

GIRLFRIENDS CLUB: SHANGHAI

Created by Anna Liza Bella and Mina Choi Hanbury Tenison
Based on the book *Shanghai Girls: Uncensored & Unsentimental*
by Mina Choi Hanbury Tenison

THE SHOW:

This is the story of Chloe, a.k.a. “CC”, a young Asian-American adoptee who goes to China in search of her birth mother, but quickly gets swept up into the Girlfriends Club—a jet-setting clique of women with a take-no-prisoners approach to achieving it all. The hour-long drama series is based on rules from a how-to-get-ahead book written for women that celebrates a uniquely Chinese form of female empowerment. *Girlfriends Club: Shanghai* explores themes of love, found family, and clashing cultures, pitting CC’s conservative Christian and American upbringing against the rules of this dynamic group of women.

THE WORLD:

Our show takes us into the fabulous matriarchal world that Mina Choi Hanbury Tenison discovered when she first landed in “the Paris of the Orient.” A fish out of water just like our protagonist CC, Mina was embraced by a group of Shanghai women who were intimidatingly confident and lived a life of luxury. Draped in designer clothes and frequenting the city’s most elite shopping strips, these women were often trailed by obedient, bag-toting men who were just happy to be seen with them – being able to afford a Shanghai lady was a status symbol in and of itself.

Shanghai women are famous for their financial savvy and unsentimental approach to courtship, evaluating prospective mates like business mergers: How much is he worth? What kind of job does he have? What is his earning’s upside? In this highly competitive, materialistic world, money and power are the ultimate goals—and beauty, marriage, and love serve as the means to an end.

The series provides a glimpse into this outrageous, yet fascinating society—Chinese & international alike— at play, love, and work against the dynamic metropolis of Shanghai -- a vibrant city filled with glitzy skyscrapers, private clubs, and quaint side streets. With its 19th century historic buildings and art deco architecture juxtaposed against gleaming towers, China’s richest city is the ultimate playground for ambitious women.

TONE/MOOD:

Girlfriends Club: Shanghai is a mixologist cocktail of the frenetic, monied Asian world of *Crazy Rich Asians* with a twist of biting cultural commentary like *White Lotus*. Our show will unveil a glamorous but ruthless society where two very different value systems clash, as CC struggles to reconcile her desires to make it as a fashion PR maven and find her birth mother against the unsentimental rules of the Girlfriends Club. The series revels in the audacious antics of these women but always comes back to the heart of the show—the camaraderie that develops between CC and her Girlfriends, creating a “family” unlike any she’s ever experienced.



THE CHARACTERS:

CC - THE INGENUE (23)

CC (Chloe Charles) is an adopted Asian kid growing up in the rigid, controlled world set up by her loving, but somewhat overbearing conservative white parents in Savannah, Georgia. Like hundreds of thousands of adopted Asian kids in the US, CC always felt a part of her was missing, yearning to find her Chinese birth mother to fill in that missing piece. As a half-Chinese pretty young thing in the Deep South and a fashionista in training, CC knows everyone in town—maybe too well, as her compassionate nature encourages people to often over share with her, even their deepest secrets. Despite her apparent popularity, CC doesn't feel that she has one single soul mate. She's always been slightly out of place, but never voiced this to anyone—especially to her adoptive mother **CINDY**. Instead, CC has always focused on doing everything just right—and the perfectionist in her has recently been struggling with her place in the world. While everyone in town has been trying to find the same white cotillion dress, CC's more likely to show up at her mom's local ladies' garden club fundraiser in vintage Emilio Pucci.

Cindy expects CC to eventually follow in her footsteps and become a solid member of the local community, but CC finds her mom's world claustrophobic and takes her first chance to break out of it. CC has outsized ambitions—she wants to attend the next Met Gala (by hook or by crook), and maybe even launch her own boutique PR company—if she can EVER get out of Savannah.

Secretly, CC has been building her Instagram alter ego of gal-hooked-on-vintage-couture-by-mail-order-on-a-budget, developing a following big enough to attract the attention of a Shanghai PR agency that reps Opening Ceremony in Asia. Impressed with CC's skills, the agency offers her an internship, and CC breaks out of her sheltered life, throwing Dad **ROBERT** into a rage by accepting the job just as her parents are about to throw an engagement party for CC and her sweet but unambitious boyfriend **JOE**. For CC, this internship is a chance to finally go to Shanghai.

