

SPOTLIGHT

A different side to the megacity

Bed and breakfast businesses are springing up on the outskirts of Shanghai, boosting rural areas through tourism and attracting young people

By XING YI in Shanghai
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To most people, the general impression of Shanghai is that of a megacity filled with modern, towering skyscrapers that are illuminated by a stunning array of neon lights come nightfall. The city streets are notoriously busy and often flanked by shop fronts of luxury brands.

The word tranquility is unlikely to be used to describe the city. The same can be said for the term "bed and breakfast" (B&B). After all, Shanghai is not known as a countryside destination.

But this could soon change, with Chinese-style B&B businesses, also known as *minsu*, sprouting up in districts on the outskirts of Shanghai to provide travelers and weary city dwellers a different experience.

The development of *minsu* in China first started as privately owned guesthouses around tourist sites. But as there are no well-known tourist sites in Shanghai's countryside areas, *minsu* in the city are limited to the water town of Zhujiajiao in Qingpu district, the beach area in Jinshan district, the Chuansha area where Shanghai Disney Resort is, and Chongming Island.

Ban Ri Xian, named after an ancient Chinese poem, is located on the idyllic Chongming Island in northwest Shanghai. This farm-style *minsu* offers guests the chance to experience rural life through activities like planting rice seedlings, picking fruit, harvesting vegetables, bird watching and fishing.

Business has been brisk. Ban Ri Xian is always fully booked at weekends, either by families or corporate team-building groups.

The *minsu*, which is owned by Liu Haiqing, 45, has been singled out by officials of the local Gangxi township as an exemplar of "rural vitalization" that others could follow. This rural vitalization strategy, proposed by President Xi Jinping at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China a year ago, forms part of the country's efforts to boost rural development through tourism.

"*Minsu* can link many things together," said Kang Qian, deputy head of Gangxi. "It can incorporate experience

programs, dining and other activities that would make tourists stay and spend."

Among those working at this *minsu* is Xing Haiyan, a Chongming native who previously worked for a marketing firm in downtown Shanghai.

"I took up this job because I wanted to show people what countryside life is like. I grew up on a farm so I know the joys of living in such an environment," said Xing, whose job involves organizing activities like one-day family programs at the farm.

Xing is also in charge of the social media accounts, and it was through this medium that Geng Lijun discovered Ban Ri Xian. Geng, who has lived in downtown Shanghai all her life, loved the environment so much that she visited the *minsu* several times last year. These short getaways were also a good way for her son to learn things outside the classroom, she said.

"Time seems to pass more slowly when you're in the countryside. I feel like I can ponder about life and think about what I want to pursue."

Xing does not plan on being an employee for the rest of her life — she aims to set up her own farm-style *minsu* by the end of this year. The 15-room building would occupy 2 hectares of land. With local authorities striving to transform Chongming into a world-class ecological island, Xing is optimistic about her business venture because she expects more tourists to visit.

"I also want to inspire other farmers to renovate their own houses to a *minsu*. It will help them earn extra money in addition to the income they get from farming."

Another area where more and more such businesses are emerging is in eastern Shanghai, near the Disneyland Resort. Since the theme park opened in 2016, many nearby villagers have transformed their houses into B&B establishments to provide an alternative to Disneyland's pricey hotel rooms.

As part of efforts to regulate the growing market, the Pudong New Area government issued guidelines regarding the development of such businesses in 2016. Authorities issued the city's first *minsu* business license last year.

Su Yu, a *minsu* project in Lianmin village, was the first recipient of this license.



Minsu have been acknowledged by many as an exemplar of China's rural vitalization policy, which aims to boost the development of rural areas through tourism.
PHOTOS BY XING YI / CHINA DAILY

But instead of just branding itself as a cheaper accommodation alternative for Disneyland goers, Su Yu offers a range of activities for its guests, such as farming, pizza-making, pottery workshops and painting classes.

This project is run by Minzhu Fuxiang Minsu Culture, a joint venture between a *minsu* operator, a real estate company, a collective-owned enterprise of Lianmin village and a fund.

Zhou Hao, a public relations assistant for the project, said the joint venture company managed to get households involved to agree on an annual rental fee ranging from 36,000 to 150,000 yuan (\$5,200 to \$21,650). The company then helped each family design their homes according to a unique theme. Six themed houses are now available.

In addition to helping to boost the incomes of villagers, the project generated more jobs as each venue would require chefs, security personnel and cleaners.

Wang Guanlun, chief executive of the project, said during Shanghai International Minsu Conference in June last year that the project injected vitality into the village.

"When I first came to the village, I could barely see young people. Now, many young people have returned to the village to work. It is these changes I see that make me proud."

Wang Ying, who works as a conductor for the district's bus company, echoed that life in Lianmin village has

indeed become more vibrant.

"Since Su Yu opened last year more visitors have definitely arrived. Our family has considered renting out our houses to the company, but we'll wait and see how it goes."

