

Seven Years in Shanghai

Carrying the remnants of the Roaring Twenties and foreshadowing the chaos of World War II, the 1930s was a period of economic downturns and natural disasters that catalyzed migration in the Midwest. Like numerous Americans, 40-year-old John Elliott was not exempted from the economic downturn. It was late September 1929, and Elliott was going about his usual business in his mansion in New York City, sitting on his leather recliner, sipping coffee from a china mug, and reading the New York Times newspaper. “Can you believe this?” Elliott frowned upon seeing the section just below the headline. His grunt met no reply. He had forgotten that his wife was out with her women’s club friends that day. He quickly shook his head as if to clear the morning confusion. Then, he picked up the phone to call his stockbroker on Wall Street, only to get a soothing reply that later proved completely wrong.

Just a month later, on October 24th, 1929, the stock market witnessed a crash of more than 10%¹. On October 29th, Elliott went bankrupt. That evening, he talked to his wife about moving to California where he had friends who could help, but only got an answer detailing her unwillingness to live with “a bunch of Okies”. After his wife went to bed, he started drinking, enjoying the last few nights in the mansion before getting it taken away. As he downed his last gulp for the night, his friend Bryan Bosch suddenly knocked on the door. Bosch is several years older than Elliott, and despite his perfect Mid-Atlantic accent and mannerism, he was everything

¹ Maury Klein, “The Stock Market Crash of 1929: A Review Article,” *The Business History Review* 75, no. 2 (2001): 325–51.

opposite of being cultured. Elliott greeted Bosch, but he was in no mood for a bull session, which was what Bosch usually did. Bosch read his face and cut to the chase. The two conversed until the morning. It was a conversation that dictated the two's life trajectory in the years to come. Some of the things said during the conversation were Elliott's "What if the plan goes wrong? I mean, it's another country, an alien, heathen land, a place we have no morally justifiable reason to be in. What if we catch malaria? You have seen the news about Chinatown right? What if we lose track of time? They use lunar calendars for God's sake"² and Bryan's "Let me tell ya something, my great-grandfather took everything from these ragtag and got them hooked on opium and made money off of them. My grandfather brought these folks here, made them work their ass off in California for not even a dime. And guess what? These people didn't put up a fight, not even once. If my grandfathers could do it, I don't see how we can't". Long story short, driven by the profitable underground opium trade in Shanghai, Bosch invited Elliott to go there and make some quick bucks in the face of financial adversity. Although it was more like forcing Elliott than inviting him. Bosch laid everything out for Elliott. He knew people in Shanghai, had everything from the production of opium to the distribution figured out. It was a clear-cut deal, go there, establish the business, and leave as a butter and egg man, a do-or-die situation. Elliott either went or would rot and die like the investors who leaped off buildings in New

² Erin Pattison, "Changing Perceptions of China in 1930s America Changing Perceptions of China in 1930s America," 2012.

York, according to Bosch. So Elliott went with Bosch, promising his wife a fortune upon return.

It was a hot day in 1910, an hour past noon. 28-year-old Zhang Heng had finished planting peanut seeds in the field and was coming home for lunch. His mother was preparing congee in the kitchen. Although it was technically congee, it was really no more than a few grains of white rice with boiled well water. To make it able to sustain the demanding labor, Zhang's mother had been boiling it since that morning to make it thicker at the cost of almost dissolving the rice completely; she had thrown in diced turnip, which was a decent meal for the family, though it was only half a small turnip. Zhang and his mother had to pay rent and part of their harvested crops to the landlord regularly, a common practice among the lowly stratified peasants³. Zhang held a bowl in his hand and was about to fetch the scoop to get the congee, but his mother stopped him midway, snatched the scoop out of his hand, and filled two bowls of congee. "What for?" Zhang asked. "As you know, your uncle and aunt are coming by tonight. I hide two bowls for us so they don't eat it all" Zhang's mother said. She then put two bowls inside the hearth where she usually put the firewood.

Zhang lost his father in 1900 when the Eight-Nation Alliance came. His father was a soldier for the Qing Dynasty at the time, a very competent one in fact because of his outstanding weaponry skills. He got killed by Yang Ren (ocean people) when his sword was overpowered by firearms, as Zhang remembered. Before his father, his

³ Philip C.C. Huang, "Analyzing the Twentieth-Century Chinese Countryside Revolutionaries versus Western Scholarship," *Modern China* 1, no. 2 (April 1975): 132–60.

grandfather went to America to work. That was all Zhang remembered about his family lineage. Surprisingly, 29 years later, in 1929, Zhang became one of the biggest gang leaders in Shanghai. He initially left his village in Fujian, came to Shanghai, and joined a local gang. Showing tremendous grit in manipulating, hurting, and killing people as well as acumen in the opium and prostitution business, he quickly rose through the ranks from a foot soldier to enforcer and finally to the leader. It was after that he brought his mother to Shanghai for a better life. Although Zhang's mother knew her son was hanging out with the bad crowd because she had heard Zhang calling his boss 'Ancient Big', the mob term for the boss, she really could not do anything except warn him not to "hang with the 'two brothers (Fujianese slang for bludger and hoodlum)", nor did her bound feet allow her to do much.

"Look yonder", Bosch pointed ahead, and Elliott looked where Bosch was pointing. In 1930, Bosch and Elliott made it to Shanghai. Elliott's worries about losing track of time and getting infected quickly dwindled as he saw the Westernized, modern city of Shanghai. The beggars called them boss and teacher; the rickshaw driver charged them more, to which they thought was the tiniest fraction of the cab fee in the States; they even found American business association, the AmCham, and Western restaurants to hang out⁴. The two got down to business very quick. Using the monetary means to bribe and employ, they had several city officials watching over their opium business. They even had a group of Shanghai kids working for them and an old Shanghainese man cooking their lunch, whom they called Joe. "Attaboy! I

⁴ AMCHAM Shanghai, Amcham-shanghai.org, 2023.

shall Shanghai Joe and make him cook for me in America” Bosch remarked after one lunch. The two got careless. They smoked opium occasionally, were surrounded by prostitutes, and most of all, completely disregarded the local rules. They thought they were the city’s shot-caller.

When a business gets big, it draws attention. When people get too bold, they slip. And this was what happened to the two. Zhang’s gang was onto them because the two had almost taken over Shanghai’s market due to their high-quality opium. Zhang did not like it. He had long established himself in the city as the alpha and had even controlled part of the opium trade in New York’s and San Francisco’s Chinatown, essentially what his grandfather did, only in a different form. Unable to intimidate Bosch and Elliott in Shanghai because of Bosch’s connection, Zhang ordered a kidnapping of Elliott’s wife in the States. It was not until a picture of Mrs. Elliot with a letter warning the two to leave was pinned to their apartment door with a knife that they realized that things were wrong; Zhang had made an offer they could not refuse. It was 1937, and the second Sino-Japanese War had just started. From what Bosch and Elliott heard, Japanese soldiers attacked American citizens, which, combined with the pressure from the local Chinese gang, made them even more anxious. They traded everything they had earned during the seven years in Shanghai in exchange for hiding in Joe’s house, waiting for rescue by fellow Americans. Their hope dipped as

American ships like the USS Panay were sunken by the Japanese attack⁵. Gulping congee made by Joe, Bosch and Elliott wished that they had never come.

⁵ Brad Lendon, “Years before the Attack on Pearl Harbor, Japan Sank a US Warship in China,” CNN, May 26, 2023.

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