

The People's Market



By Michelle Chen

Pearl River Mart has two doorways, one on each side of the store. That's bad *feng shui* according to some, because money will enter through one door and exit through the other. But my father, manager of the Chinese shopping center, says the two doors allow money to enter from both sides. Since the business recently upgraded itself from a Chinatown corner to a choice location on Broadway in SoHo, the rules of *feng shui* are perhaps not applicable here.

The boss's daughter sometimes has trouble getting through either entrance toward closing time. At 7:20 sharp, the employees start blocking the doors so everyone can go home at 7:30, turning away gaggles of tourists and evening shoppers. When I arrive to visit my parents at this hour, employees, mistaking me for just another Western customer, usually shake their heads wearily. When they realize that the girl who's been visiting the store since elementary school is now a 22 year-old urbanite, they open the gates momentarily. Since the store's recent conversion, I have similar difficulty recognizing Pearl River in its new form.

A pastime since first grade has been finding a quiet place among the store's streaming paper lions and shiny Asian trinkets and watching people shop. My latest perch is the freshly constructed Tea Bar, a glass-bordered mezzanine with small tables and a counter selling premium loose teas.

From above, I take in Pearl River's cosmopolitan pastiche. A young punkette with crimson hair totes a studded leather jacket and checks out the Japanese dinnerware. A father plays with a miniature mortar and pestle set in the kitchenware display to amuse the baby strapped to his chest. Towing a shopping basket full of pastries from a Chinatown bakery, a young female employee delivers to co-workers snacks seldom found this side of Broadway.

The store's design, the project of an Italian architect, features purposely exposed air vents and rough brick walls framed by giant orange arches, which draw remote inspiration from traditional Chinese courtyards. A legion of cast-iron columns grounds the layout while clouds of rattan birdcages and upside-down paper umbrellas hover weightlessly above. The ultra-modern sheet metal waterfall directs customers to the basement level, where the high-fashion gloss dissolves abruptly into an assembly of Mao-era steel enamel dishware and loud porcelain vases. Chinatown's vast jumbledness—the abrasive density typical of fruit markets and dumpling joints—can be found here if you look closely enough. But overall, the atmosphere of swirling Sino-Chic embodies the steady gentrification of the store from a proletarian mom-and-pop affair to a one-stop shop for all of your Asian kitsch needs. Every day, to the tinkle of over-produced Chinese orchestral music,

students scour the racks for cheap dorm decorations; cancer patients comb the shelves for foul-tasting miracle supplements; and voluptuous women cram into snug Cheong Sam gowns, discovering the hard way the gap between Asian and Western frames.

I spot my parents bustling about in denim vests emblazoned with Pearl River's double-fish logo. They spend afternoons in the store wearing the standard uniforms and assisting customers. Since the store's more proletarian days, their job description has always included catching shoplifters and scrubbing toilets.

Pearl River's new flair is decades removed from the business's conception at the dawn of modern US-China relations. After a stint as a chemistry researcher during the tumultuous '60s, my father moved to Chinatown to foster trade with Red China. He launched the business with other Taiwan-born student comrades who longed to reconnect with the estranged mainland. In the early 1970s, they peddled rare Chinese imports like soy sauce to local Chinese immigrants. The white clientele was limited to young leftists seeking Little Red Books and Mao jackets as ideological fetishes. But just months after the "people's" store ventured to dismantle the iron curtain all by itself, Nixon and Deng Xiaoping had their monumental diplomatic meeting.

A handshake and a few ping-pong matches later, Pearl River, along with the People's Republic, was careening full-force into American-style capitalism on a tide of hoisin sauce and Tiger Balm.

Within a decade, the store became a New York institution. As Chinatown's first full-fledged department store, it engaged Westerners with its unprecedented accessibility. Starving artists and yuppies alike were charmed by the gruff atmosphere, by the disengaged salespeople, by the fact that you couldn't find what you were looking for without happening upon a million other things you didn't know you wanted.

In a city where everything has already been done, the overlooked is more valuable than the sought-after. The commodity we dangled before adventurous shoppers was the thrill of a "great find"—the euphoria of having "discovered" where to buy 50-cent sandalwood soaps or silk pajamas for the price of flannels. Still, the titillation of discovery was at least half imagination; by the mid-1990s, everyone from Madonna to Isaac Mizrahi had "discovered" Pearl River over and over again, on the pages of *Living*, *Lucky*, and the *New York Times Weekend* section.

