



# Condé Nast **Traveller**

**SPECIAL  
DOUBLE ISSUE**

JULY/AUGUST 2018 £4.50

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**+ THE 50 PEOPLE  
CHANGING THE  
WAY WE TRAVEL  
RIGHT NOW**



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**PANTELLERIA MAKES A BIGGER SPLASH**

**MAXIMUM CITY: A PORTRAIT OF SHANGHAI**

**THE BOLD ARRIVAL PUTTING TURKEY BACK ON THE AGENDA**

**WHY CHINESE ARCHITECTS ARE BLOWING OUR MINDS**

**L.A.'S URBAN SHAMANS**

**THE GREATEST ROAD TRIP IN SOUTH AMERICA**



# **HYPER HYPER**

**SHANGHAI IS A NEON-LIT MASH-UP OF OLD AND NEW, A  
*BLADE RUNNER* BOOM TOWN WHERE FUTURISTIC TOWERS LOOM OVER  
VICTORIAN GOTHIC LANDMARKS IN A COUNTRY THAT HAS BUILT MORE  
SKYSCRAPERS THAN ANY OTHER EVERY YEAR FOR ALMOST A DECADE**

**BY STEVE KING. PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM PARKER**



## MEGACITY?

OH, NO. YOU MUST THINK BIGGER. Shanghai is one of the world's dozen or so hypercities – those with a population in excess of 20 million. It might actually be the biggest, the hypermost city of all. Depends on who you ask and how they're counting. Truth to tell, nobody knows for sure how big Shanghai is. Twenty-six million people? Twenty-eight? Thirty? More? Well, if it isn't quite that big today, it will be tomorrow. Likewise the physical space it occupies, already greater than that of many nations, is continuously expanding. Even from the air, you can't make out its boundaries.

On a rare clear day last autumn I visited the observation deck of the tallest building in town. On the way up I tactlessly asked the lift operator whether I was correct in thinking that this was only the second tallest building in the world. 'That's right,' she said coolly, gloved finger on button. 'But it's got the fastest elevator.'

From the top, the numberless towers of Shanghai receded in all directions. It was like looking at a choppy sea from the crow's nest of a staysail schooner – silvery glints and deep shadows rolling away to the smeared grey arc of the distant horizon. I remembered Noël Coward's quip about the time he pressed his cheek to the mahogany at one end of the famously long Long Bar in the Shanghai Club and declared that he could perceive in its surface the curvature of the earth. That was in 1930. His vision may have been slightly impaired at the time – poor Noël spent an unhappy week in bed at the Cathay Hotel with a nasty bout of flu. Despite his delicate health he found the wherewithal not only to put on a suit and tie and slick back his hair and force down a medicinal cocktail or two at the Shanghai Club but also to dash off a draft of *Private Lives* in between temperature spikes. What a guy. What style. What smarts. What energy.

But then Shanghai was – and still very much is – all about style and smarts and energy.

Twenty years ago there was next to nothing on the eastern bank of the Huangpu River. Today it's the site of the main financial district, Lujiazui, where the tallest buildings are concentrated, and one of the defining images of contemporary China. Whether you've been to Shanghai or not, you've seen it. If you've seen the James Bond movie *Skyfall*, you've seen it. Sam Mendes shot it well, and Daniel Craig shot it up pretty well too.

