



# REAL SHANGHAI

**A**fter the Wendy Deng affair I decide against claiming I'm related to Rupert Murdoch and go with saying I'm the son of Kerry Packer. Mrs Wu smiles politely but I doubt she has any idea who James Packer is and I don't get much more than a cursory glance up and down.

I'm taking a walk in Shanghai's People's Park just past noon on a Saturday and have stumbled into one of the world's oddest markets – it's called the marriage market or "blind date corner" and already a gaggle of pensioners has gathered near the main entrance of the park, each sitting behind an umbrella with a card pasted on it listing details about their son or daughter in the hopes of making a marriage match.

Typically those with sons list their age, job, salary and that he has an apartment and car – considered prerequisites in modern, materialistic Shanghai. For the girls the details are more scant, listing age, job, educational background, personality and height. Each also has a list of the requirements for a potential match.

It has been estimated that by 2020 as many as 24 million men in China will be unmarried and unable to find a wife so it's a competitive market and 200 or more umbrellas can be displayed each Saturday and Sunday afternoon. At one umbrella a mother is grilling a father about his son. "Which university did he go to and was it full-time?" "How much money does he make?" The father wearily replies; some of the parents have been coming for years and chances of success seem slim.

Mrs Wu admits that her 28-year-old daughter, who works in a bank, has no idea that she is there but, like many parents, she has given up waiting for her daughter to find a husband and decided to take affirmative action.

Nearby across a lotus-filled pond another pensioner is playing a Nagoya harp accompanied by a warbling lady. With limited space in most people's apartments parks offer an extension of the living room for most Shanghainese, particularly the retired. Early in the morning they gather to do tai chi, while the days are punctuated by impromptu musical performances. Finally at night they, along with any available square, are taken over by the so-called dancing aunties. Middle aged

and older, they dance to loud music ranging from traditional ballroom melodies to Lady Gaga.

## SIGHTS BY SIDECAR

Andaz Hotel is a brisk walk away in the Xintiandi area, now a fashionable art and entertainment precinct behind the facades of traditional shikumen buildings. At the modern hotel I await my ride – a sidecar which can trace its vintage to the 1930s era BMW R71. My Shanghai Insiders guide, 26-year-old Abi Li, pulls up on a China Post green Changjiang 750 sidecar and seems at home on the motorcycle. "I grew up in a sidecar as my godfather was a policeman and had a police sidecar. I remember from when I was about 5 until age 12 spending time in the sidecar going here and there," she explains before we set off. It's an exhilarating ride low down on the road, zipping through busy Shanghai traffic – well, the actual speed is only about 25km/h but it feels faster with the engine barking loudly as we go and the wind whistling around my head – helmets are available but not compulsory to wear, adding to the thrill of the ride for anyone used to stricter western road rules.

Our first stop is the 1933 Old Millfun building which hides a gruesome past behind its Art Deco façade. Today its five levels are a labyrinthine web of concrete bridges, stairways, cloisters and massive halls that house galleries, creative spaces and contemporary art that have erased any sign that this once was the city's main abattoir.

Back in the sidecar we continue on through southern Hongkou and the area where Jewish refugees found sanctuary during WWII in Shanghai then across the iconic Garden Bridge to the Yu Gardens old town. Instead of going to the tourist-swamped centre we dive down a back street of traditional houses where locals are busy going about their lives. That's the trademark of Shanghai Insiders tours, guides aim to take visitors off the beaten path.

"I enjoy showing foreigners the big contrast of modern and traditional which can easily be found in Hongkou and the old town



Shanghai Insiders touring

**Behind the bright lights and flashy skyscrapers of new Shanghai, Mark Andrews discovers the quirky charm of the old city**



The old abattoir is now an arts hub

# “The contrast of modern and traditional is what Shanghai is made of and where its charm lies”

for the traditional part and among all the skyscrapers and office buildings for the new. They can feel that this city is full of energy, creativity and productivity. Plus there are the former concessions [French, American, British communities] and all the Laszlo Hudec [a prolific Hungarian architect in pre-war Shanghai] buildings. I think these are what Shanghai is made of and where its charm lies.”

Tours are tailored to what visitors are interested in and can last from one to four hours. Often there’s no set route and an emphasis on local knowledge shows visitors a side of Shanghai they otherwise might not see.

## COLOURFUL HISTORY

The basement of an apartment building seems an incongruous location for a museum but hiding beneath a complex just off Huashan Road the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre is one of the most unique in the city. It is a private passion and a labour of love for owner Yang Pei Ming who started collecting the posters more than 30 years ago, afraid they would be lost to history forever if destroyed during the political changes over the years. Since the 1990s he has amassed more than 6000, although only a fraction of that amount is on display in the two-room centre.

