



A stone table that Minet purchased from a local antique store.



An upstairs bedroom with a hexagonal window on the wall. Guests can observe local life through this window, says Minet.



A bamboo tube used to serve snacks. Minet loves using local materials.

Paradise found in rural idyll

Chehui Peh

Two homes, two places, two lives. When Frenchman Julien Minet chose to settle in China he did not believe that he would stay long. That is, until fate brought him to a village in Anhui Province and gave him the home he calls Chawu; a home that embraces nature and its surroundings while retaining its old Ming Dynasty history.

"Chawu is the reason I have stayed in China for so long. I prefer the peaceful, quiet life, and this is the place for a rest with a garden for my two kids."

Nimes native Minet, 39, arrived in China in 1995 as a student but his permanent stay in China began in 1998 when he worked for the French Consulate General in Shanghai before starting an educational business in partnership with Chinese universities.

"Like most foreigners, I appreciate the energy of Chinese society," says Minet. "Everyone believes in a better future, and this is an environment suitable for building your own desired life."

Chaji, the little village of Minet calls "paradise" offers charms few can resist.

"It is a very old Ming Dynasty village. But it's not a museum; it's a real village with its own way of life, where you can see people working in their fields, doing laundry in the rivers," he says.

"A foreigners' dream is to meet the hidden China. I live this dream every weekend and it is a miracle each time."

For some, though, Minet's love for the countryside and the mountains is perplexing.

"Villagers who love their village and their mountains understand where I'm coming from," said Minet.

"But a friend in Nanjing once told me that he studied and worked hard all his life to leave the countryside, yet I'm constantly running to my house in the mountains," said Minet.

"There's a cultural difference, of course, but I like learning and understanding other cultures."

What makes Minet stand out from the crowd, however, is not his foreign face or his unusual choice for settling in China. Rather, it is the mix of two cultures that villagers have come to know as "Master Yu" — Yu Laoshi in Chinese — the man who "loves French wine and local tea and worked hard to restore a Ming Dynasty house."

His beautiful home has three rooms set aside for occasional rentals. After all, Minet reasons, it would be selfish to keep his paradise on earth all to himself.

"I love the idea of sharing my home with foreign visitors because I know that their dream China is similar to this small village," Minet explained.

"I help them to immerse in local culture, to understand the long history and meet my friendly neighbors. They love all these experiences that can't be felt elsewhere."

For Minet, his guesthouse is more a hobby than a business. "I like it that way," he says.

His love for design and his artistic eye are evident in his home. Its simple yet eye-catching style combines a Chinese exterior and French interior.

"When I bought the house it was just a ruin," described Minet. "My idea was to restore it to make a comfortable vacation house for my family, especially my kids."

"I wanted to offer them a place without pollution and noise, give them a place where they could play freely."

But Minet also respected the history that came with the house. A fan of Chinese writer Li Yu and Ming Dynasty painter Chou Ying, the Frenchman wanted to preserve the heritage witnessed by the house, while creating an ideal living environment.

"The result is a unique place where Chinese and Latin culture meet," says Minet. "I actually designed it without prior planning but it worked very well. When I see my kids playing in front of

the fireplace on the 500 year old marble table, I feel that I did the right thing."

Minet doesn't want the village to become the next Zhouzhuang or Lijiang — hugely popular picturesque tourist villages — instead favoring natural development.

"I believe there is another way to increase the quality of life for locals with tourism without disturbance to their way of life," he said. "Perhaps the solution is to change government strategies from quantity to quality support to minimize damage to local lives."

Minet is, however, quietly promoting cultural exchanges between France and China through his guesthouse, which attracts foreign visitors to the idyllic village. Academically, it has also provided opportunities for cooperation. "Chawu has also organized a collaboration between Tongji University in Shanghai and Chaillot University in France to restore a village temple that 20 architects worked on for a year," said Minet.

"The temple is now restored and open to the public, and an exposition of this showed at the World Urban Forum in Nanjing by UNESCO." It has also been shown in Paris, Shanghai, plus the village.

Local traditional crafts have also received help from Minet. "A traditional brush maker now sells 80 percent of his brushes to Europe," he said.

Minet says he strives to work with and help villagers, improving individual relations between Chinese and French.

As part of this, Chawu holds importance not just as a guesthouse, but also as a platform for bridging the cultural gap between countries with different languages, he says.

While happy in his rural idyll, Minet doesn't rule out new horizons. "I don't need a goal to enjoy my life as I love the way it is now," he said.

"But if another opportunity elsewhere comes up for a new adventure for me and my family, then perhaps I will begin a new life elsewhere."

DESIGNER

Jean-Pierre Heim



Who is he?

Jean-Pierre Heim is a highly regarded visionary architect with an international architectural and interior design practice in New York, Paris and now in Shanghai. He has a degree in architecture from the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris and also attended the US University of Illinois for specialized architectural studies.

Tell us about your work and name the one of which you're most proud.