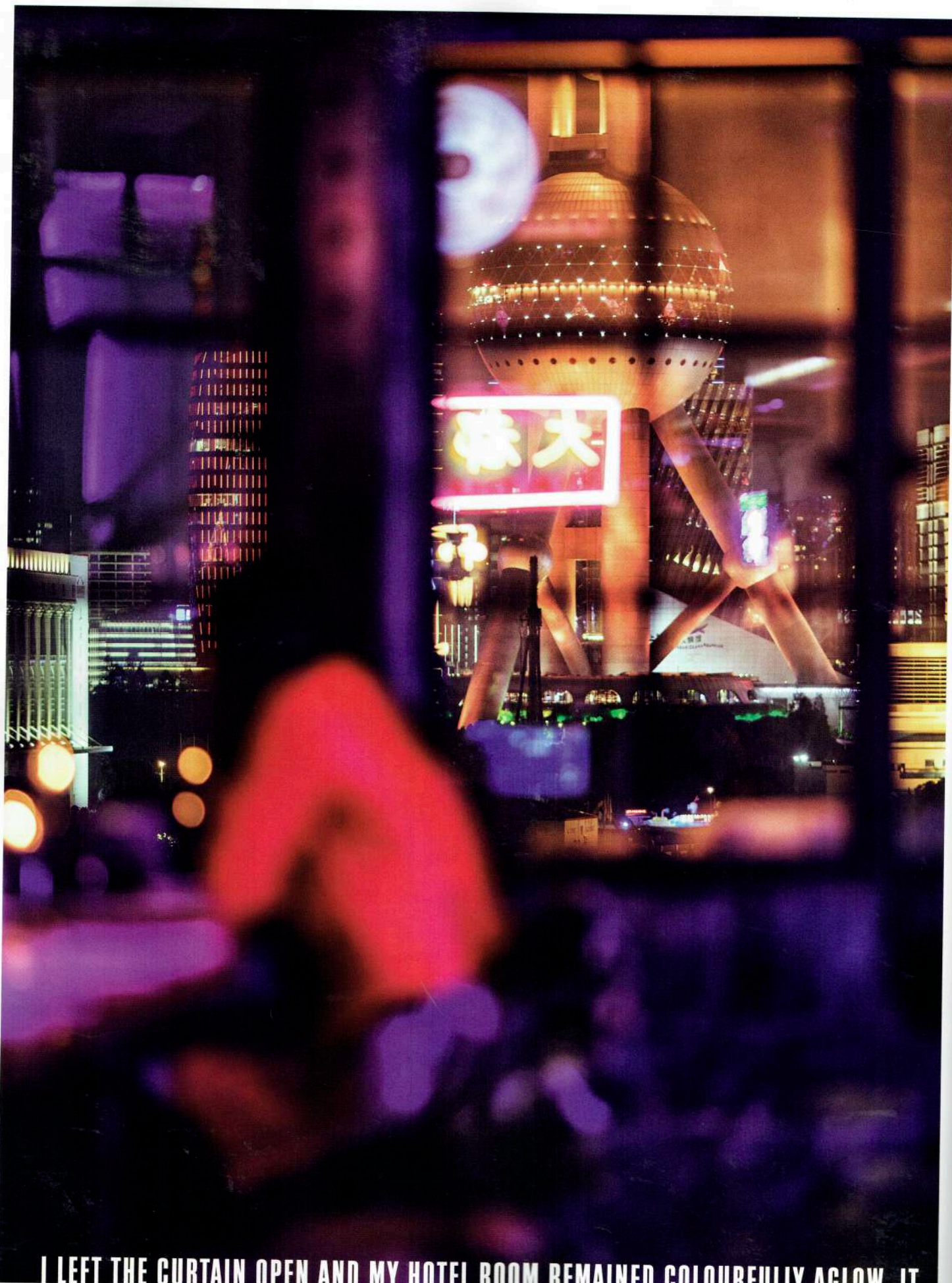
All skyscrapers are statements, of course, expressions of power or money or ingenuity or, occasionally, originality and wit. It is difficult not to read this particular agglomeration of jagged-edged towers as a rebuke. Hundreds of middle fingers retrospectively raised to the British opium traders and French and American speculators who, in the second half of the 19th century, transformed Shanghai into the most cosmopolitan city in the East; sophisticated, louche, neither wholly European nor wholly Asian but a delicious admixture of both. Even now Shanghai is held in suspicion by the rest of the country for the manner in which it prostituted itself to foreigners. A sell-out. Tainted. Not properly Chinese. Lujiazui is a properly Shanghaiese rebuttal of that perception, radiant with



