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Another round: Shanghai reopens 110ft bar fabled for colonial decadence

The ostentatious Long Bar in Shanghai, once the epicentre of business and social life in the city, is reopening nearly seven decades after the last drink was served.

By Josephine McDermott in Shanghai
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After a six-month restoration, the bar is part of the new Waldorf Astoria hotel, which opens to guests on Saturday. Photo: www.magicbuscreative.com

British colonials sat along the 110ft-long bar in order of rank during the era of British rule – women and Chinese were barred.

"There were probably few places in the world where per capita consumption of alcoholic drinks was greater," wrote Carl Crow, a journalist who arrived in Shanghai in 1911, the year the Long Bar opened inside the Shanghai Club at No. 2 on the Bund, the city's imposing waterfront.

Noel Coward once remarked that the bar was so long, "one could see the curvature of the earth in it".

Once inside, there was a strict pecking order, with the richest taipans, or bosses, standing at the end of the bar nearest the window and the Huangpu River, and the lower ranks and new arrivals standing at the darker end near the back of the room. The custom was only breached when soldiers returning from the First World War ordered drinks at

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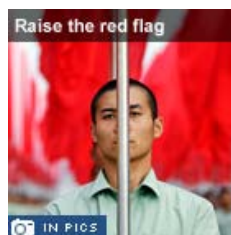
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the window-end of the bar, without any objection.

However, the premises were taken over by the Japanese in December 1941 while the city was under occupation. Japanese soldiers sawed off the legs to lower the club's billiards table to allow them play the game in comfort.

More recently, the building became the site of Kentucky Fried Chicken's first branch in Shanghai in 1990.

Now, after a painstaking six-month restoration, the bar is part of the new Waldorf Astoria hotel, which opens to guests on Saturday.

"I think it's magnificent. I'm really impressed at how they have brought back the Long Bar. It's one of the most wonderful things on the Bund," said Peter Hibbard, the president of the Royal Asiatic Society.

Ian Carr, the architect responsible for the restoration, said local Shanghai officials had insisted on a perfect reproduction of the original bar.

"We got into detail about the legs of the chairs and even the colour scheme. They really wanted to micromanage it," he said.

Mr Carr said only the floor and ceiling had survived since the 1940s. "There was no bar and no back bar left," he said. However, Chinese craftsmen rebuilt the bar, panelling and cabinets in Burmese teak using period photographs and the original blueprints. The work cost around £320,000, he said.

The bar's famed collection of mounted animal heads, initiated by Arthur de Carle Sowerby, a big game hunter and director of the Shanghai Museum, has not been reinstated.

There are also no longer any membership restrictions. Noel Barber, in his book *The Fall of Shanghai*, describes how a young man sheltering from gunfire on the steps of the club when the Communists were invading the city had to be proposed by his boss and seconded by another before he could be given "temporary membership" to cross the threshold.

When Thomas Lipton, the tea baron, visited Shanghai he was also not permitted to enter. "He might be a millionaire but he was still a greengrocer," remarked Mr Crow.



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