[People's Republic Of Uber: Making Friends, Chauffeuring People In China](https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/04/403251841/peoples-republic-of-uber-driving-for-connections-in-china)

Frank Langfitt,May 4, 2015,Heard on [All Things Considered](https://www.npr.org/programs/all-things-considered/2015/05/04/404236299/all-things-considered-for-may-4-2015)

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

Uber is increasingly popular in Shanghai and not for the reasons you might think. In the latest installment of his free taxi series Streets of Shanghai, NPR's Frank Langfitt reports from what he calls the People's Republic of Uber.

FRANK LANGFITT, BYLINE: I've been driving a rented car around the city, offering rides to strangers to find stories about real life in China, but the rental charges were piling up, so I bought a car. While waiting for delivery, I started using Uber...

CICI XU: (Foreign language spoken).

LANGFITT: ...And began meeting people like Cici Xu. Cici's her English name. She's a 40-year-old accountant who drives in her free time for People's Uber, a nonprofit ridesharing service. Today, she's dropping me at the NPR office downtown, but Cici says she doesn't really drive for the money. She explained the real reason over coffee.

C. XU: (Through interpreter) I hope to meet different people, make life more colorful and get to know a different Shanghai. I have now discovered I'm addicted to this work.

LANGFITT: Cici's pretty typical. My assistant Yang and I have talked to more than 50 Uber drivers in the last couple of months. Unlike in the U.S., most here say the main reason they drive is to chat with all sorts of people and better make sense of this mega-city of 24 million. They include the airline pilot who picked me up at home one morning in his Land Rover and the retired factory worker who took me to Starbucks and didn't even care if he got paid. For Cici, driving's cathartic. The last two years have been tough. She was diagnosed with breast cancer, got divorced and suffered from insomnia. Recently, she had a heart-to-heart with a passenger, who's also divorced, and later called, offering Cici medication to help her sleep - a rare gesture between strangers in a Chinese city where trust is scarce.

C. XU: (Through interpreter) Sometimes customers help us. Other times we help customers. Uber provided us with this kind of platform, although it's not what they had in mind.

LANGFITT: For many, Uber cars serve as rolling neighborhood pubs, minus the alcohol, which is at odds with the core criticism of big cities in China - that people here only care about money and care nothing for strangers. Before Cici started driving, that's what she thought.

C. XU: (Through interpreter) Actually, in today's Chinese society, sometimes we feel human relationships are very cold, but after I became an Uber driver, I actually feel many, many people are very kindhearted.

LANGFITT: Cici no longer sits at home stewing. Driving has become her social outlet and escape.

C. XU: (Through interpreter) I feel my life now is very rich. I used to dread long holidays. I would be very scared of them because I would feel very lonely, but now I'm not afraid.

JOEL XU: (Foreign language spoken).

LANGFITT: This is Joel. He's 25 and used to work as an auto engineer. He started driving for Uber as many do because he was bored with his job. Like Cici, Joel has found driving liberating, but in a completely different way. It took guts for him to quit his engineering work. His parents pulled strings to get him hired, and he told me at a coffee shop one day his mom oversaw everything, including his bank cards and salary.

J. XU: (Through interpreter) My mother works at a state-run bank. All the money at the household is controlled by her. When I need money, I have to ask my mother. I told her she's violating my rights. Then my mom said even your job is arranged by me, so your money is mine.

LANGFITT: This conversation is unthinkable for most American millennials, but in China, it's not unheard of. Chinese parents generally have much more control over the lives of their adult children. And like Joel, many children live at home until they marry. Joel's parents were furious when he quit his engineering job. They grew up in the 1960s and '70s when China was still genuinely communist. Joel says his folks value stability and conformity. To explain, Joel describes a recent Chinese road movie called "The Continent." Two disaffected guys leave a lonely island where they grew up and drive across China. In this scene, one tosses frogs in a wok as an experiment.