The store's good fortune spawns from a marriage of business savvy and cultural evolution. My father, who has now outgrown his radicalism but not his entrepreneurial passion, seems vaguely amused by his success: "People just like it for some reason," he says of the Asian craze that has afflicted New Yorkers. The

premise is simple: give the people what they want, even if they don't yet know what that is.

My mother, with bobbed black hair and kinetic pragmatism, is the visionary behind the enterprise. She manages our overseas manufacturing ventures and collects every magazine clipping featuring our products: 6-foot-tall models sporting baby girl satin pajamas and metallic "joss paper"—traditionally burned at gravesites—as a living room accent. For the new Pearl River's grand opening, she commissioned a PR firm to coordinate a traditional lion dance by Master Chan's Kung Fu school, a performance by an Asian funk fusion band, and a sushi buffet. Her latest idea is the strategic insertion of a non-Chinese employee—one of our twenty-something part-timers—on the more Chinatownish basement level. "That would be a breakthrough," she predicts, since the presence of a *lao fan* or Western employee instantly improves the tenor of customer service. Whereas Americans, who are "used to being served" when shopping, are relatively courteous, Chinese staff are more familiar with the pushy markets of Mott Street, where "presentation" means glistening fish carcasses on a bed of ice.

But when I was growing up, Pearl River's charm derived from its character as a typical Chinese market made atypical by its American setting. Something was always just a bit off. Statue of Liberty pencil sharpeners were thrown in with bronze Buddha paperweights; Chinese beef jerky and Japanese Pocky Sticks were stacked beside bubble gum. One high school buddy called it "the ghetto store," and I liked to think that Pearl River's status as a Chinese Costco earned me some degree of street cred, as if my parents ran a local fencing operation or something.

Despite efforts to upgrade the ambiance, today familiar Chinatown-esque non-sequiturs still peak out from beneath the layers of polish without a hint of tackiness: "I Love New York" key-chains hang beside brocade baby slippers. Electric candles, a tiny doll couple, and draped sheets of red and pink satin form a Chinese wedding-theme backdrop to the cash register. And somehow, the "signature surly service" has remained "blissfully intact," in the words of one shopping guide. It is comforting to see the old employees I grew up with—Chinese immigrants from Brooklyn, Queens, and Chinatown—even if they don't recognize me sometimes.

Nevertheless, the self-conscious funk of the new location seems to obscure Pearl River's rumpled core—the conviction that a Chinese dry goods store could be both a moral and a capitalistic venture. My pride now tinted by liberal guilt, I miss those awkward culture gaps that once gave the store its peculiar harmony.

The new store is almost seamless; I'm used to the seams bursting, like an ill-fitting Mandarin gown.

* * *

I recently visited the building which housed the old store, having heard from my parents that an imitation had sprung up, attempting to dupe longtime customers who had not yet discovered our move. The inventory consisted completely of Pearl River ripoffs, the cheapest of the cheap. Disturbed by the shameless fraud, I began approaching customers and directing them to the genuine artifact up the street. I was happily rerouting the misguided *lao fan* when a middle-aged woman in the foodstuffs aisle, who looked like a seasoned Downtown shopper, asked me if I had visited the new location. I replied yes.

"It's terrible, isn't it?"

As I tried to conceal my shock, she complained it was nothing like the old place. She insisted this building was better and suspected the prices were higher at the new location. I tried, and failed, to convince her it was essentially the same store. I left feeling disappointed at the loss of a customer, and disappointed that I understood why. People come to Pearl River to journey to a different side of New York, but it's clear now that the store itself has journeyed.

Perhaps Pearl River's evolution was destined for this paradox. Back on the tea mezzanine in Soho, gazing into the jaws of a giant red dragon float, I wonder if there is anywhere else for the store to go after this. The luster of the new store reminds me of what I've read in history books on the Qing Dynasty's extravagance just before it was extinguished by China's first revolution. But I predict that unlike the Qing ruling house, years from now, my parents will have the foresight to close the store before it sinks under its own prosperity. My parents have never suggested that they hope to pass on the store after their retirement, and they certainly know better than to foist it upon a daughter to whom the business is more of an aged babysitter than a grand inheritance. Pearl River will exit nobly, having ridden out its good fortune in the global metropolis. ■