

That resilience and pragmatic creativity remind me of the long and intriguing history of coffee in Shanghai — one of an imported product packed with mix-and-match, innovation and a strength to bounce back whenever possible.



The Four Sisters Café made headlines in January 1945. — Courtesy of Shanghai Library

The Kentucky native came to the city at the end of the 19th century and worked in a variety of hotels before starting his own business — the Carlton Café on Ningbo Road. It was said to be the first place in Shanghai to offer regular performances of jazz music and dances.

Later he built Carlton Café on Bubbling Well Road (now Nanjing Road W.), right across from the racecourse. The Carlton Café, or more accurately a cabaret as its Chinese name suggests, often made it into local English newspapers when it had special shows or invited celebrity musicians or dancers.

When the café was shut down in September 1928, the China Press wrote a sensational article that called it a “famous amusement resort so widely

known throughout the Far East and always one of the cynosures for tourists from abroad.”

“The happy days of the Carlton,” the newspaper continued, “which reigned for so long as Shanghai’s most luxurious downtown cabaret are ended.”

Nobody knew what was to become of the famous café at the time, as its manager denied all rumors on the final night. Three months later, the Grand Theater cinema opened on the same site.

The cinema was demolished in 1931 after screening the film “Welcome Danger” that portrayed the Chinese as drug dealers and robbers. Architect Laszlo Hudec was commissioned to design a new theater on the site, one of his most challenging projects on a narrow, irregular lot sandwiched between tall shops.

The archives also show that local Chinese began opening Western-style restaurants and cafés as early as around 1880. That trend accelerated in the 1920s, when such venues became

increasingly more popular and also competitive.


Many business tycoons joined the business trend and, like today, so did celebrities and movie stars. One short-lived operation that made many headlines was the Four Sisters Café, named after the four movie stars who ran it.

Gong Qiuxia, a film star and singer, was nicknamed “big sister” due to her impressive acting as the eldest sister in the movie “Four Daughters.” She became friend with the other three

co-stars, and they opened the café together. It was quite possibly the first movie-themed café in China.

Coffee adventurers like Ladow and Gong continued in Shanghai for decades, each generation braving unprecedented challenges and redefining local coffee culture.

That has not stopped for more than 100 years and that will not stop now, just like that strange blend of cold scallion and coffee aroma that stuck with me, along with a reassured confidence for my home city.

<p>Shanghai! Gasp New Brevy Of Beauties To Appear At Carlton</p> <p>“So this is Shanghai!” With that bemused exclamation uttered tout ensemble, the seven American musical comedy artists who are to be in the cast of the new show which is to open at the Carlton Cafe with a lavish entertainment on Christmas Eve, arrived yesterday after spending nearly two weeks in a sea-going rickshaw, as one girl expressed it.</p> <p>They were met at the dock by Manager Israel and a group of cameramen and escorted immediately to their headquarters at the Carlton, where preparations were at once begun for a rehearsal. They were guests of the Carlton Theater at a motion picture show, last night.</p>	<p>ALADDIN 122 H. Bubbling Well Road Tel. W. 6046</p> <p>CHRISTMAS SALE OF SHOP-SAMPLES OF SILK SHADES AT COST PRICE.</p> <p>PLYMOUTH</p> <p>Cates ORIGINAL GIN</p>	<p>including NEW PARIS MODELS of HATS DRESSES COATS FUR COATS</p> <p>SALON BEATRICE 24B Nanking Road Tel. C. 2016</p> <p>After the sale this Salon will be transferred to The Maison de Modes Mme D’Obry No. 1x Broadway, opposite Hongkong & Shanghai Bank (Hongkew Branch) PHONE N. 2247</p>	 <p>SINCERE’S WINE HAMPERS</p> <p>Attractively arranged in pretty baskets and comprising of only the very best wines and liqueurs. Get yours now for the yuletide. Our prices on these, are calculated to make it cheaper than if you were to buy, separately.</p>
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The Carlton Café made it into local English newspaper The China Press in 1926, when it had special shows featuring seven American musical comedy artists. — Courtesy of Shanghai Library