The series opens as CC arrives in Shanghai after her hasty exit, a hot mess as she starts her internship at the cutthroat PR agency. Once there, CC embarks on a search for her birth mother, all while struggling to keep up in this wild environment of glamorous parties and luxury. Embraced by a group of ambitious ladies including the Queen Bee of Shanghai, **LAN LAN**, CC is dazzled by their unique attitude and high-flying lifestyles. CC learns that some rules come naturally to her, but other times, they go against her upbringing. Ultimately CC must make up her own rules, navigating the emotional roller coaster of meeting her birth mom and falling in love when she least expects it.

LAN LAN - THE O.G. SHANGHAI GIRL (55)

Lan Lan takes our ingenue CC under her wing, a mother figure of sorts. Lan Lan is the proprietress of several exclusive restaurants and the private club frequented by the Who's Who of Shanghai: Fa La on The Bund. A Sunday afternoon gathering with CC and the Girlfriends at Fa La becomes a weekly standard for this group of ambitious women.

Always perfectly decked out in expensive couture accessorized with a matching Birkin bag (she has one in every color!), Lan Lan can scan a room of a hundred people and see who is worth paying attention to. She is, after all, the queen of *guanxi*—relationships – the lubricant that runs Shanghai society.

That's how she managed to have a fortune accumulated from three marriages, each husband richer than the last. Lest anyone get too envious, Lan Lan often reminds many aspirational girls that she herself came from nothing.

Lan Lan looms large as a role model for the Girlfriends, who frequent her exclusive private club scouring for connections and opportunities. Famous for doling out choice advice to the Girlfriends, many of which get repeated as a legendary “rule”, Lan Lan can be a tough and demanding mentor. She finds CC amusing, and over time, develops a soft spot for the young lady. Lan Lan's relationships with most of the Girlfriends are always transactional, but CC is a different situation: she's the only one who doesn't want anything from Lan Lan.

However, their relationship becomes complicated when Lan Lan pieces together the identity of CC's birth mother. Lan Lan must follow one of her own rules: Be sparing with the truth, knowing that the emotional homecoming that CC expects with her birth mother is not possible. The birth mother, a former classmate of Lan Lan, has made some hard choices to ascend to the top political class in China and cannot admit to having a mixed-race, illegitimate child.

BEN SHA - THE LOVE INTEREST (28)

Ben is CC's hard-to-read, but dashing handsome co-worker. Initially, CC has a love-hate relationship with Ben when he is assigned to babysit her account after CC has disastrous misadventures during her first work event at the Formula One Race.

A workaholic, the soft-spoken Ben becomes CC's ally as he helps her navigate the ruthless culture at the agency. Born in Gaoxiong, Taiwan, Ben disapproves of the way CC has taken up with the fast circle of Girlfriends and tries to show CC a different, more down-to-earth side of China, even inviting her to visit with his maternal grandparents, way south of Shanghai.

Ben keeps his feelings close to the vest while CC, as his polar opposite, wears her heart on her sleeve and takes huge risks as she goes through life with no filters. CC develops a serious crush on Ben, but the Girlfriends advise her against it: Ben is a dud: no money and no assets. Of course, the Girlfriends have no idea about Ben's very private but extremely wealthy family back in Taiwan and the fact that the PR firm is owned by Ben's family.

THE GIRLFRIENDS

TING TING (28) is the plain Jane, who becomes CC's go-to BESTIE and big sister she never had. Stuck in a dead-end receptionist job at a small media company in the far-flung suburbs of Shanghai, the ambitious Ting Ting is a Shanghai Girl in training, desperate for an opportunity to break-out. She is wowed when she sees CC on the arm of a famous billionaire at the Formula One and befriends CC, anticipating her needs to

become indispensable. Ting Ting advises CC on the day-to-day survival tactics of living in China: setting her up with SIM cards and Weibo accounts, taking her shopping (black market style), translating Shanghainese, and being an emotional support blanket during their daily check-ins. Ting Ting is thrilled to be CC's "plus one" at high-profile PR events and loves being in Lan Lan's orbit at the club with the other girlfriends, becoming the mainstay every Sunday. When CC cannot get through the bureaucratic red tape of her adoption, Ting Ting finds information via sneaky methods through her uncle's contacts. Impressed by how tight-knit Ting Ting's family is, CC tries to learn more about her friend's background, but Ting Ting always makes excuses. CC realizes she has never even been to her bestie's flat, but Ting Ting is hiding the embarrassing truth that she still lives in a tiny hovel with her parents.

