

CHINA'S UNSUNG HEROES

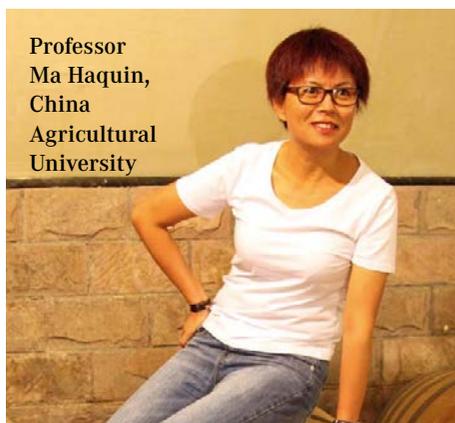
Many people have had a hand in the rise of China's wine scene. Jim Boyce identifies ten significant people who are too often overlooked.

Lists of China's key wine people tend to repeat. You'll often find mentioned Grace Vineyard owner Judy Chan, consultant Li Demei, Lu Yang MS, Fongyee Walker MW, Silver Heights' winemaker Emma Gao and social media star Wang Shenghan (Lady Penguin). There are a few dozen other regulars, from critics, sommeliers and educators to winery owners to the heads of major producers and importers.

But crucial to the rise of China's wine scene are thousands of unsung heroes who are much less known, especially on the global stage. Here are ten such people who play a wide range of roles and have gone above and beyond.

Ma Huiqin

You could say the only thing keeping Professor Ma from becoming one of China's best-known wine experts is Ma herself. This indefatigable 20-year veteran has visited the breadth of China's wineries to give marketing advice, monitor grape variety performance and assess vineyard disease. She has partnered on projects with academics from five continents, served as judge and writer for a wide range of contests and publications, and coordinated the Ningxia region's entry into the International Organisation of Vine and Wine (OIV).



But Ma also happily retreats to her lab at China Agricultural University – "I'm a scientist" is her mantra – to focus on molecular biology and a family of graduate students. Maybe Ma's influence will best be measured via the 10,000-plus students, from all subject areas and parts of China, who took her wine appreciation course these past 15 years and, in numerous cases, have gone on to work in the trade.

Julien Boulard

The head of Zhulian Wines Consulting, Boulard has taught wine classes for more than a decade, including WSET to Level 3. He's writing his Master of Wine thesis on Marselan, which some call "China's grape". And he's organised high-profile events, from tastings of top local brands to Grand Cru extravaganzas with Andrew Jefford.

With much persistence, and an impressively thick beard, Boulard has done this not from a well-known city such as Shanghai or Shenzhen, but from Nanning. It's a second tier city of about 7m people that's closer to Bangkok than Beijing. As someone who knew little of wine before settling there, he embodies the spread of knowledge in China.

Zhou Shuzhen

Although Ningxia has gone from an unknown region to a global curiosity during the past decade, this noteworthy winemaker has a relatively low profile. Soft-spoken Zhou first dipped her toe into winemaking in the mid-1980s, when she took a course in Hebei province just outside Beijing, at the same time that mega-brand Great Wall was being launched.

After working with early Ningxia producers such as Xixia King and former Pernod Ricard partner Guangxia, Zhou has more recently

been crucial in helping Ningxia wineries such as Legacy Peak, Kanaan and Jade ascend the ranks of China's best. From elegant creamy Chardonnays to vibrant fruit-packed Cabernets, Zhou's wines have brought prestige to the region.

Tersina Shieh

Any talk of Hong Kong wine influencers invariably turns to the growing number of MWs there. Meanwhile, Shieh just keeps opening bottles. She's helped run programs for Wines of South Africa, Wines of Germany and The Vintage Port Academy and joined harvests at Treaty Port in Shandong and Silver Heights in Ningxia.

Most impressive is her commitment to consumers. Shieh has written for sites such as OpenRice and Foodie even though she recognises some wine trade people might dismiss the readers as amateurs. Add her music and wine events, and efforts to get casual restaurant chains to serve wine with set dinners, and Shieh has been a role model for reaching out to casual drinkers.

Zhang Yanzhi

Given some think he holds a key to China's fine wine future, Zhang has quite a low profile. He has worn many hats: as a winemaker, as a representative for Jean-Pierre Moueix, as the portfolio builder for China's first wine investment fund and, more recently, as founder of the distributor Easy Cellar, which helped spread Penfolds in China.

