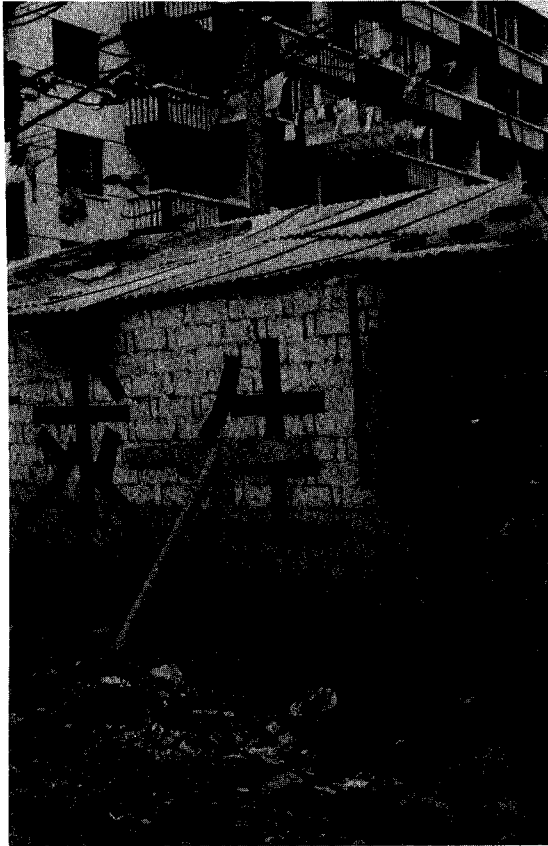
"No, in our village, when one gets a serious disease like cancer, one just waits for death," Wang Ping said to me. "Our family could not afford medical treatment. I started to work on the farm at 11 when my father died. Two years after my father's death, my mother remarried an old man in a neighboring village. My stepfather moved into our house, because his village was even poorer."

"So you didn't need to work on your family's land since your stepfather could do the job?" "Yes, you are right, I became 'surplus' or 'useless' in my family. My stepfather started to swear at me. He even beat me when my mother was absent. I could not stand him and left Hunan three months ago."

"What made you decide to come to Shanghai?"

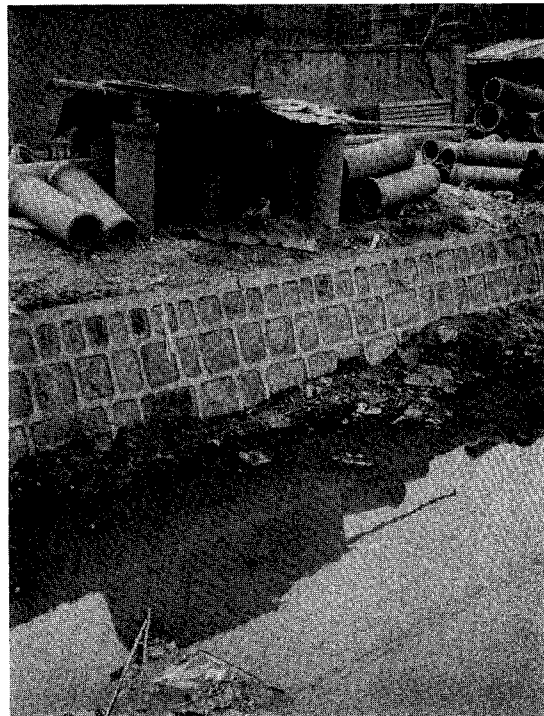
"Shanghai is China's new frontier and will be better than Hong Kong soon," the 14 year-old boy replied. "This is what everyone in our village said. We all heard that in Shanghai, Taiwanese and Japanese businessmen spend 10 yuan bills like using toilet paper!"

This was the first time I heard this expression.



Most migrants in Shanghai sleep on bunks or straw mats in cramped huts. Two Chinese characters on the wall of this hut mean "struggle for survival."

This small, crude shelter, as someone told me, accommodates three street people at night.



"Adults in our village also said that Shanghai's Nanjing Road has ten miles of neon lights and thousands of shops. In some restaurants you could drink Coca Cola for free. Most importantly, there are so many jobs and opportunities waiting for you.

"I have lived in Shanghai for three months now, but I never had a 10 yuan bill. I did drink Coca Cola, but just from the remains in the cans that people threw away. No one wants to hire me because I don't have an I.D. card. I end up as a beggar on the streets." In China, only those who are over 16 are entitled to have an I.D.

"Do you regret leaving your home and coming to Shanghai?"

"No, I just feel that the heaven has been unfair to me. Where else can I go? Hunan is not my home. I don't have a home. Shanghai is wonderful, but only for rich people."

Wang Ping pointed to the neon lights on the street and said, "These neon lights belong to them."

Wang Ping was probably right – there is no fairness under heaven. For most migrants, especially homeless people, lives in Shanghai have been tough. Like Wang Ping, each and every one of them has a story – a story of bitterness and hardships, a story of dreams and the break of dreams. The glamorous neon lights, as well as those homeless people under them, constantly remind us of the increasing gap between rich and poor, have and have-nots, in today's China.

Sincerely,


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