

# A TALE OF TWO CITIES

By Tony Tong



## BEIJING IT'S A GRAND SOLEMN AND HUMOROUS CITY!

The characteristics of this city and the character of its citizens are both homogeneous and complementary. The Beijingers's broadmindedness and their concern for all matters in the world are the most direct reflection of the imperial city's characteristics. Everyone, even the taxi drivers, talks about the economy and destiny of the country. They pay greater attention to spiritual life than citizens of other cities, although they also have some materialistic tendencies.

Beijingers attach great importance to friendship and brotherhood and they believe that friendship is something they are destined for. Their worst remark about a person is "he is boring." Here "boring" has two meanings. One is that he does not deserve the description "friend" as he will gain personal benefits even at the cost of his friends' interests. If one breaks the underlying rule upheld by The Beijingers, that is, one should give up benefits for the sake of their friends, they will be called "boring." Often, this means the end of their friendship. Moreover, the power of the description

"boring" can never be underestimated as it will be known among other friends, as well. Therefore, do "boring" things as little as possible, unless you don't want to make friends with any Beijing people. In fact, it is not difficult to be "interesting" as the Beijingers think there are many ways to be "interesting," but one way to be "boring." The other meaning of boring is that the person is a bore, for which everyone has their own definitions. If you can keep your friends interested in certain topics for half an hour at the table, you'll be viewed as an interesting person. Very often these topics focus on cars, houses, and other common issues, as well as political news.

The Beijingers have a reputation for their humor. Many of them are good at making witty remarks. To them, Chinese is just like cards in their hands and their careless combination of them may surprise others. Of course, the fact that they have spoken the language since they learned to talk helps. Shanghai children, on the other hand, are first taught to speak the Shanghai dialect and don't learn Mandarin until

kindergarten or primary school, which also helps to build their capability in learning foreign languages.

The Beijingers are broad-minded, so they seldom treat people from other parts of China as "country folk." In their eyes, as long as one has recognized Beijing's prevailing cultural force and has come to Beijing, they will treat them as one of their own. Of course, there are exceptions. I admit their mentality also originates from their sense of cultural superiority. For example, conductors often bully rural workers with bags on their backs. However, the conductors' actions are unwelcome and usually provoke the aversion of others. The Beijingers often intervene on behalf of the injured party, even if they are old and weak.

The Beijingers place emphasis on respect and integrity. Living in the city that has been the capital city for 800 years, they have developed character best described by the phrase "die rather than being humiliated." They think a man should live as a man. You may see cynicism in their eyes, but seldom fear and cowardice.

Shanghai itself is a paradox. It is characterized by sharp clashes between southern and northern cultures as well as the integration of local and foreign cultures, which typically conflict with each other. Although a city with a history of only 150 years can't be called old, it has experienced many vicissitudes.

This being the safest city in China, all citizens are civilized and order-obedient. Sometimes only those who have been accustomed to orders know their effectiveness. As one can hardly find a street that runs in a strict south-north direction, the four directions (east, south, west and north) that the Beijingers have been accustomed to become meaningless. Many places here are usually defined as "the crossroad of Nanjing Road and Shaanxi Road" or the like. In fact, everyone here has a map in their mind and they follow this map subconsciously. This is an illustration of order. If you want to enjoy the convenience of order, you should learn it as soon as possible, just like you'd better learn the Shanghai dialect.

Whether you are willing to admit it or not, the development of the city is actually leading the development of the whole country. Shanghai was destined to be a legendary city ever since it made its first appearance.

This city is flavored with petty bourgeoisie, which seem to be akin to "professionals." The Shanghainese are also dedicated to their work. When one tries hard to do their work well, it is dedication to work. However, when work and personal life are separated as far as possible, it is called being professional.

Their dedication to work is demonstrated in many aspects. The most obvious examples are that bus conductors and transportation coordinators treat their work carefully at all times. Bus conductors in Shanghai always approach each passenger to sell tickets despite the crowdedness. No one will be asked twice to buy a ticket. Nor is there anyone who can escape buying a ticket. More astonishing is that if someone misses their stop "by mistake," the conductor will rush to him and ask them to pay the additional charge. As the conductor can tell exactly where the passenger gets on and should get off, he often wins, beaming with his "Shanghai-style" pride. How they manage to do that is still a mystery to me, as there are usually dozens of passengers on the bus. Economic incentive may be one of the reasons, but is probably not the only one. Besides dedication to work, doesn't this also show that the Shanghainese's shrewdness that can be seen

everywhere?

The Shanghainese are not as indifferent as you may imagine, they really are very meticulous. They are born accountants. Of course, this has something to do with dedication to working, being petty bourgeoisie, and acting professional. If you travel with a Shanghainese you can enjoy the trip to your heart's content. As for the Shanghainese, they can enjoy double the fun: traveling and accounting.

Shanghai is an enthralling city that is the engine of development for the whole nation. The "Shanghainese," a group of people that did not exist even as recently as 150 years ago, have created history continuously and unintentionally, because most of them are not even aware of what they have done. Again, this seems to be a paradox. A reasonable explanation is that this miracle-making city has genes conducive to the creation of legends.

When I left Shanghai last time, I found that I had come to love the city. Now, 9 years later, I come back to it with the hope that I will be fortunate enough to be involved in the creation of the next legend or to at least be a witness of history. **THELINK**

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# SHANGHAI A MIX OF ORDER AND LEGEND.