But while the move to regulate the market may be music to the ears of consumers, it has not been well-received by some B&B operators.

"Our business has suddenly become illegal because of the introduction of licenses," said a woman who runs three homestay properties in Pudong. "We don't dare advertise anymore."

It is difficult to obtain a business license because only registered companies can do so, she said, and becoming a registered company requires a certain amount of capital that many people lack.

The woman also lamented the costs needed to ensure that each *minsu* meets government regulations regarding safety standards.

"Having to meet all these standards drives up costs, thus reducing profitability. The development of the *minsu* industry needs standards, but there also needs to be some support from the government."

Xu Weiwang, director of the Shanghai Municipal Tourism Administration, told the Shanghai news website Eastday that the city is monitoring the development of two pilot districts, Pudong and Jinshan, which have introduced *minsu* licenses and guidelines. These regions have already pub-



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lished the guidelines and issued 10 licenses, Xu said, and these projects are usually fully booked during weekends and holidays.

Over at Fengshou village in Minhang district, a tourism project which includes many *minsu* projects was due to open in August, the *Shanghai Observer* reported.

Airbnb, the US home-sharing platform, told *China Daily* that it has seen a big increase in the number of shared B&B homes and guests over the past few years.

"Outside Shanghai's downtown area, Songjiang and Chongming districts have registered a major increase in the

number of people using our service. We see great potential in China's market. Young people born in the 1980s and 90s have a high acceptance for home-sharing, and they account for 80 percent of our customers," Xu said.

A home-sharing report published by the State Information Center in May said that about 3 million *minsu* were registered online in the country last year, with the transaction amount totaling 14.5 billion yuan, up 70 percent from 2016. The number of shared homes in rural areas would double, and the market would be worth an estimated 50 billion yuan in 2020, the report said.

House of 'culture and lore' popular

The spirit of B&B is sharing, says guesthouse owner in a traditional Shanghai neighborhood

By XING YI

Pan Rongda has always been mesmerized by the old neighborhoods in the Hongkou district of Shanghai, an area where lanes intertwine, small markets ooze liveliness and houses have remained largely unchanged for more than a century.

The 30-something was born and raised in the area north of Suzhou Creek. With few skyscrapers and big shopping malls, the area has remained very local and has largely retained its old neighborhoods, thus evading tons of tourist groups.

"I love the old feeling here," Pan said. "I grew up in a *nongtang* (lane in the Shanghaiese dialect) in the area, and I'd like my guests to experience the localness of the city, too."

Pan runs a bed and breakfast (B&B) guesthouse in Dongzhaoli, one of the lanes in the area where the early Communist leader and literary translator Qu Qiubai once lived, and opposite the entrance of the lane is the former residence of the renowned writer Lu Xun.

The 500-meter Tian'ai Road, or road of sweet love, is where local lovers go to scrawl their names or commitment on the walls along the street. Many believe that if they walk the entire route their love will be forever blessed and they will never be separated.

Just a few blocks further is Duolun Road, a pedestrian cultural street lined with teahouses, art galleries and antiques shops. Many literary celebrities in modern China lived here in the first half of the 20th century.

In her guesthouse, Pan also organizes a cocktail workshop, a passion she has cultivated since quitting her office job, telling people about each drink and teaching them how to make a personal signature cocktail.

She also holds cocktail parties on the 18th of every month — 18 is her house number — and a movie night every Wednesday.

The 4-year-old border collie she adopted this year is also a reason for guests to come back again and again.

Pan said that when she quit her office job she thought being a B&B host could give her a lot of freedom to "go and see the world," but it has turned out that she can barely leave the city because of it. Her rooms are often booked up by travelers from home and abroad, especially on weekends and during summer holidays.

"I just got bored of the routine work every day, and wanted to try something else one day," Pan said.

It did not take her too long to open her first B&B business two years ago,

which she expanded last year by renting this old house from a Hong Kong owner.

"I like this old house, and it happens to stand on the same street, Yinshan Road, where my parents got married."

Pan then renovated the house and turned it into a popular Airbnb listing.

"But I wouldn't call it a pure business, because I think the spirit of B&B is sharing. I live in the house and interact with my guests, help them plan the trips, tell them my stories and listen to theirs."

Fu Zhiyi, who worked in an advertising company in Hong Kong, went traveling in Shanghai last year and stayed in Pan's house. Fu, a history buff, fell in love with the old house and became so obsessed with the historical aspects of Shanghai that he quit his job and went to work for Pan to run this old guesthouse.

Fu assiduously studies the history of the old lanes and the history of Shanghai, and apart from working on promoting Pan's guesthouse — which now has a name, Mani Papa — sometimes accompanies guests on walks around the city, imparting his local knowledge.

"I like the stories in the city, and the old house itself is the carrier of a lot of the culture and lore," Fu said. "Each old lane and house is a storybook, telling different local tales against the backdrop of all-the-same high-rises being built in the context of globalization."

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"But perhaps that's not too bad. It's the world that's coming to see me."