All that experience will help in his new role as head of Xige Estate (Pigeon Hill), a 25,000m2 cutting-edge winery with access to 600ha of Ningxia's oldest vines. The goal? To create a respected national brand, a kind of Penfolds, that changes Chinese consumers' lukewarm opinion of local wines and helps boost the industry as a whole.

Alberto Pascual

Passion ranks among the most overused trade words but Pascual embodies it so much that calling his Spanish wine-focused company *Pasión International* is perfect. He pursues a quality rather than quantity game, with China allotments for some wines counted in hundreds or even dozens of bottles.

Pascual's enthusiasm is relentless, from writing all-caps social media posts saturated with reviews, scores and exclamation marks to loading a scooter with a dozen-plus bottles and a Coravin machine for day-long visits to current and potential clients. At major tastings, he's the guy with mussed hair, an extra dress shirt button undone and the persuasiveness to make you try a sixth, seventh or eighth wine before moving to the next table.

Zhijun 'Jim' Sun

A native of Yantai, the birthplace of China's modern wine industry, Sun has written about the alcohol scene for 25 years, including with *winechina.com* since 2000. His most recent effort is a book about boutique Chinese winery tours.

Sun has a master's degree in Wine Management Science from the OIV and leads seminars, tastings and tours for OIV students visiting China. He has also organised wine contests, festivals and trade fairs in his province. Many visitors will have fond memories of his two-storey wine cellar and event space. It closed in 2017 because of zoning changes, but Sun plans to open a new one soon.

Zhao Desheng

Like a skilled player on a football team that never makes the World Cup, Zhao has quietly toiled at *Domaine Franco-Chinois (DFC)*, just outside Beijing, which began as a joint French-Chinese scientific project 20 years ago. DCF was privatised in 2010 and makes some of China's finest wines but, frustratingly, they are not yet on the market.

Not that Zhao isn't busy. Along with DFC, he works with the winery's sibling project, *Canaan*, which has experimented with grape

varieties including *Gewürztraminer*. He's caught between powerful management bidding its time and a trade pleading for the wines to go on sale. Once those bottles are available – perhaps this year? – expect Zhao to rise to greater prominence.

Chen Shu

It's hard to define the role that Chen 'Kiki' Shu plays in Ningxia. She has served as a translator (English, Spanish and Mandarin), tour guide, event planner, sympathetic ear and more. Perhaps the most crucial contribution this outgoing and helpful Ningxia native makes is in her role as unofficial diplomat for regional wine authorities.

Chen has leveraged her cultural know-how to "save face" when dealing with the rising tide of foreign visitors, whether that means caring for VIPs or making connections to local trade people. When a group of foreign winemakers faced losing storage space for wine they made as part of a government project, Chen even stepped up and moved thousands of bottles to her family's warehouse.



Chen Shu, Ningxia

Lee Yeon Yeon

His 2006 e-mail request to join the harvest at *Grace Vineyard* in Shanxi put him on a path to becoming chief winemaker. Unlike some of his contemporaries, who focus on Cabernet

blends, Lee works with a range of grapes at *Grace's* Shanxi and Ningxia vineyards, from *Marselan* to *Malbec* to *Aglianico*. He also helped launch the winery's sparkling wine programme.

While Lee might lament that rural Shanxi lacks *nasi lemak* and other dishes from his native Malaysia, he is keeping *Grace* fans happy. The fruits of that labour are notable, including a *Best in Show* for *Grace's* 2015 *Marselan* at the *Decanter Asia Wine Awards* in 2017. And, even more importantly, kudos from consumers.



Lee Yeon Yeon, Chief Winemaker, Grace Vineyards

From winemakers to academics to importers to managers, these ten symbolise those who make the wine industry more dynamic. There are many more, such as *Torres China* managing partner *Alberto Fernández*, the "last man standing" of those who ran key distributors including *ASC* and *Summergate* 15 years ago; *Willa Yang*, who until recently helmed the China program for *Wine Australia* during that country's meteoric rise; and *David Jiang*, founder of *Wine 100*, which runs wine contests, festivals and tours. There's also *Frederic Choux* of importer *DCT* in Dalian, *Ma Li* of her eponymous shops in Beijing and *Galia Rautenberg* of retailer *De'Vine* in Nanjing, who are blending wine with lifestyle across the country. They might not get as much attention as some but are all important to China's maturing wine scene. ■