We have developed a rich portfolio of private residences, office interiors, luxury stores, restaurants, hotels and resorts. Our clients include international businesses as well as private individuals, including luxury brands such as Van Cleef & Arpels, Baccarat, Christian Lacroix, Lanvin, Puiforcat and Club Med.

I'm most proud of nature and geography, so I love to design resorts. I have designed the Coral Beach resort in the Caribbean in St Maarten, a home in the Cyclades islands in Greece, Club Med in Africa, a small resort hotel HYH on Shanghai's Chongming Island.

Recently I have designed the Shanghai Yacht Club, and am working on the Shanghai International Trade Center venue and event center.

I have relocated a branch of my architectural design office in Shanghai.

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What else are you working on?

Several projects in one direction: luxury travel. For Falcon Jet I have designed with a focus on multi-directional feng shui elements for the Chinese market and am working on high-speed train interiors.

Describe your design style.

Luxury simple, with respect for the natural environment.

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What does your home mean to you?

I have several places where I live and all very different. My name Heim also means home.

What do you collect?

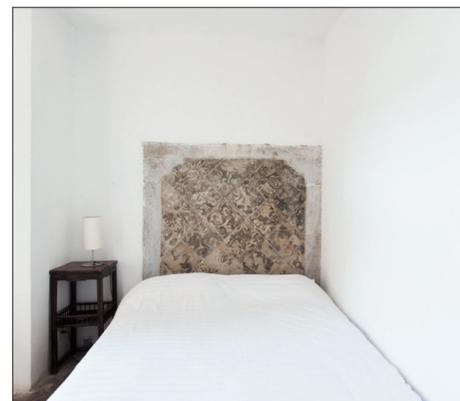
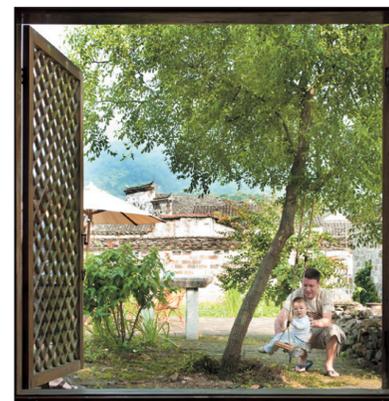
I like everything about travelling. I started with a stamp collection when I was young, then during my travels I have collected furniture, art objects of all styles and I have a huge collection of photography and travelling drawings and sketches that I have done during my travels in many countries.

Where would you like to go most in Shanghai?

I like all about Shanghai that is international and diverse and always constant discovery of new people, places and constant changes. What I don't like is the fact that sometimes I miss the past, I miss old lanes, I miss Chinese culture around every corner that was turned into tall buildings and "new luxury culture" with brands stores overwhelming real life; but finally this is all about new Chinese way of life, isn't it?

What will be the next big design trend?

Fashion is always running for the next season, is always late and out of fashion. Why don't we calm down on new trends! Every designer has a style, every person a personality. People without personality follow trends. Be your own trend — this is for me the next design trend. Buy everything you like, not what is society wants you to buy. Wear what you feel like wearing or furnishing — but with style!



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1. The pillars in the living room date back to the Yuan Dynasty (1217-1368). Minet renovated the room, adding a French-style fireplace.

2. Minet plays with his son in the garden. The lattice window was made by local craftsmen.

3. A guest room in Chawu. The headboard was originally part of the gate to the house. — Xue Bingqing



If you'd like us to feature your home, email yangdi@shanghaidaily.com

ASK THE OWNER



Julien Minet

Q: What's best about living in the country?

A: The quiet and the beauty of nature.

Q: Describe your home in three words.

A: Ming cultural heritage.

Q: What's the first thing you do when you get home?

A: Boil some water.

Q: How do you unwind?

A: When I arrive there, I have many things to do: open the water system; switch on the fridge,

internet and water heater; check the garden; and bring some wood inside for the fireplace. That helps me unwind. Then a cup of Huangshan Mao-feng and that's it!

Q: Where do you spend most of your time?

A: Drinking tea, reading books in the garden and chatting with neighbors.

Q: What's the best view outside your window?

A: The mountains beyond the garden, with traditional

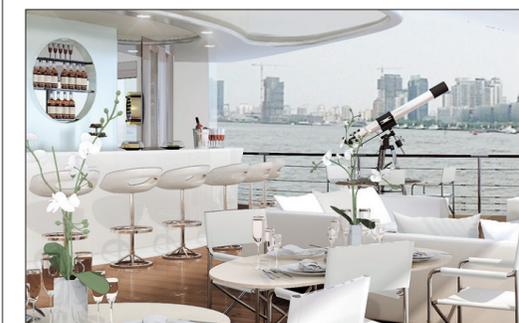
Chinese roofs at the foot.

Q: Tell us more about your home.

A: Its roots are Yuan and Ming dynasties, and nowadays a mix of old China heritage and Western convenience in the fireplace, sofa, French books, music, good water pressure, plus a convenient kitchen.

Q: What's your favorite object?

A: The fireplace. (But is it an object?)



Shanghai Yacht Club designed by Heim