ANASTASIA (23) is CC's **accidental flatmate** at the dingy Airbnb. A working **MODEL**—Anastasia is a fast learner of the rules because there is no way that she is going back to Vladivostok! Anastasia was a mail-order bride on the run after ditching her Chinese husband. CC is entertained by Anastasia's up-and-down antics with various boyfriends and lovers. Even though they are very much the "odd couple" with CC's OCD neatness and Anastasia the walking tornado, they bond because they are both outsiders. Anastasia is also generous—often sharing her high-wattage designer outfits with CC and the Girlfriends, even giving CC a fierce makeover. CC is constantly amazed by Anastasia's born survivor instincts, which include knowledge of all the pawn shops and loan sharks.

MARIBEL (24) is the struggling CHANTEUSE, a voluptuous and petite half-Filipina from Manila, who was raised by her single mother. Maribel dutifully supports them both crooning soulful jazz and blues ballads at the Long Bar on the Bund and building a fan base as she juggles her mother's constant texts requesting money. CC becomes an instant fan of Maribel's amazing vocal talent when they meet at the Formula One event – CC is drawn to Maribel's wicked sense of humor and sultry singing voice. CC can't wait to introduce Maribel to a young hard-up entrepreneur who is launching a digital music platform with the PR firm. Maribel represents an opportunity for CC's PR services to break through—CC knows Maribel is just one hit single away from fame, especially after Lan Lan offers Maribel the chance to be the main act at the club. However, Maribel has to make some hard choices when her mother's medical emergency and need for money drives her to drop the entrepreneur for a wealthy, married restaurateur. CC is disappointed with her choice, but things go from bad to worse when Maribel becomes pregnant and is left with the same decision that CC's birth mother faced.

LILI, 40-Something, is the SEXPOT, who undulates rather than moves. Everything about her spells 'sex' as she is a keen practitioner of the rule "**Sex and How to Use It.**" A talented "sexpert," Lili doles out bedroom tips to the Girlfriends if and when she is in the mood. Always a mystery as to what she does to make a living, she is legendary in their Girlfriends Club Lunch circle for the "Gucci Bag Maneuver"—having had it purchased for her by four different men only to return three of them for cash. Although Lili often seems hard and calculating, Lili is intensely loyal, lending money and even providing shelter to girlfriends in need. CC is drawn to Lili in a girl-crush kind of way and finds herself receiving unwanted sexual lessons from Lili, many of which makes her blush. Unbeknownst to CC, one of Lili's many sugar daddies is Ben's father.

SEASON ARCS:

In the pilot, CC learns her very first lesson, when she is stuck with an exorbitant \$8,000 dinner bill after a wealthy billionaire WU cuts out early from their date at Fa La, the private club restaurant. Lan Lan has been watching the whole fiasco unfold, and comes to CC's rescue, imparting the first of many rules: that a young woman should only cry in public when she knows EXACTLY what she's getting out of it.

In Season 1, CC struggles to adapt to the Shanghai scene. She is embraced by Lan Lan and the Girlfriends, who gradually become CC's confidantes and advisors as she tries to survive her fiercely competitive work environment and the impossible assignments. CC and the Girlfriends connect often at Lan Lan's club, during fabulous black-tie events but also on Sunday afternoons at Lan Lan's tea gatherings where we have quiet moments that show CC's more intimate connections with each of the Girlfriends. As CC learns from her girlfriends, she also develops a growing rapport with Ben, which creates friction between CC and the girls. CC eagerly begins the search for her birth mother but comes to a dead end when she finds that the adoption agency closed almost a decade ago and she can't manage to extract any information behind the red tape and secrecy. Just when it seems impossible to continue, Ting Ting comes to her aid and manages to wring some information through underhanded means.

Each episode is framed thematically by rules taken from the book: in **Think Hard Assets**, roommate Anastasia learns how to trade up out of their shared Airbnb to a luxury condo, leaving CC in the lurch. The sexpot Lili shows CC how to **Fake a Career**, when she demonstrates that a fake business card with a snazzy website AND adrenaline-level confidence is all one needs to convince investors to pour money into her new livestream shopping business. Taking this lesson to heart, CC takes on Lili as her first side-hustle PR client and creates a new name card and website for her private PR agency—and finds several clients instantly.

