

# One-of-a-kind Chinese department store in New York

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ARTICLE



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**The popular three-story Pearl River Mart, on Broadway in New York City, is chock full of nifty gift items, clothing, and kitchen ware from China.**

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NEW YORK — Tucked between the brightly lit retail fashion storefronts of SoHo and the clamor and bustle of Chinatown, there is a store unlike all the others. Pearl River Mart is spacious but still filled to capacity, and perhaps the last independent department store of its kind. It occupies three floors and while your first steps into the space, where you'll catch the scent of incense, may suggest you'll find only a slightly grander home for inexpensive Chinatown knickknacks, it only takes a couple of moments to realize that



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something much deeper, richer, and more varied is going on here.

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Pearl River was opened in 1971 by a group of graduate students from Taiwan and southern China (specifically, Guangdong, where the Pearl River is located), and began as a place for Chinatown residents to find goods from home. According to co-owner and company president Ching-Yeh Chen, “many good things from China were blocked because of political reasons.” To pick up merchandise, Chen and her husband, who were among the original group, were obliged to drive to Canada, which maintained open-trade relations with China. Their stock also came from Hong Kong.

From the start, “we couldn’t keep anything in the store,” says Chen, as homesick Chinatown residents flocked to Pearl River. “They were happy to get even a Pearl River soy sauce bottle,” she says, referring to the now-popular brand (though the name is unrelated). Over the years, the store was discovered by adventurers from points uptown, and then, explosively, by the fashion industry. Business boomed as New York fashion insiders and decorators beat a hot path to Chinatown. In contrast to the warren of tiny shops below Canal Street, Pearl River offered a more accessible space and vast selection. “We were a bridge for them,” explains Chen. With each decade, the store expanded and moved, hopscotching across Chinatown to its current location. From serving a 90 percent Chinese clientele, the store has shifted to serving “90 percent general public,” says Chen.

Today, the first floor holds traditional Chinese apparel – cheongsams (the slim-fitting traditional dresses), silk robes, little girl’s brocade slippers, brocaded bolts of fabric, and silk-and-linen-frogged mandarin jackets. There’s a huge array of kitchenwares, from the traditional blue and white china to more teapots than you’ve probably ever seen in your life. There are shelves of figurines and a section for Chinese groceries. Overhead, bamboo bird cages and real Chinese parade dragons – 50 feet long – run riot across the ceiling.

The store is organized top to bottom, roughly by price. The second floor holds the big-ticket items such as lacquered cabinets, painted tables, fringe panels, dozens of Buddhas, screens of every description (bamboo, rice paper, rattan), a wall full of ceremonial swords (thoughtfully marked “For Decorative Purposes Only”), and enough vases for an indoor botanical garden. The largest gong would dwarf a fireplace. And for the collector who has everything, how about your own terra-cotta reproduction of a warrior? The smallest, standing 6 inches high, is \$6.50. You can take home a life-size version for \$1,250.

On the other end of the spectrum, the “cellar,” as it’s labeled on the elevator, is a literal bargain basement, cement-floored and packed with goods: tiny bamboo boxes, Taiwanese parasols, the ubiquitous black Chinatown Mary Janes, an endless selection of ceramics, novelties, toys, and household appliances. You can get a china soup spoon, carved wooden fan, beach mats, incense, or pajamas. Or just plop yourself down on a colorful fabric camp stool to catch your breath.

The souvenir items at the front of the shop like lipstick cases and brocaded slippers are quite a bit less if you’re willing to plunge into the raucous streets of Chinatown and negotiate with hole-in-the-wall shopkeepers. But there’s a shopper’s sweet spot here: housewares and kitchenwares are less than you’d pay elsewhere. And items like the lanterns and teapots, priced at market rates or just above, are displayed in a variety and profusion you won’t find elsewhere.



There is good reason to hasten your shopping trip. Pearl River has become, in a way, a victim of its own success. As Chen observes, this “is always true in retail.” In each of its moves, the store has drawn business and tourists, improving the fortunes of the neighborhood and, indirectly, raising the cost of its lease.

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In the next few years, in what has now become a rather tony stretch of Broadway, a decision looms about renewing the lease again. Neither Chen’s children nor those of the other founder want to work in the business. The choices seem to be selling it or scaling back on the brick and mortar store and focusing on the website.

But as every bargain shopper knows, it pays to seize the moment — before the last 100 percent linen mandarin jacket and paper dragon have flown forever off the shelves.

**Pearl River Mart**, 477 Broadway (between Grand and Broome), New York, N.Y., 212-431-4770, [www.pearlriver.com](http://www.pearlriver.com)

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