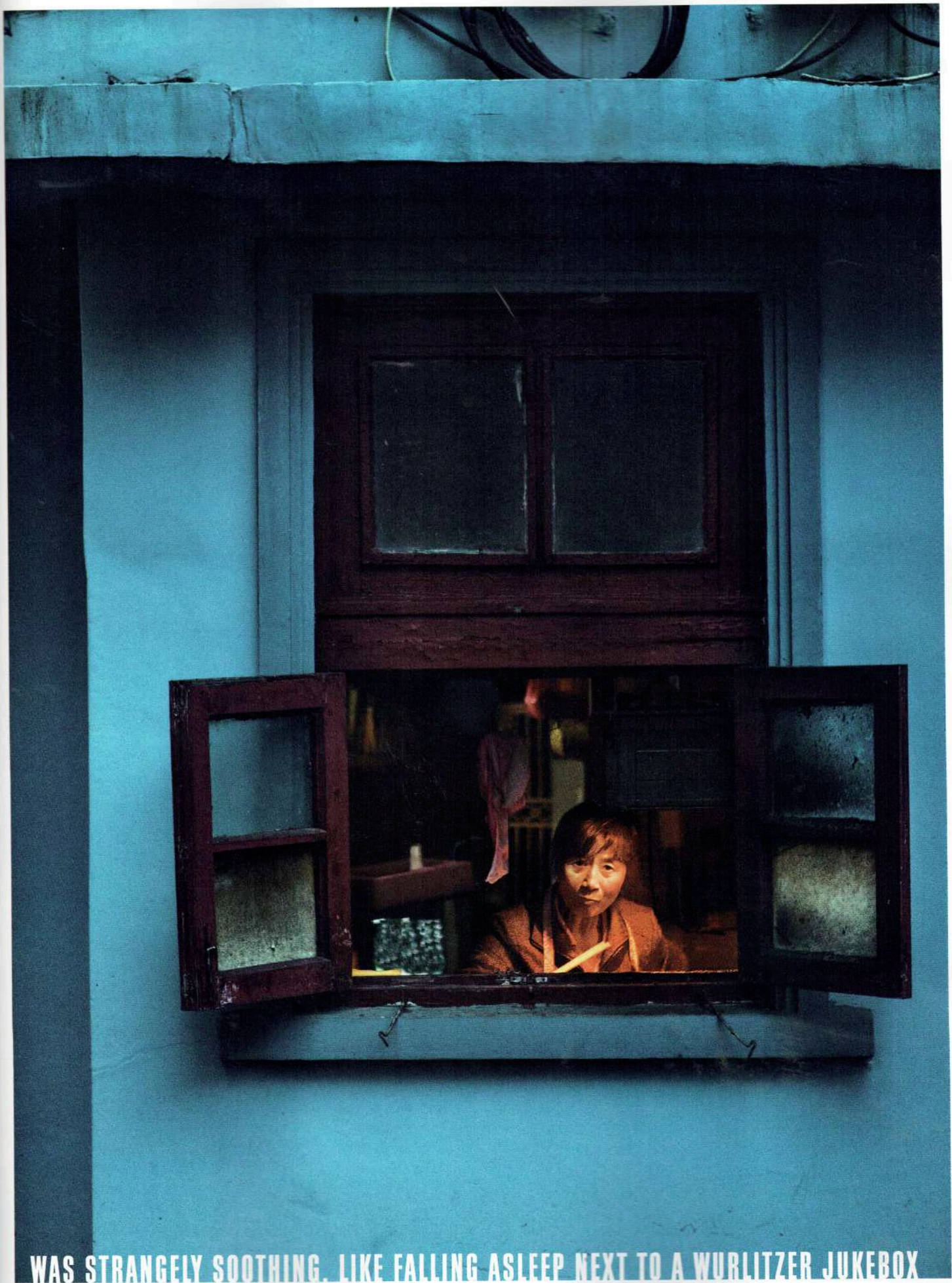
**AMONG THE WORLD'S SUPER-SIZED HUBS THIS MIGHT BE THE BIGGEST OF ALL. 26 MILLION PEOPLE? 28? 30? WELL, IF IT ISN'T QUITE THAT BIG TODAY, IT WILL BE TOMORROW**

can-do attitude. I have only ever spent one night on that side of the river, in a corner suite at the Mandarin Oriental fit for a Jardine Matheson tai-pan, a haven of *luxe, calme et volupté* amid the futuristic dazzle, and an ideal vantage point from which to contemplate the city's astonishing eclecticism and stubborn contrariness. I left the curtains open and the room remained colourfully aglow. It was strangely soothing, like falling asleep next to a vast Wurlitzer jukebox.

