



# A splendid Shanghainese dream of camping chairs

Clara Chow

Shanghai is full of camping chairs.

You see them everywhere: on pavements outside trendy cafes on Julu and Anfu roads; in shopping malls, bakeries and yogurt shops; in tourist information centers and ancient towns.

Since arriving last month (September 2023) for the Shanghai Writing Program with six other foreign writers, I have been obsessed with these chairs.

My favorite thing to do is to commandeer one of them in which to watch the world go by.

On a recent Friday night, my friend, Argentinian writer-director Santiago Loza, and I sat outside a tea shop, steaming cups of sweet rougui (cinnamon) on our laps. On the street, pajama-wearing old men with perpetual smokers' coughs rubbed shoulders with well-dressed couples on dates. Inside the tea shop, the boss and her colleague lives-treamed latest wares in front of ring lights. Motorcycles and sports cars blared past. Delivery riders rushing to their next address adroitly avoided our toes. Autumn's first fallen leaves landed gently on us.

## Paradoxical urge

It is this blend of the old, modern and eternal that fascinates me about Shanghai. People here share my paradoxical urge for being out in the open air without straying too far from safe urban comforts. Camping was all the rage last year, Ms Hu Peihua of the Shanghai Writers' Association, my host here, informs me. I feel late to the game, but then



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again, the urban lite-campers, as I think of them, are the upstarts in a city where chairs have been plonked on sidewalks since as far as anyone can remember.

Even now, the camping chairs jostle for space next to bamboo seats, wooden stools and other ramshackle random chairs put out by owners who enjoy a good game of chess or a cigarette under plane trees and telephone wires.

I hadn't planned to come to Shanghai to write about chairs. Unlike the other writing residencies I applied for and attended in the past, where I had to test my limits and expand my horizons in order to find new writing material, this one is less about international exploration and more about trying to fit in. As a Singaporean of Chinese descent, I feel immediately at home in this metropolis. I love chatting in Putonghua with shopowners, ayi (aunties) and security guards. Love listening to the



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Shanghainese announcements on public buses, the gentle tones and dulcet vowels.

I love buying things with cashless payments, ordering up a storm of *qipao* which arrive on my doorstep in no time at all. Love wearing said *qipao* to walk the streets, small hills and old towns, earphones plugged in to Jay Chou and Joker Xue pop hits.

On Sheshan Hill, I sat in the basilica in the national park, listening to an elderly docent sing a Latin hymn. Eileen Chang's Shanghai is still alive for me in some way, as is Lu Xun's and Mao Dun's, but so is that of the gleaming skyscrapers in Lujiazui. I tried to walk into JG Ballard's old bungalow in the Changning area but was shooed away — it is now some sort of contemporary club. Things have a way of jumbling up and remixing here.

Home, I have decided, is made up of details, and I have slowly accumulated a whole bunch in Shanghai. The trucks that wash the streets while playing "It's a Small World." Munching on meat-filled mooncakes at Jing'an Temple. Buying tea by the kilo near Tian'ai Road. The cosplayers at the underground mall in People's Square. It has

taken me 46 years to make my way to the gleaming miracle on the banks of the Huangpu River. I don't intend to stay away for very long again.

For home is also about coming back for people you hold dear. The writing program, on hiatus for three years because of the pandemic, is where I have found friends old and new.

It was sweet reuniting with Santiago as well as playwright and Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center artistic director Nick Yu Rongjun. All three of us first met in 2019 at Iowa's International Writing Program, which inspired the Shanghai program. It was a pleasure catching up over red braised pork and roasted tofu at dinner here.

## Literary landmarks

On a recent trip to Tonglu and Shaoxing, our writing program cohort toured Lu Xun's birthplace and Wang Xizhi's famed Orchid Pavilion, among other literary landmarks. We took many photos of one another. I egged Melinda Szymanik, an author from New Zealand, to buy a *qipao* of her own. She did, and looked great in her dark blue embossed number.

Cyprus novelist Sofronis Sofroniou taught me some Greek phrases over lunch, as we discussed both our countries' history as former British colonies. And Peihua and I walked hand in hand through beautiful Jiangnan gardens like sisters, as I spun stupid stories about emperors to make her laugh.

I started writing this on the Metro, swaying next to this city's inhabitants going about their daily lives. I am writing these final lines on a camping chair while waiting for my cup of Oolong to be served on a Saturday. Two young women behind me chat about dreams and life in a mix of Mandarin and English. Santiago is scrolling through social media next to me. We are waiting to give a lecture at the Shanghai Writers' Association, about cities that seem distant.

It's a perfectly ordinary day, the last warmth of summer making a comeback in mid-October. Actually, the chair isn't such a bad metaphor for a city: It is comfortable and convenient, affording a little rest, before you hurry on your way. There are places to go, people to see. But for now, this chair, this moment, is just perfect.