

Shantou ERA100 Review

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Here's a quick test. The subject is black & white films. Now, name a Chinese B&W film. Chances are, if you were able to come up with any at all, you probably thought of Lucky SHD. Lucky was (forgive the word play) lucky enough to enter into a cooperation of sorts with Kodak, giving it global distribution. This partnership also led to rumors that Lucky SHD films were simply "re-branded" Kodak films. Although untrue, this helped to increase Lucky's visibility in the international market. Of course, due in part to Lucky's unwillingness to improve its film quality and QA process, this relationship is now seemingly on the rocks and Kodak has decided to focus primarily on building its own brand in the PRC. But that's not the end of Chinese films. There are other film manufacturers there, some producing films with quality and history that matches the more well-known flavors. Shantou ERA100 is one such film.

Shan-who? Shantou. No, I'm not surprised you've never heard of it. I live right at China's doorstep in Taiwan and I was only introduced to this film a year ago. Not that it's not common. Rolls can be bought all over mainland China right next to rolls of Tri-X. The company has been producing films for over half a century now. It's just you have to remember that the PRC has been closed to the world culturally and economically for the vast majority of that time. Also add to the fact that as of yet they really don't have any distribution outside of the PRC with the exception of a few eBay sellers, most of whom either have "friends" in China who buy the film for them or are able to afford enough volume that they can make large purchases directly from the manufacturer. Finally, Chinese films in general have been far overshadowed by the influx of Eastern European-manufactured films such as Fomapan and Efke/ADOX, whose fanbase and distribution channels started developing over a decade-and-a-half ago with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the opening of tourism and free trade.

So here I am helping one of the better Chinese brand films play catch-up.

Introductory Rant Over, So What is ERA100 Exactly?

ERA100 is an ISO-rated 100 speed film. Bet you guessed that much, right? It's a traditional type of emulsion like Plus-X and FP4 and, like them, it is multi-layered. Yes, it has an anti-halation layer. ERA100 is currently available in 35mm rolls of 36 exposures, 4x5 sheets, 8x10 sheets, and 7x17 sheets only. Yes, no medium format. Finally, it is only available as a 100 speed film. There is no ERA200 "Creative" or ERA400 "Action" out there. They only do one black & white emulsion.

Rendering

Having played with Lucky before, I really wasn't expecting too much. I mean, Lucky has a decent exposure range but highlight detail (in 35mm) is lost thanks to lack of anti-halation and (with 120) the emulsion flakes off too easily for comfort. With Efke (which I shot as Mitsubishi Gekko 100) the emulsion was more stable when dry but still very soft when wet and there were also anti-halation issues. My thought upon sticking the first roll of ERA100 in my rangefinder was along the lines of "here we go with another one of those films". Thankfully, I was pleasantly surprised with the results. It's tonal range was the first thing that grabbed me. The midtone coverage was excellent, on par with any mainstream 100 speed film, if not better. Grain was noticeable, but still less than you'd get from a higher speed film. The level of grain was similar to FP4, although FP4 has a slight edge on exposure latitude. Contrast was a little on the high-side, but not so high that tonality was sacrificed. Basically, it (combined with processing) rendered a look that I liked and fell in line with my typical style.

Processing

Being a traditional emulsion, I chose to process my rolls of ERA in various dilutions of HC-110 (B and H) and Rodinal (1+25 and 1+50). I always develop at 20C and saw no reason to adjust that with this film. Out of them, I found that I achieved the best combination of grain, sharpness, and tonality with Rodinal (1+50) for 14 minutes at 20C. It gave me a tonality, contrast, and overall look similar to what I get out of Tri-X in HC-110 (H) but with less grain. One thing that

annoys me about processing this film is how soft the emulsion is. To say it's "soft like Efke" is an understatement. I've had more scratches with ERA than Efke when squeegee-ing wet negs. For this reason, I strongly recommend the use of a hardening fixer. I also suggest avoiding the squeegee altogether and using a 2-finger wipe (assuming you have smooth skin). One caveat, though. I generally process my film at night and hang it up when I have the time the next day, so my negs can soak in photoflo for anything up to 24 hours before I hang them to dry. This may contribute to the softness of the emulsion, however I really don't think so as I don't get the same softness from other films that suffer the same "long bath" like Tri-X or HP5+.

A Note On Large Format

I recently shot half a dozen sheets of ERA100 4x5 in my Crown Graphic and tray-developed them using my normal, non-hardening fixer. To my amazement, none of the cut sheets exhibited any of the softness or "dust magnetism" that I get from 35mm. Perhaps its because of the thicker base? Or, maybe because I put them through a normal wash time before hanging and not leaving them soaking overnight? Whatever the reason, I ordered 2 more boxes a few days later. Ten bucks for 25 sheets. How can you beat that?

The Current State of Shantou ERA100

This is a hard one to answer. Over the past couple of years I've heard from multiple people "who know" that Shantou is discontinuing this emulsion. I first heard of the impending demise of ERA100 from a North American vendor who bought rolls en masse from the factory in China and resold them through various outlets including eBay. In fact, he advertised his rolls as being from the last batch made by Shantou. He claimed that in his most recent telephone conversation with the manufacturer they had told him the ERA100 would no longer be available after the current batch was finished. More than 12 months on and 6 months past the expiration date of that batch and ERA is still available. However, since then that particular individual has not offered any more ERA100 for sale. More recently an eBay seller located in Mainland China has claimed that ERA100 was being discontinued. I contacted my supplier in Tainan (Taiwan) about it and he told me he hadn't heard anything yet. In fact, he was expecting a new shipment of film from then in just a couple of weeks. I also attempted to contact Shantou directly via their English website contact form but at the time of this writing I have yet to receive a response.

So is ERA100 being discontinued? I don't know. So far, the claims seem to be more like selling tools than actual statements of fact. For now I am under the assumption that ERA100 is still being produced. In fact, I just purchased a recently made batch. When I am able to verify something different I'll update this article.

In Summary

So, how best to describe this film? The best way for me is to simply compare it to what I know. Great midtones like FP4. Like FP4 the grain is a little high for a 100 speed film, but still not as great as you would get with a faster film. Good latitude, but not quite as broad as FP4. A little contrasty like Plus-X. Soft emulsion like Efke but with better highlight detail and price. Overall I must say that I really have come to like this film and it is currently my "medium speed" film of choice.

The Good: Wonderful price (I paid US\$1.41/roll for mine. 4x5 costs about ten bucks for a box of 25 sheets). Great latitude and tonal range. Good sharpness. Okay grain. Is multi-layered, which comes in handy for keeping those highlight details.

The Bad: Slightly on the grainy side, but no more than some of its contemporaries like FP4. Limited global distribution. If you're outside of the PRC but in Asia, you may be able to find a roll or two on the street. Outside of the region your only bet is either eBay or strait from the manufacturer.

The Ugly: Soft emulsion in 35mm scratches easily when wet and is a dust-magnet. ERA100 is only available in the

135mm cartridge and individual sheet formats (currently 4x5, 8x10, and 7x17) with no plans for 120/220.{mos_fb_discuss:17}