

As Shanghai hurtles into the future, technological and commercial advancements would appear to threaten real-life connections. These are the city's entrepreneurs and creators supporting conscious expansion, whose work pushes the city forward while protecting the very things that make us human.



shanghai

irl



26-year-old Yohan Kuei is 4th-generation Chinese-Indian and grew up speaking English at home. But what he lacks in Mandarin skills he makes up for with other tongues: “I speak Hindi, four different Indian dialects, a little Nepali, and some Arabic.”



Shanghai locals are experts on a bike or a scooter. In China, 22.7 million electric vehicles were sold in 2018 alone.

dusted on his round face like powdered sugar on a beignet. That said, the suggestion to reopen a bar in the dead of night for four strange women invites a momentary, instinctual gut-check no matter how sweet a person's smile. But Kuei is genuine. He knows we're all visiting from out of town and, having recently moved to the city himself, wants to make us fall in love with Shanghai the way he has. Simple as that.

We stumble over to Bird, where we round out the night telling stories over a bottle of something that was most likely red and almost certainly organic. We're wary not to make a mess, but we help him tidy where we can. Around 4:00 he calls us a DiDi taxi with his WeChat app and, with his limited Mandarin (he's still learning, though to my untrained ear it sounds quite good), directs the driver to our various drop-off points. He watches our car drive away before walking to the metro station where he catches a train home to the other side of town.

**THIS IS MY FIRST TIME** in mainland China, and I admit that I arrived full of suspicions and stereotypes. There was something in Shanghai's vague, fabled street food scene that held easy appeal for a girl like me (you know the type: cries through every episode of “Chef's Table,” gets hard thinking about “No Reservations” with Anthony Bourdain). Honestly, I couldn't point to much else, but I was curious. I had problematic ideas about what a Chinese megacity would look and feel like, had imagined my little white self struggling to do something as simple as crossing the street, and getting swallowed up by an unforgiving sea of people who didn't look like me or speak my language. The Shanghai I pictured was a residual image of China's recent past: a graveyard of half-built high-rises, streets lined with the skeletons of construction projects erected hastily by the government, then abandoned—symbols of waste and greed.

“Chinese expansion” is something of a dirty set of words in the U.S., where a decaying democracy has loosened its near-chokehold on global influence. Meanwhile, China continues to grow at a face-melting rate. In a recent *Forbes* article titled “China's Grand Strategy,” journalist and policy analyst Daniel Araya contrasts “Western leaders” who rely on outdated political frameworks with the vision of President Xi Jinping, whose costly Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is meant to stretch across Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, and “represents the largest infrastructure project in history.” China's recent ventures in several economically vulnerable countries (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania, among others) are also making watchdogs of neocolonialism nervous. Beyond the strictly economic, intellectual and technological expansion in China seems to be well on its way to surpassing the wildest dreams of developers, as the ubiquitous WeChat allows anyone with a smartphone to order food, a new wardrobe, a taxi—even services like dry cleaning, massages, and chiropractors—all from a single application.

But what's being propagandized as a dystopian nightmare for Americans is actually producing a sort of hospitality renaissance in Shanghai, where creators and entrepreneurs have identified a growing need to cultivate and nurture

# its \*it's

**3 A.M. AND ALL** the bars on Wuyuan Lu in Shanghai's French Concession are closed or closing. Under other circumstances, our group of five would likely have winced at the shame of being ushered out with the last call, but hours of bar hopping and speakeasy spelunking have filled us with enough spirit (or, more accurately, spirits) to dull any creeping embarrassment. Consequently, we're far from ready to call it a night.

“Let's go to Bird, I'll open it back up for us.”

Yohan Kuei is Bird's 26-year-old Dubai-born, Mumbai-raised manager, and he's been hanging out with us since his shift ended about an hour ago. We met for the first time just the night before, when I went into the natural wine bar for a drink with a friend. His warmth was immediate, freckles

Previous page, left: Shanghai is full of street vendors selling snacks like these tea eggs (boiled eggs that have been lightly cracked, then boiled for a second time in tea).

Previous page, right: The old and the new live side by side in this rapidly industrializing metropolis.

BIRD  
50 Wuyuan Lu,  
near Changshu Lu



→ Architectural models at LUKSTUDIO.

Not everything in Shanghai is high-tech.