Shanghai was once a centre of printing propaganda posters and they offer a glimpse of life in modern China, from the calendar girls of the 1930s to the Cold War posters of the 1950s and 1960s. Certainly from the 1950s the content became a lot more political and the bulk of the collection dates from the communist takeover in 1949. In the earlier years they started to attack people labelled as enemies within China and then moved on to the western powers. In one poster of the era a Chinese dragon boat races past caricatures of the Americans and British in a floundering boat. Near the museum entrance are three seemingly identical paintings of the founding of the People’s Republic by artist Dong Xiwen. Dated 1953, 1956, and 1972 a closer look reveals a changing sea of faces behind Mao Zedong as those in favour shifted with China’s tumultuous history.



From top: The Xintiandi district is a fashionable art and entertainment precinct; parents gather at 'the marriage market' in the People's Park to find a match for their adult children; posters at the Shanghai Propaganda Poster Art Centre

## REAL FOOD

Nanjing Road is one of the main shopping streets in Shanghai and home to international brands ranging from cheap mass market H&M to luxury Louis Vuitton. Wujiang Road, just behind Nanjing West Road (Nanjing Xilu) subway station, used to be full of local food shops but in the lead-up to the 2010 World Expo it received a thorough makeover and while it is still an eating destination it’s been mostly taken over by international chains.

However, hidden on the second floor of a shopping centre is one of the last bastions of the old food street, Yang’s Dumpling. Most guide books about Shanghai talk about *xiaolongbao* – small soup dumplings – which are delicious but they are not really everyday food in Shanghai. *Shengjianbao* are their rough cousin, bigger with a gruff exterior yet a similar soupy heart designed to satiate the hunger pangs of the workers. They are cooked on huge covered iron skillets then water is added and they come out with crisp bases.

There’s an art to eating any kind of soup dumpling or else it’s easy to scald either yourself or fellow diners as hot liquid spurts across the room. The trick is to bite a small hole in the wrapper and suck the juices out. As *shengjianbao* are quite large it’s also easier to use a spoon to hold it rather than chopsticks for this stage. Then dip into vinegar and devour.

Yang’s is a good introduction to where the locals eat. The cheap prices are affordable to most and the taste attracts people from all walks of life. There’s an English menu so ordering is easy and after collecting my dumplings from the window I end up sharing a table with a young woman who talks to me in English. She tells me that she’s recently returned from abroad and this is one of the tastes from home she misses. As she leaves my next dish arrives, thin cellophane noodles with beef in a curry soup.


Shanghai is a large city and the traffic can be slow moving and so although taxis are cheap it’s often easier to hop on the subway train. With 14 lines operating most places in the city centre are easy to get to and I’m on my way to Jiashan Road station where I meet Helen Liu from Cook in Shanghai. I’m joining one of her classes along with couples from Germany and Finland.

First Helen takes us to a nearby wet market where locals go to buy their groceries to find the freshest ingredients – and it’s quite an experience. We see things like duck blood, live fish and live toads

**EAT  
5  
WAYS**

being sold alongside tofu. While it's a traditional style of shopping in Shanghai Helen scans a QR code from a vendor to pay for her goods by smartphone.

Helen's classes are promoted as 'home-style' and that's exactly what they are – there's no shiny commercial kitchen set-up – once the shopping is done we go to a nearby apartment. Inside chef Ding from Anhui province has already made some preparations but we are soon put to work chopping. Ding shows us how to slice the beef sideways at an angle. Next we marinate the chicken and beef. The first dish we cook, *gong bao* chicken, a popular dish in Australia, is cooked a little differently here and our beef with peppers dish turns out spicy rather than with the more familiar black bean sauce. Surprisingly, in both cases we deep fry the meat very quickly at the beginning before stir frying. We also make *shao mai*, a kind of dumpling stuffed with sticky rice, meat and mushrooms. Classes are small, limited to just six people, and last about four hours. In each class you eat the food you prepare and can take it away if it's too much to finish. Everyone prepares two to three dishes in our class and, full on my afternoon's work, I know I won't need dinner.



China Eastern Airlines will operate direct flights between Brisbane and Shanghai four times a week on board A330 aircraft from 17 December. It services a broad network of destinations across China, Europe, North America and Asia from its base at Shanghai's Pudong Airport

**1 LYNN**

**99-1 Xikang lu (Rd)**  
Modern Shanghai-style food in a stylish environment. Weekend lunch dim sum is popular.

**2 MR & MRS BUND**

**6th Floor 18 Zhongshan Dong Yi Lu (East One Rd)**  
Pricey French restaurant with well executed food and a great view across the Huangpu River to the modern buildings of Pudong.

**3 LOST HEAVEN**

**38 Gaoyou Lu (Rd)**  
Romantic restaurant in the former French Concession serving up high quality Yunnan-style food from the south west of China.

**4 TMSK**

**Unit 2 No.11, Xintiandi Square, Lane 181 Taicang Rd**  
Stylish restaurant serving up largely European but supposedly fusion food in a traditional Shanghai lane house with live Chinese music.

**5 JESSE**

**41 Tianping Lu, near Huaihai Xi Lu**  
Small local restaurant serving unpretentious genuine Shanghai food.

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