



The new hair salon on Laowaijie is much larger and fancier than before.



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Li Menghua

Owner of the Martin & Jin Hair Salon

so if we use the same products on them as we do on Chinese customers, their hair may become damaged."

'Bad hair days'

His clients attest to that. Many have a story or two to tell about "bad hair days" at the hands of Shanghai hairdressers.

Megan Andrew from South Africa, who has lived in Shanghai for three years and been a regular at the salon for more than a year, said she needed particular care for very curly hair.

"I tried one hairdresser and it turned out to be a disaster," she told Shanghai Daily. "One treatment for my hair took way all the curls, which was not what I wanted. I had to go home and undo the damage."

Li, however, has demonstrated his facility with different hair types. He's also willing to listen to what patrons want.

"When you move abroad, you worry about finding things that you had at home — things that are familiar and comfortable,"

said Donegan. "And hairdressing is obviously one of them."

Born in Zhoukou in Henan Province, Li started to learn hairdressing when he was 14. He came to Shanghai when he was 16, believing that a large city would afford him more opportunities.

He worked at many jobs but didn't settle into his niche until a trip to Thailand changed his life.

"When I was in Thailand, I couldn't understand a word," he said. "So I thought I should study English to be able to communicate with foreigners."

He wanted to go to a language school but couldn't afford the fees, so he used Hollywood movies and English-language TV series to learn English.

The opportunity to work in hair salons run by expats — one an Italian; the other Russian — gave him the opportunity to hone both his language and hairdressing skills.

"Every morning before I go to work, I read English texts for an hour or so," he said. "I have compiled a hairdressing-related

English vocabulary and give lessons to my employees."

In 2019, Li and his partner opened Martin & Jin in Huaihaifang, a century-old community in downtown Shanghai. Although the salon was small, simply decorated and hard to find in a back lane, the site attracted an increasing volume of expats, thriving on word-of-mouth.

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Indeed, relationships with clients sometimes extend beyond hairstyles. He often lends a hand when a patron is looking for a new real estate agent or having problems navigating e-commerce.

Many of customers regard him as a friend. He'll be attending Donegan's birthday party next month and will be participating in a festival party with some his customers. In



Megan Andrew from South Africa tells Li how she wants her hair to be done. — Hu Wenhao

fact, one of his clients, Marilyn Budde from the United States, has become his girlfriend.

"Outside work, Martin is very funny and adventurous," Budde said. "He surprises me a lot. One day he took me strawberry picking; another day he took me wind surfing."

It hasn't always been easy for Martin & Jin. The salon was once on the brink of bankruptcy, and it actually had to close for about six months during the COVID pandemic.

"At that time, I was under severe pressure," Li said. "The salon couldn't open for months, but I still had to pay rent and my staff."

Martin & Jin's loyal clients were shocked and saddened by the closure. They formed a group on WeChat to discuss how to save the salon. Eventually more than 70 foreign clients collected around 70,000 yuan (US\$9,651).

Li cried when the money was handed over to him.

Although the donation was actually too little, too late to save the salon, the story of

the expats' campaign to save a small local business went viral online, which piqued the interest of Zhang Wucai, general manager of Laowaijie.

"I contacted Martin and asked him if he might be willing to settle down here," said Zhang. "I told him not to worry about capital or anything else. We would fully support him as long as he made Laowaijie his home."

When the pandemic ebbed and restrictions on movement were lifted, Laowaijie came back to life, busier than ever. Martin & Li rode the tide.

The new salon site is a bit farther from downtown than the previous shop, but Li clients don't seem deterred.

For the first time, the salon is offering discounts to clients for three months to express Li's gratitude to his loyal customers.

"Working with foreign clients broadened my mind. I became more culturally inclusive and more tolerant," Li said. "I can easily accept new things and have new dreams."