LUKSTUDIO  
→ lukstudiodesign.com

↳ Architect Christina Luk champions meditation, reflection, and patience—elements that she identifies as part of her power as a female leader.

the city's soul before it's razed and replaced with a luxury high-rise or shopping mall. These are people who believe in the continued modernization of China, but know it will only be sustainable if the expansion—from restaurants and bars to architecture and design and tourism—is more conscious, prioritizing human connection over big business.

In such a large and complicated city, I've chosen to zoom in on those whose very jobs are to make people feel welcome—from the architects shaping the spaces people inhabit to the bartenders and restaurateurs shaping the experiences inside those spaces. As unofficial ambassadors, they may very well be the ones to implement, or at the very least introduce, lasting change.

When I go back to Wuyuan Lu the following day to ask Kuei a few questions about the neighborhood, we wind up chatting over an Aperol spritz at Bitter, an Italian-inspired cocktail bar that specializes in aperitivo. Like Bird next door, it's owned by Camden Hauge, who's from the States. Kuei tells me about finding his footing in Shanghai's food and beverage world, a pursuit that's an homage to his father, who runs a Chinese-Indian restaurant in Mumbai. We talk about his favorite late-night snacks on the street, how it felt for him to move here and not speak the language, and where he buys all his great turtle-neck sweaters (online).

None of it has much to do with Shanghai or China more broadly, but that's okay—because here, it's personal.

#### CHRISTINA LUK

**LIKE MOST OF** Shanghai's 27 million residents, Christina Luk is Chinese but not native to the city—she grew up in Hong Kong before living in Toronto and London. When she eventually landed in Shanghai, she founded her design and architectural firm, **LUKSTUDIO**, in the Changning District. A friend and I are meant to meet her at her office on a Sunday; it's empty and locked. She's running a few minutes late, but we don't mind—the glass windows are floor-to-ceiling, allowing us to thoroughly examine the floor without a key. We marvel at how there are at least as many plants as there are desks.

She arrives, apologizes, and taps the door, which opens sideways with an almost sci-fi flare. She promptly brews us cups of tea and lays out snacks. Even in this ultra-modern studio, we're made to feel at home.

As we talk, Luk uses the phrase "contemporary Chinese" to describe her design ethos. It's a term that, to her, reflects "communal space" and "blurring the lines between private and public." In 2017, Luk's studio created the "Modular Lilong," a retail space built to support a concept brand that works with local designers, modeled after Shanghai's famous lanehouses. The project marries the residential with the commercial, softening the blow of mercantile encroachment on ordinary life.

"A lot of the neighborhoods used to be very condensed," Luk says. "The Shanghai streetscape is interesting because when you walk down the street, you see shared kitchens and sinks, you see people outside playing mahjong. They treat the street almost like an extension of their home."

This way of life, Luk says with a tinge of sorrow, is threatened by an obsession with (and reliance upon) technology, and developers who are looking to commercialize as much of Shanghai as possible, favoring shopping malls to quaint, even historic, cityscapes and public spaces. But where Luk sees problems, she's galvanized toward solutions.

"This 'shopping mall' thing is sort of a Western model just plopped into the landscape," she says. "But in my work I always want to have more of a public element. I don't want it to be just purely about selling something. I want to work towards something that can improve people's living, something with more of a social impact that would be sustainable. It's important to think that way as a designer."

Luk has the well-being of future generations in mind when committing to new projects, whether residential or commercial.

"Most of the younger generation, their desire is actual experience," she says. "The more you are in this virtual space, the more you crave physical connections. We have to ask ourselves: What is the well-being of people? It's not about shopping. It's not about looking at your Instagram nonstop for the whole day. It's really about enjoying the present. And I think that's why the physical space will never be obsolete. There will always be a need for these social spaces."

#### CAMDEN HAUGE

WHEN NEW JERSEY native Camden Hauge moved to Shanghai more than six years ago, her career in food and beverage snowballed at lightning speed. The supper club that she started with friends quickly led to her quitting her job in advertising to open Egg, which has become a wildly popular brunch staple. She describes it as "an all-day dining space that has an equal focus on good food, good coffee, and good service." Egg is cheffed by another Jersey native who goes by the name Jamie Pea. The two actually went to high school together and migrated to China around the same time, Hauge to Shanghai and Pea to Beijing. Since moving to Shanghai this year, however, Pea feels that she enjoys more freedom in the kitchen. "People in Shanghai, the locals and expats, have been more open-minded than in Beijing," she says. "We're just more free to make stuff that we think is delicious and share that with people."