Later it occurred to me that it's also possible to understand Lujiazui in another way – as a sort of fairground mirror that casts a distorted reflection of Old Shanghai, or at least of the principles on which it was created. In the 1920s and 1930s thousands of new buildings went up on the western side of the Huangpu, where the British, French and Americans administered their extraterritorial statelets according to their own laws. Men like Victor Sassoon – who owned the Cathay Hotel, which proved so agreeable to Noël Coward – conceived of these buildings as emblems of the city's modernity. Others, even then, mourned the consequent loss of countless  
*Above, a resident near the 1933 Milfun building. Opposite, from top left; dim-sum seller in the former French Concession; Yuz Museum; Grand Hyatt viewpoint; the 1933 block. Previous pages from left: Baker & Spice café; apartments near M50 art centre*



I LEFT THE CURTAIN OPEN AND MY HOTEL ROOM REMAINED COLOUREFULLY AGLOW. IT



WAS STRANGELY SOOTHING. LIKE FALLING ASLEEP NEXT TO A WURLITZER JUKEBOX

traditional lane houses and the sudden, involuntary displacement of those who had lived in them. Spectacular growth without obstruction was the mantra of the early 20th century. So it is once again in the early 21st.

I had coffee with Pius Chan, a feng shui master. Neat, dapper, loafered, he squeezed me in between meetings with Hermès and Louis Vuitton, two of his most important clients, and did his best to distill several millennia worth of arcane science and philosophy into a caffè-latte-sized conversation.

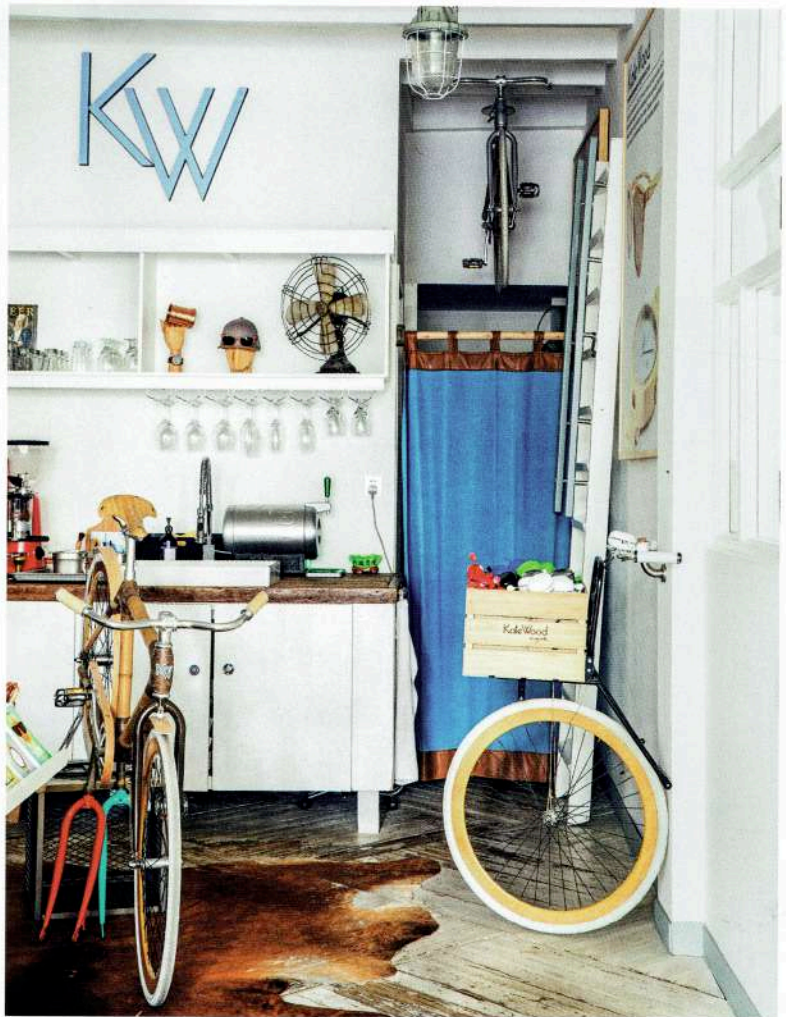
Feng shui, he explained, is a Chinese system of geomancy that considers the relationship between the location and orientation of buildings or objects and positive or negative *qi* – energy. Scale is not relevant. Purpose is. Is the space in question for commercial or residential use? Should it be a dynamic or a stable place? Surroundings are also significant – the proximity to the good or bad energy that is inherent in natural features such as bodies of water and mountains. This is known as land luck, and may apply not only to an individual building but to an entire city. In a present-day commercial set-up, a store can be divided into nine distinct and more or less auspicious spaces. The cashier should occupy the one with the most positive energy. ‘Energy equals money,’ said Chan, clearly comfortable at the sweet spot where mysticism meets the bottom line.

