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CHINA RISING

In buzzing Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong, new hotels, cultural centers and smart tours showcase an ancient civilization in a new light.
By Janine Yu.



ON A STEAMY June Sunday, local elders gathered at a pavilion in a park near the Forbidden City in Beijing and sang buoyant songs celebrating the Cultural Revolution. Nostalgia for the past still exists in China in modern times, but you wouldn't know it from the rapid-fire pace at which its economy, the world's second largest, is developing. The China of yesteryear seems like a distant memory, with its cities now powerhouses in art, architecture, fashion and technology. Even the most ardent admirer of the

old traditions would be thrilled by the way the best of these have developed and been given new life. Feiyue sneakers, for example, originally worn by laborers in 1920s Shanghai, today are the footwear of choice for that city's millennials and are sold internationally by U.S. fashion brand Madewell. Meanwhile, 21st-century trends and technologies are more advanced here: the ride-sharing app Didi is far more sophisticated than Uber, allowing you to order a Maybach and communicate with your

driver using an auto-translation feature. The ubiquitous WeChat app combines a social-media platform, instant messaging and mobile payment. And that's just skimming the surface. Here are the must-sees in China's three most-visited cities.

SHANGHAI

Nowhere is China's rapid development more evident than in Shanghai, where cranes rise over the skyline and a spate of luxury hotels has opened away from the iconic Bund. The



Tai chi at sunrise on the Bund in Shanghai;
Clockwise from top right: The Forbidden
City in Beijing; the reception at the Middle
House in Shanghai; dim sum in Shanghai;
locals playing a board game in Beijing.





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Middle House debuted in May 2018. With stunning artwork, including a show-stopping glass chandelier handcrafted by an Italian artisan living in China, the chic boutique hotel also offers the latest in fitness equipment, including Hypoxi machines, which claim to be three times as effective as competitors at burning fat.

Like Beijing’s historic *hutong* alleyways, the *lilongs* of Shanghai’s former **French Concession** are under siege from urban sprawl, so you’ll want to explore the centuries-old lane houses—in the shadow of surrounding skyscrapers—before they are gone. An immersive way to experience the district is on a bicycle tour, cycling down tree-lined avenues then through nondescript entrances into the densely packed lanes, where you’ll get a glimpse of Shanghainese family life spanning generations. Be warned: riding through traffic and in narrow alleyways is not for the faint of heart.

The former French Concession also contains the trendy **An Fu Lu** neighborhood, where hipsters reside in Art Deco buildings and frequent the funky bars and sleek restaurants. Tucked away in an unassuming building is one of the most fascinating museums in China, the **Propaganda Poster Art Center**, a private collection of signs boosting the Cultural Revolution, with painted images depicting socialist ideals pulled from

Mao’s Little Red Book and the era’s political ideology.

Located in a historic mansion in the upscale Jing’an district is **Prada Rong Zhai**. Opened by the luxury brand in 2017, the cultural center hosts rotating art exhibitions and shows, and its early 20th-century three-story building is almost as beautiful as the pieces displayed within it.

BEIJING

Old neighborhoods making way for new ones seems to be the norm for Beijing. The funky boutique hotel **Opposite House** is located in an area that used to be known for grungy dive bars and strip clubs. The clubs still exist, but the district has gone upmarket, with a massive shopping mall and posh cocktail bars. The hotel has kept its edge, however, showcasing works by some of the most talented contemporary Chinese artists in its lobby and public spaces.

You can learn a lot about a country’s history through its culinary traditions. A street-food tour of Beijing’s *hutongs* provides a thought-provoking and scrumptious introduction to the influences of modern Chinese cuisine. While sampling the wares of the best *jianbing* (traditional crêpe) stalls and dumpling eateries, you’ll discover how the *hutongs* have developed over the centuries and are now slowly disappearing.



HONG KONG

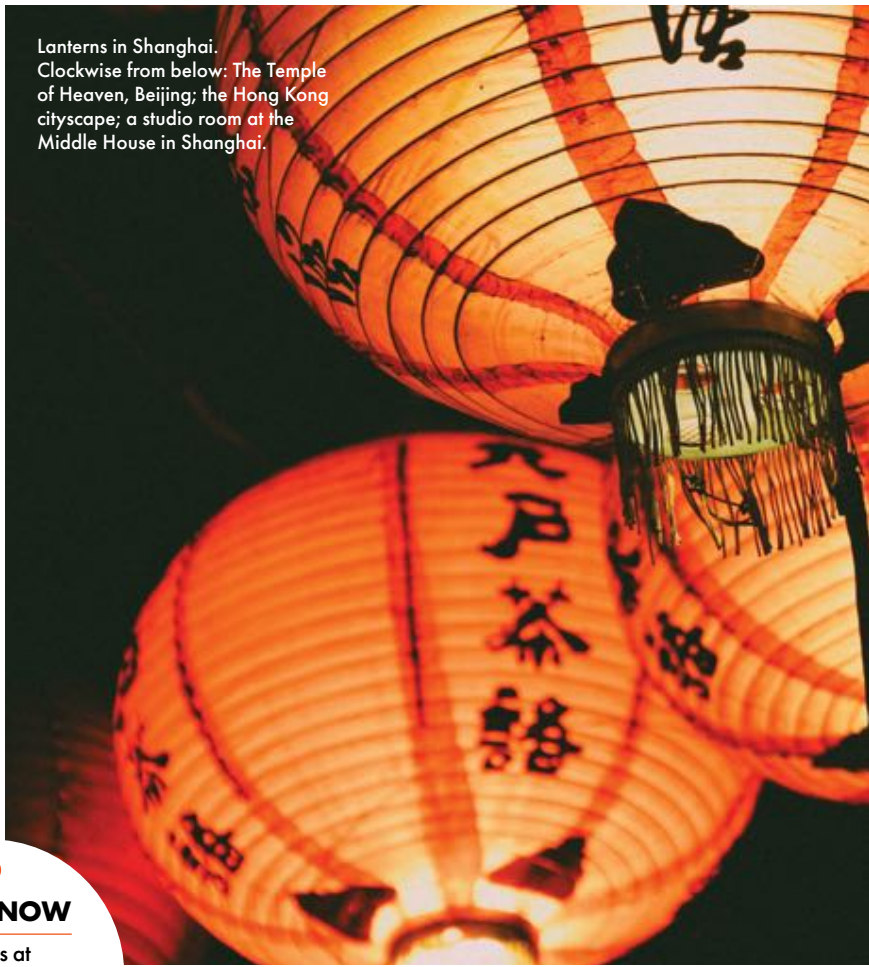
Hong Kong has long been the poster child for East meets West, thanks to the local government’s commitment to preserving its British colonial past. This commitment includes a huge revitalization project, which bore fruit last May with the opening of the **Tai Kwun** in what was formerly a walled compound comprising the Central Police Station, the Central Magistracy and the Victoria Prison. Renowned architectural firm Herzog & de Meuron restored 16 heritage buildings and built two new ones in creating the cultural center, which presents film festivals, concerts, art exhibits and other public events.

The Upper House boutique hotel, meanwhile, is hosting by-invitation-only talks by such global personalities as hotel designer Andrew Fu and British fashion designer Victoria Beckham. It’s all evidence that exciting new things are under way in China. ■





Lanterns in Shanghai.
Clockwise from below: The Temple
of Heaven, Beijing; the Hong Kong
cityscape; a studio room at the
Middle House in Shanghai.



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