With Egg, Bird, and Bitter under her hat, Hauge is no stranger to hospitality. But her talent for bringing people together around food became apparent first with her supper club project. "The original intention of my monthly supper club was to gather people, to force them to intersect the concentric social circles we settle into, and grow a community," she says. "And what better way than around a table?"

Even now, as a full-blown restaurateur, Hauge doesn't open watering holes for the sake of growing an empire. Every spot must fit a real niche. Her approach is a welcome departure from the formulaic eateries that clutter dining scenes in major cities around the world. "When opening new

Inset: While in the city, we did a night eats excursion with UnTour Food Tours. At A Touch of Shy Pepper (辣椒寨), the third and spiciest stop, patrons are equipped with a full kit that includes chopsticks, Wet-Naps, tissues, and a stick of gum. Daring eaters should order the rabbit head—it's an unforgettable experience.



BITTER  
58 Wuyuan Lu,  
near Changshu Lu

Camden Hauge's Bitter is famous for more than just great Aperol spritzes; behind the bar, "Cocktail Ayi"—a middle-aged woman named Ang Wei Hong, who traded in her life as a maid for one as a bartender—is a neighborhood icon.

restaurants, I believe they need to fill a genuine need in the market. There has to be an apparent soul,” she says. “People are looking for a genuine experience—whether that’s in how you say hello, the font of your menu, the type of wine you have selected, the music you play—and that’s what we try and provide them. Something that’s personal and considered and hopefully enjoyable because of that.”

→ In spite of all the development, Shanghai has quite a lot of green space.

### YAO LU

I MEET YAO LU on the top floor of Egg, his “neighborhood breakfast spot,” where he orders us matching coconut cold brew coffees. (Normally I’m too anxious to drink caffeine, but I break my own rule because of how delicious he makes it sound.) The mason jars sweat as the ice melts, diffusing the punch of the deliciously rich coffee that I sip, cautiously at first, before I transition to a heartier slurp.

We would have met at Union Trading Company, his bar on Fenyang Lu, but I had been there just last night with friends, so he suggested Egg. I revel in the opportunity to order a couple breakfast tacos—and welcome a short reprieve from alcohol.

The heavily tattooed bartender shares that, though he grew up mostly in Dallas, Texas, his family is Shanghainese, and he lived in Shanghai when he was in middle school. For years after his family’s return to the U.S., Lu felt drawn back to Shanghai, a city that he says “rewards adventurous people” and has an unrivaled energy. After receiving a degree in hospitality from the University of Houston, Lu worked a few jobs in Texas as a bartender before making the move to Shanghai, where he opened Union.

Unlike a surge of other bars that serve the same trendy libations, Lu’s menu is flexible, seasonal, and creative, changing every three or four months in accordance with what’s available locally. “China has such an amazing variety of produce and exotic things that you can’t get anywhere else, but are also incredibly seasonal, like wax berries for example,” he says. “They’re literally in season for, like, two weeks. If you miss it, you miss it. A lot of things are very fleeting, so we have to make a decision about how we want to utilize these ingredients. Do we preserve it? Pickle it? Make a jam out of it?”

As our glasses empty and my jitters kick in, Lu tells me stories about tending bar in Texas, where he once served up identical Manhattans to a tattoo artist and the oil executive sitting next to him. The pair, though aesthetically opposite, bonded over their shared love of the classic cocktail. “That’s what a bar should be. It’s inclusive,” he says. “It doesn’t really matter what walk of life you’re from. You come, you feel welcomed, and you connect with people that you never thought you would.”

In Shanghai, Lu has applied the same principles.

“My bar is really hospitality-driven,” he says. “That’s ultimately why people go to bars, in my opinion; people want a refuge. People want to walk out happier than when they came in. That is the ultimate reason why a bar exists.” ↑

• EGG  
12 Xiangyang Bei Lu,  
near Julu Lu

• UNION TRADING COMPANY  
64 Fenyang Lu,  
near Fuxing Zhong Lu

Yao Lu says that Shanghai is one of the world’s most exciting cities for bars. “Shanghai’s identity is really created by food and drink.”



✓ Inset: Jamie Pea and Yao Lu both rave about Shanghai’s abundance of fresh, local produce, which includes plenty of fruits. Not surprisingly, cuisine from this region is particularly sweet.