

Shanghai Street

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It is the missing block four of a development,
the way we avoid going outdoors
one summer evening of ghost festival.

We suspect foreigners may be confused
5 by shop signs that read
'Celestial Pleasures' or
'Eternal Living' nestled between
tuck-shops and stationers
in the middle of Shanghai Street.
10 I heard that folks went there
for quality timber and craftsmanship.

When I was a kid I used to think
they were toy shops - all those
paper houses, paper dolls,
15 paper shirts and even mobile phones.
I didn't know until the day I saw
Grandmother burned them after purchase.

I didn't know what to do
with the packet I received:
20 a coin, a sweet, and tissue paper.
A riddle.
How strange it feels,
things we don't talk about.

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?
2. In Stanza 1, why is the block four missing?
3. What do the “folks” want to buy in lines 10-11?
4. In Stanza 2, why may foreigners be confused?
5. Comment on the tone and voice of the speaker in the poem.
6. What does the speaker mean by “A riddle” in line 21?

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set in Shanghai Street in one evening near the ghost festival.

2. In Stanza 1, why is the block four missing?

As “four” and “death” sound similar in Cantonese, the number “four” is regarded as inauspicious in Hong Kong. It is not uncommon to leave out this unlucky number for blocks and floors of buildings in Hong Kong.

3. What do the “folks” want to buy in lines 10-11?

Coffins/caskets

4. In Stanza 2, why may foreigners be confused?

Without knowledge of the Chinese culture, foreigners may have no clue about the types of shops by looking at the signs which read “Celestial Pleasures” or “Eternal Living”. The names of the shops suggest happiness but the shops actually sell death related items (e.g. coffins).

5. Comment on the tone and voice of the speaker in the poem.

The speaker adopts the first-person point of view and recalls her memory about the paper effigies shops as a kid. The repeated use of “I didn’t know” in lines 16 and 18 emphasises the speaker’s ignorance of and bewilderment at the Chinese rituals and culture when she was young. She used to think that the paper effigies were toys but in fact, they were offerings to the dead.

6. What does the speaker mean by “A riddle” in line 21?

The speaker describes the packet she received at the funeral as a riddle because she was puzzled at what she should do with the coin, sweet and tissue paper in the packet, and she would never ask her family as death is considered a taboo subject in Chinese society.