Throughout the season, big events like the Formula One Race or Shanghai Film Festival provide glamorous backdrops, with opportunities for cameos of Hollywood A-listers and Chinese and Hong Kong celebrities and escapades. In **Find a Starter Boyfriend**, Lan Lan gives CC and Ting Ting plum advice at the Shanghai Fashion Week opening night party. CC is unable to follow the rule—choosing not to string along married billionaire Wu for more connections and money— as she begins to fall for her colleague Ben. Meanwhile, Ting Ting follows Lan Lan's rule to a tee and hooks up with a wealthy, nearly geriatric Hong Kong developer.

Eventually, Ben's conflicted ambivalence about being part of the family business comes to a head. He admires CC for having been able to break away from her family in Georgia and diving headfirst into the unknown, whereas he must act as the dutiful son. Caught between his overbearing mom constantly advising him to watch out for those "Shanghai Girls" and his philandering father, Ben struggles to find his own path, inspired by CC. However, Ben & CC's relationship suddenly takes a turn when work politics pose a serious hurdle.

Ting Ting's efforts to help CC with the search for the birth mother ends abruptly when she is visited by the Public Security Bureau who hint that continuing is not a wise idea.

CC and Lan Lan's relationship evolves, despite CC feeling pressure from the PR firm to use Lan Lan's private club and network to promote their events. CC often seeks out Lan Lan to ask questions, and gets surprising answers, eventually developing a deeper understanding of Lan Lan's philosophy. After hearing about Lan Lan's first husband, CC dares to ask Lan Lan whether she ever wanted children, and that becomes the catalyst for CC revealing the circumstances of her birth and adoption.

CC witnesses Maribel's own difficult choice with her pregnancy in **Jumping Ship** and realizes she's been too distracted by the Girlfriends' world and returns to her pursuit of finding her birth mother, and that puts her on a collision course with Lan Lan.

By season's end, Lan Lan consents to arrange for CC to see the birth mother from afar. Lan Lan's conversation with her old classmate goes poorly and Lan Lan signals that CC should leave, but CC decides to: **Break All the Rules**. When CC reveals herself to her birth mother, the cold-hearted woman lists the conditions of their possible future relationship—that CC will never be acknowledged but they might meet once or twice a year—all on the birth mother's terms and with no room for CC's needs.

CC is devastated when she realizes that the connection she has been yearning for—that missing piece—was a mirage. Lan Lan comes to CC's rescue and together they ditch the birth mother and walk out without paying the bill. Lan Lan repeats the first rule of Shanghai Girls: **Be Unsentimental**, but CC hesitates. Lan Lan leaves her to think about it. As CC looks around the glamour and glitz, she wonders: what should I do? Do I stay or do I go? Ben catches sight of her and offers her a ride. The romance might be back on again...

SECOND SEASON:

CC's birth mother agrees to help Lan Lan to distance herself from a difficulty with her investor at the private club in exchange for a request: the birth mother asks for a proper meeting with CC, without Lan Lan's interference. CC is hesitant about it and Lan Lan worries about the birth mother's intentions, especially when CC is asked to fly to a very secluded secret place outside Beijing for the meeting. Also, tensions come to a head when CC's adopted parents decide to come visit Shanghai, and Cindy becomes extremely jealous of CC's close relationship with Lan Lan.

Ben's over-protective mother comes to Shanghai and becomes an obstacle as she plots to find out more about this girl who has captured her son's heart.

After Ting Ting's Hong Kong real estate investor disappears and she loses her luxury lifestyle, she comes back to the Girlfriends Club to try her hand at the rules again.

Anastasia's latest boyfriend turns out to be a gangster with unsavory activities. She must untangle herself from him without offending him, and resorts to some unusual (and maybe illegal) tactics with the Girlfriends coming to her aid.

Maribel has the baby, and she decides not to divulge who the father is. CC convinces her to keep the boy and not put it up for adoption. A babysitting rotation of Girlfriends creates havoc.

Lili expands her livestreaming shopping club success into a charm/etiquette school, taking on a select group of young women to groom them for marrying (or becoming a second wife/mistress) for the new-money rich.

Girlfriends Club: Shanghai celebrates a unique form of female empowerment and solidarity that audiences are hungry for. The question is: Are you ready to join the club?