

SHOPPING WITH A SHADOW

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“Retail Therapy”. According to the Collins English Dictionary it means “the action of shopping for clothes etc., in order to cheer oneself up”. In Zhangye it could also mean “people pretending to have a job”. In many shops there are only people waiting to sell things without any customers wanting to spend money. What makes a place like Zhangye so interesting is that you can see the old and the new, tradition and progress, all in the same city. There are street vendors and tiny shops as well as many big multi-storey department stores with large modern food departments that have wide aisles with shelves full of products. It is quantity more than variety though. In Zhangye you can shop in places where the latest fashion hangs on classy looking mannequins and where prices compare with New Zealand, or you can buy clothes that scream “*Made in China*” in small stalls in large people’s stores and markets. Here you see men and women behind sewing machines stitching canvas shoes or anything else that needs to be repaired, altered or made for next to



nothing. Bruised and battered western-looking mannequins from the last century stare at you with big eyes and pouty mouths. If a shop sells jackets, then that will be all they are wearing. Trousers hanging in these shops have the bottom of their



legs in paper bags, so they don’t get dirty from all the dust that gets in everywhere. Cleaning the shop floor takes a minimum of three people. One is slopping a wet mop over the marble or concrete, another flapping a

large piece of cardboard to speed up the drying process and the third one supervising. In more fancy shops an electric blower takes over from the cardboard-waving shop assistant.

There is not much you can’t buy here, but some things come at a price. Eight small square slices of cheese cost about \$4.50 and a loaf of bread is \$3.00. If you want real coffee and butter or margarine, you need to go to Lanzhou, a six-hour train ride away, or ask a Chinese friend to buy it on the internet. But most things, especially food, are cheap here. There is an abundance of fresh fruit and vegetables that don’t cost much more than a few yuan per 500g. If you fancy a nice lager, a 600ml bottle of Tsingtao beer is only 46 cents.



Now the weather is warming up, the heavy padded curtains in front of the shop doors are disappearing and all of a sudden there are shops where we have never seen them before. Shopping is a daily activity for us, since we have to carry everything home and up those 87 steps to our apartment. It is a 20 minute stroll to the town centre and because we like to explore, we do our shopping in different places, big and small, and like to wander in and out of shops often “just

looking”. It is one of the first things we wanted to learn how to say in Chinese, because no matter what kind of shop, there are so many shop assistants hanging around, that the moment you walk into a store you have acquired a shadow that follows you so closely, that if you suddenly stop you will collide. The only time you lose your shadow is in a large store when you go beyond the aisles that are your shadow’s territory, only to be picked up by the next shadow. Now when I pitch “*suibian kankan*” right, the shadow will smile and stop following ... so close. Also, after having been here for more than two months and totalling about 15% of the foreign population here in Zhangye, maybe people are becoming used to seeing us around town.

It is good that this is not a tourist city like Shanghai. Here we only hear “Hello!” from across the street and see people stop, point and stare. You get used to that and can ignore it if you want or smile and wave, depending on your mood. The few days we were in Shanghai we were the constant target of people who wanted to sell us umbrellas whether it rained or not, watches, T-shirts, bags, phones and even tie-on roller skates while we were lugging our suitcases and backpacks to the station. None of that here luckily.

Although we certainly did not travel light when we left New Zealand, there were things we thought we did not need to bring to China, because this should be the land of plenty. Like T-shirts for example. We did not even want to buy them in Shanghai because it was still winter, so we would not need them for another few months. However, with the tropical temperatures in our apartment, we were in dire need of some short-sleeved cotton. The rest of Zhangye was still freezing though, so the only shirts for sale were warm and padded. D-day is the 1st of May. Then restaurants will move their seating outside and town will be in the full swing of summer. As for the T-shirts? From the 1st of April when the heaters were turned off, the mercury has been going up and down like a yoyo. Temperatures range from the mid-twenties one day to single digits the next. T-shirts can wait.

