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### Authors

Yang, Xiaoneng  
Gong, Jianhua

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# Shanghai Alleyways I Cross-Currents

*Xiaoneng Yang*

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When I was growing up, the term “Shanghainese” had somewhat pejorative connotations in the local idiom of many regions of China. My mother was a true native of the city, born and raised in Shanghai to parents who had come to the city from Ningbo. My maternal grandparents lived at the intersection of North Sichuan Road and Shanyin Road, close to literary figure Lu Xun’s home, and I remember playing in front of the red brick houses and on *longtang* sidewalks as a child. My youth, however, was spent in China’s north, where I was loathe to admit that I had blood relatives from Shanghai, and even more leery of speaking Shanghai dialect. To do so would invite the taunts of naughty children who would call after me: “Southern barbarian! Southern barbarian!”

Initially, the term “Shanghai style” also had slightly disparaging connotations: it was a term that orthodox and conservative gentlemen used to describe a culture that was heavily nonconformist, transgressive, a haphazard combination of East and West, brimming with Westernized openness, exaggerated, unreliable, vulgar, and commercial in style. This term has only gradually assumed positive connotations.<sup>[1]</sup> Today, Shanghai

culture is often described proudly by the saying “a hundred rivers flowing into the sea, preserving and integrating the best of each,” referring to the convergence and blending of immigrants and different cultures in Shanghai, as well as the pluralism, initiative, and openness of Shanghai culture itself.

### **Architectural Changes and the Creation of the *Longtang* Alleyways**

After Shanghai was forcibly opened to trade in 1843, and the concessions were established by the competing Great Powers, different styles of architecture began to appear in Shanghai. The synthesis of Chinese and Western styles was born out of opportunity. From 1853 onward, in order to meet the needs of the large numbers of Chinese refugees entering the concessions, foreign firms seized the business opportunity of building adjacent wooden shacks in large groups to be rented out. These were the original alley neighborhoods. However, these shacks were prone to fires, so after 1870 they were banned by concession authorities. At the same time, *shikumen* residences featuring wood-frame construction, brick walls, and two floors were built side by side, creating narrow residential alleys. These structures combined traditional *siheyuan* courtyards and *sanheyuan* courtyard buildings with two-level Jiangnan-region residential homes, and absorbed the narrow, long lanes typical of European and American row house-style architecture. This type of neighborhood design satisfied the traditional concept of one family living together as a single unit, with a closed exterior and open-plan interior. The residences' elaborate doors were barriers that separated the interior from the exterior, gateways that came into contact with both friends and strangers and prevented theft. It was fashionable

to use black painted wood planks for door panels, with frames made of stone, which is how they came to be named *shikumen* (“stone storehouse door”) homes. Later on, doors were often decorated with European- and American-style relief carvings.

Both old and new styles are evident in the *shikumen* structures. The peak of the new-style buildings was during the period from 1910 to 1930, when building materials and designs were improved. Large numbers of buildings used steel reinforcing bars in concrete, weight-bearing brick walls, and wood-frame roofs replaced post-and-lintel construction. Brick archways appeared on doors, windows, buildings constructed over the street, and entrances and exits to the alleyways. Many outer surfaces were decorated, and three-level residences became popular. Later, the even newer-style *lilong* lane houses were also mostly three-level buildings. Iron doors were fitted for safety, washrooms were installed, and some even had parking garages. The streets of the neighborhoods were widened, and the designs and motifs tended to be Western. Around 1940, completely Westernized, newly constructed garden lane houses and apartment lane houses were the order of the day. Consequently, *shikumen* construction and residence began to decline.<sup>[2]</sup> After the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949, over two-thirds of Shanghainese residences were located in *lilong* lane house–style neighborhoods.

Varying architectural types and different grades of residential homes served different social classes. The *shikumen* residences were originally built for prosperous families, foreign residents, white-collar workers, and middle-class residents, but as the maintenance of the buildings fell into disrepair, population density increased, facilities became outmoded, buildings became

increasingly makeshift, and living conditions worsened. Some neighborhoods gradually degenerated to house society's lower classes, and others became slums. The Western garden lane houses originally represented the special privilege and success of foreign adventurers, compradors, and rich merchants. Shanghai's residences were the highest-quality of the Western homes built all over China in the same period, and their design and craftsmanship were unrivaled for that period.