As he trotted off to his next appointment I wondered whether these notions of energy and land luck might provide the keys to the city. It is undeniable that we all respond, sometimes strongly, to the way certain places make us feel. There must be reasons for these responses, not all of them merely personal or irrational. And Chan’s ideas were echoed, in different ways and in different contexts, by others I spoke to on my rambles.

The gallerist Pearl Lam, much admired for her purple hair and husky voice, told me about the explosive growth in the contemporary art market and the emerging class of young, confident, status-conscious Shanghaiese collectors. ‘Until 2011, 2012, Chinese collectors bought art like they’d buy property or antiques, for investment, with no real idea of what they were getting,’ she said. ‘They’d follow the auction houses and snap up whatever was most expensive. Sometimes they wouldn’t even open the crate when it arrived. But now their children, these rich kids, are consuming art with incredible energy, and for different reasons. I mean, for one thing, they actually like it.’

Lam used the words ‘romantic’ and ‘decadent’ repeatedly. I thought there was something of both in her view of the city. ‘Take the French Concession,’ she said. ‘It’s unique in the country. A historic area that hasn’t been destroyed. The Art Deco buildings are some of the best in the world – European-influenced, yes, but adapted, turned into something totally Shanghaiese. It’s the same with the Bund, which sort of looks like Westminster and sort of doesn’t. What an amazing fusion of cultures. And, I mean, in what other Chinese city can you walk?’

She had a point about walking, though oddly the two least walkable parts of the city were those where the contemporary art scene, of which Lam is practically the patron saint, has developed most conspicuously: first,



## I HAD COFFEE WITH A FENG SHUI MASTER. NEAT, DAPPER, LOAFERED, HE SQUEEZED ME IN BETWEEN MEETINGS WITH HERMES AND LOUIS VUITTON, TWO OF HIS BIGGEST CLIENTS

around the complex of repurposed textile mills to the north of downtown, known as M50, and, more recently, the so-called West Bund area. To my great surprise I found myself almost physically repelled by the West Bund. The scale, the traffic. Something not quite right with the feng shui. Among the galleries, entertainment venues and apartment buildings currently under construction is a project known as the DreamCenter, a commercial and cultural complex featuring a performance space in a former concrete factory with seating for 3,000. The Shanghai-born novelist JG Ballard wrote of the city as ‘a waking dream where everything I could imagine had already been taken to its extreme’. I was inclined to side with Ballard rather than with the property developers on this one. I remain unsure how much a self-proclaimed DreamCenter could add to a city like Shanghai.

Ballard was a schoolboy in the 1930s when Shanghai’s reputation as ‘the Paris of the East’ or, less politely, ‘the whore of the Orient’ was at its peak. Such labels have always seemed to me unhelpful and unlikely – the sort of things nobody ever says out loud in real life. But then in a taxi on my way

*Above, bamboo bikes at Kate Wood Originals in the former French Concession. Opposite, Little Catch fishmongers in the same neighbourhood. Previous pages, from left: view of the Pearl Tower from Daimon Gastrolounge; a Shanghai local*





to the real Bund, while driving past the Paramount, a palatial nightclub that survives from the pre-war golden age, I made an offhand remark to my guide, a Shanghainese gentleman of advancing years, about how much fun it must have been in its heyday. He breathed out emphatically through his nose. 'Harlots and hooligans,' he declared in perfectly precise English.

