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# Roads well-traveled

IT entrepreneur with passion for exploring new places runs online rental service that offers tourists shared accommodation embedded in local culture

By PEARL LIU in Hong Kong  
For China Daily Asia Weekly

For two weeks in August 2017, Shen Zhiqiang was the regular tourist. He traveled through Kyoto, soaking up the sights and sounds of the Japanese city and comparing hotels and guesthouses.

For the CEO of Mayi.com, a Chinese online short-term room rental service, comparing hotels and shared accommodation is also a matter of professional interest. For his Kyoto trip, the 40-year-old booked one guesthouse on Airbnb and another on Mayi.com.

Shen was born in Central China's Henan province in 1978 — the start of a new dawn in China as the country embarked on political reforms and opened up its economy. His parents benefited from the opportunities created by the economic restructuring in the 1980s and started doing business with factories on a small scale.

"Building a company from scratch means that I'm working 24 hours a day, seven days a week, which translates to a life bound up with work," said Shen. "But I never feel that I'm slaving over a job. I've chosen a field that I truly enjoy."

Shen has always been passionate about travel and is fond of sharing his stories about hikes and camping nights two decades ago in Southwest China's Tibet autonomous region and Shangri-La, high in the northwestern uplands of neighboring Yunnan province. At the time, those two places were untapped wonderlands.

"Back then, we met peers, discussed routes, looked for places to stay on bulletin board services, an online community, when there were no WeChat, Weibo or various tourism-sharing websites," recalled the veteran backpacker who has crisscrossed China.

"That is how and when I started to observe the tourism market. With my own traveling experience, I understand the demands of the market not only as an industry player but also adding the perspectives of a tourist."

Spurred on by his dream of becoming a globe-trotter and armed with expertise in information technology, Shen set up his first company, the hotel-booking application Chujian, with a few partners in 2011. For Shen the move came after more than 10 years of working as a computer engineer following graduation.

When one of the partners backed out in 2013 due to personal reasons, Shen decided it was time to embark on a new journey. A year later, he took over Mayi.com, which had been founded in November 2011.

Today Shen remains committed to fine-tuning the services Mayi.com offers to ensure that travelers experiencing local culture can always find a clean room. And that includes variety: From semi-colonial-era villas in Shanghai, to courtyard homes in Beijing's historical *hutongs* and beach houses in Sanya, in South China's Hainan province — all are available for booking on Mayi.com's website.

"People travel for experiences they can only get at a particular place. We see that the millennial generation, in particular, who have amazing purchasing power and are a major driving force of China's consumption upgrade, favor those apartments with local elements," said Shen.

"Family vacation" is another concept that Shen wants to highlight via Mayi.com.

A father himself, Shen believes there is a rising demand for services to support family tours and changing lifestyles, drawing lessons from his own family.

"I am like those travelers; I travel with my parents and kid two to three times a year," he said. "My daughter is 7 years old. Since she turned 1 we have been taking her with us on our trips. It is good for kids to see and experience different cultures and environments."

Typically, family trips a decade ago would be rare events. At times, three generations would prepare for that long-awaited holiday, then join a large tour group and spend most of their time on a bus hunting out scenic spots.

Trips these days are different. Modern traveling tends to be more casual and focused on leisure. Families will pick a long weekend and drive themselves to a tranquil suburb or neighboring city for rest or simple family gatherings.

For "family tours, the emphasis, in terms of stay, is usually different from those young backpackers. They are looking for larger spaces with homestay functions, like cooking and laundry," Shen explained. "That is why those two- to three-or-more-bedroom apartments with kitchens and courtyards are quite popular on Mayi.com."

Benefiting from Shen's subtle understanding of market needs,



MA XUEJING / CHINA DAILY

Mayi.com now has more than 300,000 houses for rent in over 300 cities in China and abroad. In the past two years, the total volume of Mayi.com's users has increased 500 percent.

