

SILK ORDERS AT THE SOUTH BUND

~Chai Lu Bohannan~

The sound of a sewing machine rumbling reminds me of my mother. My mother, Ivy, works as a tailor in a local boutique in Durham, NC. As a child, I could usually find my mother in her sewing room working on her clients' clothes or a sewing project for fun. Many of the garments my sister and I wore growing up were custom made by my mom. My mother sewed us many things, including, smoking dresses, bedspreads, and Halloween costumes. She would often bring my sister and me along to shop for buttons, zippers, and thread. While walking through the fabric store, my hands would move across the endless rows of fabric rolls; cotton, fleece, polyester, leather, silk and satin.

Last week, I made a trip to the South Bund Fabric Market in Shanghai. This market is popular among travelers and locals looking to buy custom made shirts, dresses, suits and jackets. When I walked through the front doors of the building, my mind immediately flashed back to the times I spent roaming different colors, textures and prints with my mother. The South Bund Fabric Market is a three story building jammed packed with individual vendor stalls. I was a bit overwhelmed at first; every stall was covered in fabric, model designs and

finished orders from floor to ceiling. I did not know where to start.

After wandering around some, Shanel and I entered a stall on the first floor that was recommended by our professor. We were both looking to order traditional Chinese dresses known as cheongsams (qípáo). From my understanding, one or two storefront merchants operate each stall. These merchants help customers pick designs, choose fabrics and measure sizes. Orders are then sent to neighboring buildings and laborers to be made. Customers typically wait about one week to pick up their custom made pieces.

The stall we selected was about ten square-meters in area and was run by a husband and wife team. Before making any concrete decisions, we asked the storekeepers how much one cheongsam would cost. The woman merchant grabbed the calculator from her desk and typed "450¥." We knew this was a good and fair starting price, but proceeded to bargain for a discount. In the end, we agreed to buying five cheongsams between the two of us priced at 360¥ each. So, this meant each custom made silk cheongsam cost about \$60, a price impossible to find back home.



Through watching my mother sew, I have developed an appreciation for good craftsmanship and hands-on work. My mother has built up her clientele based on her quality workmanship. In the tailoring business back home charging \$60 for a custom made cheongsam would result in negative profits. The South Bund Fabric Market's low prices are made possible by China's abundance of willing workers and low labor costs. Our vendor told us that the price of fabric and materials make up most of the retail price. The prices we encountered were lower than "off-the-shelf" items back home. For example, Nicky ordered three custom fit suit sets for the price of one off-the-shelf suit in the United States.

Sewing is a disappearing trade in the developed countries. It has become a specialty skill as more and more textile factories get outsourced to developing countries. There seem to be more tailoring booths in the South Bund Fabric Market building than there are in the city of Durham. The difference between tailoring prices and choices in China and the United States interests me. In my Chinese Marketplace class, my group is researching and conducting a field study of the South Bund Fabric Market. We will be digging deeper into the vendors' daily lives, the power structure within the market and the supply chain. But, for now, I am most excited to pick up my three cheongsams tomorrow afternoon.