As the towers of Lujiazui began to rise in the 1990s, things were changing on the opposite side of the river as well, driven by a successful bid to host Expo 2010, a distant relation of the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851 to showcase the innovations of an imperial superpower. The Chinese government threw tremendous sums of money at the event, much of which went on prettifying corners of historic Shanghai: the French Concession, the Jewish quarter, the industrial buildings along Suzhou Creek, the stone-gated *shikumen* houses of Xintiandi. But nowhere in the city was the process more visible than on the mile-long stretch of waterfront, comprising 33 grand Victorian buildings where the foreign banks had established their headquarters and the expats had come to play, known as the Bund.

Things may have gone awfully quiet here with the implementation of Communist Party rule in 1949, but today the Bund is once again jumping. It wouldn't be fair to speak of a flurry of recent and upcoming hotel openings in Shanghai. More like an outburst, an eruption, an ecstasy. Many of these are on or near the Bund. A selective list would include the Anandi, Bellagio, Bulgari, Edition, Middle House and W. (Amanyangyun and the Capella, both wonderful, are exceptions, one just outside the city, the other in the French Concession.) The pick of the more established establishments, and the keeper of the flame of unabashed old-school grandeur, is The Peninsula. With its combination of Art Deco flourishes and up-to-the-minute opulence, it's the direct descendant of Victor Sassoon's beloved Cathay Hotel (now renamed the Peace Hotel and part of the Fairmont group), just a few minutes' walk down the Bund.

All along the Bund rich young Chinese jostle in the shops at street level that sell Italian shoes and Swiss watches, then repair to the rooftop bars directly above to down French Champagne and American cocktails while a German or a Dutch or a Spanish DJ competes with the faintly chiming English bells on the Custom House clock tower.

Take a dozen steps away from the Bund, however, and you enter another world. For me, these are streets of infinite enchantment and mystery. In the company of another, less censorious guide, I stepped, on a whim, through an open door into a dark old building that I had often admired before as I passed by and started climbing the stairs. I suppose you could call this trespassing. But nobody seemed to mind. People passed us on the stairs and we exchanged greetings. We could hear voices, televisions, children playing. When we reached the top-floor landing, we found three old ladies cooking in a shared kitchen. We explained what we were doing there – just looking around. In that case, one of the ladies asked, would we like to see the view from the roof? She



led us through her tiny one-room apartment and up a ladder. On the roof, freshly laundered clothes hung on a line. The weather was fair and there was a breeze. The old lady patted the clothes and started unpegging them and folding them over one arm. Looming to one side were the backs of several of the buildings of the Bund, places where, not so long ago, fortunes were made and decisions taken that, one way or another, affected the lives of millions of Chinese people.

The old lady's name was Chen Ping but she asked us to call her Ah Ping. Ah is a familiar form of address normally used among friends and family. She had lived in this building for almost 40 years. So much had changed, she said, but she loved it here. I asked her what she liked most about it. Her answer was brief and she smiled as she gave it. The breeze ruffled her boyish hair and she squinted into the sun. I took her picture while I waited for my guide to translate. 'She's using an interesting word. I'm not sure what the English equivalent is. She says she likes it because it's convenient and it's got *re nao*. Literally, it means hot and noisy. But it's more like, I don't know... Buzz. Energy.' 🗣️

#### GETTING HERE

Ampersand Travel offers nine-night Shanghai itineraries from £5,900 per person, staying at the Peninsula, the Mandarin Oriental, Capella and Amanyangyun, including flights, transfers and sightseeing.  
+44 20 7819 9770; [ampersandtravel.com](http://ampersandtravel.com)

Above, a house in the former French Concession. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the Capella hotel; Denise Huang, owner of Suzhou Cobblers; the 33-floor atrium of the Grand Hyatt; an artwork at M50