Mayi.com now has more than 300 staff, but when Shen took over in 2014, the online rental company had about 10 people, after a couple of top personnel changes. It had shown no signs of growth for more than a year — often a sign of trouble for a startup.

When Shen joined the company, he brought with him insights from the other side of the market, as a traveler.

"Although Mayi.com claimed to operate as the Chinese Airbnb when first founded in 2011, what we did was totally different," he said.

Shen found that the majority of the houses for rent on the Mayi.com website were low-priced accommodation that met temporary transitional needs, such as for patients traveling from the countryside to see doctors in the cities, or graduates going for job interviews.

"That was not the sharing-lodging model at all," he said.

Shen's first move was to get rid of all listings that met only those transitional needs, particularly apartments divided into cubical rooms or filled with bunk beds. At the time, those accounted for 70 percent of Mayi.com's accommodation supply. Removing those listings basically meant starting all over again.

"It was not easy. We had to find the right niche, riding the wave of China's rising tourism (industry)."

The bold move paid off, but Shen

is yet to establish the standard blueprint for a sharing-lodging system in China. As he put it, science graduates like him are always thinking about how to use new technologies to solve pain points.

"We are now promoting digital locks with face recognition technology for auto check-in and check-out. The purpose is to ease safety concerns on both sides," said Shen.

Veteran backpackers who are used to the share-accommodation model may not have such concerns. However, some tourists, especially older ones, worry about break-ins when staying in homes where the keys have been passed around.

Also, sadly, there are stories of thefts and damage in well-decorated apartments by tenants who used fake information to book a rental.

To address such issues, during check-in, Mayi.com's app can read the tourist's face, make a comparison with the identification used to register on Mayi.com and verify whether it is the actual person who made the booking. Once the houseowner approves the check-in, a one-time digital passcode to open the door will be sent directly to the tourist's phone. Even the houseowner does not know the code.

"The culture is different in China, and we have to admit that we are still at an early stage in the sharing-accommodation field when compared with developed countries. It also means we have huge potential for further growth," said Shen. "The next key element in the Chinese sharing-lodging sector will be found in

## Bio

### Shen Zhiqiang

CEO, Mayi.com

#### Education:

1998: Degree in computer science and technology, Zhengzhou University, Central China's Henan province

#### Career milestones:

2014: Became CEO of Mayi.com; initiated a "travel and short-term rental" model as the future development direction of the home-sharing market, resulting in fivefold growth of Mayi.com within a short period

2013: Senior director, responsible for online-to-offline (O2O) innovation business, at Ganji.com, a leading online marketplace in China

2011: Cofounder of Chujian, a hotel-booking application that successfully raised \$10 million in a Series A round of funding

#### Awards:

2015: China O2O Person of the Year by SINA.com

#### Quick takes:

**Among all the countries and cities you have been, where is the best place to travel? And where else would you most like to visit?**

The best place I've ever been is Tibet, and the one that I've always wanted to go to is Antarctica. I really enjoy nature and I think these two places have the best and most unique landscapes.

**What book are you currently reading?**

*The Inevitable* (2016) by Kevin Kelly. I've read other Kevin Kelly books, for example *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World* (1994). He has a very good sense of future technology trends.

**Date of birth:** Jan 17, 1978

third- and fourth-tier cities, for example Beihai" in South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region.

Shen expects more tourists to flock to places that are not yet overly commercialized — areas that have become more accessible with the country's expanding network of high-speed railways. Unlike in first-tier cities like Beijing and Shanghai, there is no shortage of unoccupied houses with larger spaces in places like Beihai.

Shen is now preparing to go to New Zealand and Australia. These top holiday destinations, with their unique weather and landscapes, are on his wishlist for Mayi.com's overseas market expansion.

"We currently have apartment supplies in Kyoto and Osaka (in Japan) and some popular destinations in Southeast Asia, for example (Thailand's) Chiang Mai," he said. "Looking forward, Mayi.com hopes to step into more foreign markets."