The districts in which these residences were located also reflected the status and position of the residents. Wealthy families and those with status mostly chose to live in garden lane houses and fancy apartments built in the International Settlement and French Concession, located in the western part of Shanghai; these areas are still Shanghai's most luxurious residential districts. Many intellectuals and cultural celebrities, including Lu Xun, the most famous among this group, lived in the new-style *lilong* lane houses in the Hongkou District; similar to townhouses in America, these three-story red brick homes stood side by side, sharing walls on either side. Finally, because numerous factories were built in Yangshupu, workers tended to live there; most of the residents of Nanshi worked in small businesses and performed manual labor, so whole neighborhoods of simple wood-plank and brick buildings were commonplace. A market with sixteen stalls outside the east gate of Nanshi sold seafood, cured meats, and other provisions.

Shanghai's early immigrants were mostly drifters and people just passing through,<sup>[3]</sup> but later immigrants largely made Shanghai their home. Regardless of when they arrived (i.e., before or after 1949), after they set down their roots, immigrants became Shanghainese. The overall environment of economy, culture, and

living conditions in twentieth-century Shanghai were relatively superior to those elsewhere in China, breeding reluctance among the Shanghainese to be away from Shanghai. Unless it was absolutely imperative, few Shanghainese moved to other places.

Over the years, Shanghai's population rapidly increased, but residential construction could not keep pace, which led to a leap in housing density. It was not uncommon to see multiple generations squeezed into cramped rooms and garrets, and living spaces for individuals and families shrank dramatically. As a result, people drew on their abilities and resources to creatively use what little space they had to the utmost, achieving great feats of organization and arrangement. Shanties could be built on small, narrow roof terraces, an entire family could squeeze into a *tingzijian* studio, and courtyards and kitchens could be converted into living quarters. Clothing and miscellaneous items, hung above *longtang* alleyways, were scattered all over. In these tiny places, beds were squeezed next to other beds, and the lives of generations were separated by merely a curtain—mothers and daughters-in law, brothers and sisters sharing the same room. In the daytime, a table and chairs were brought out, and at night the table and chairs were folded away in order to make way for the three planks that constituted a bed. At any given time, on one side of the room someone might be eating, while on the other side someone might be using the chamber pot, quarreling, making love, or sleeping. Individual space was largely lost, and personal privacy had become a rare luxury. “Beauty is functionality” was established as a pragmatic attitude toward life and the dominant aesthetic ideology of Shanghai's material culture.

All public spaces that could be used were turned into daily life

“public halls”: the coal stove in the morning, the toilets, baths in the open...Cooling oneself bare-chested, cooking side by side, eating and living on the street, selling goods from roadside stalls, looking at others from neighboring windows, whispering to one other—all these formed a special practice of the cultural and human landscape in which “it is good just to be alive.” Many of the *longtang* alleys became multifunctional clubhouses, guesthouses, hospitals, small factories, public restrooms... everything was there.

My mother recalls walking through the shouting street peddlers and performers in historic Shanghai:

*While taking advantage of the afternoon cool, the countryside women from Pudong, wearing blue scarves on their heads, basket aprons tied around their waists, and carrying bamboo baskets in their hands, would cry “dried malan vegetable,” “salted vegetables”... Men from Chongming would carry on their backs a bundle of Chongming sugarcane, and children would fight with each other to buy it. Men bearing cooked ginkgo nuts on shoulder poles would loudly cry, “Sweet and sweeter, sticky and stickier, ginkgo nuts, large as goose eggs, you must try them.” This was an effective way of attracting customers.*

*There were also peddlers who sold dried stinky tofu and soft tofu, who would loudly shout, “Hua,” and welcome people on the streets to taste their wares.*

*On the side of the streets and in the longtang alley entrances there were often blind men playing the huqin fiddle with young girls singing for a living, their soft voices winding around the longtang alleyways and streets: “At the end of the world, a promontory, seeking, seeking a bosom friend....” “... In the winter snowflakes*

*fly, the Lady of Meng Jiang comes from ten thousand li away to deliver winter clothes (for her husband)....” With the resonant sound of a gong, all the people in the neighborhood would gather in a circle to watch a monkey show, or a display of magic tricks.*

Small bookstalls were located in unimportant areas near the *longtang* neighborhoods. At that time children could spend a trifling amount of money and sit on a little stool to read children’s books. When they tired of reading, they could shoot marbles, play with slingshots, and jump rope.

During the Cultural Revolution, crowding in Shanghai reached an unprecedented level of density. The sumptuous housing districts where the Westerners and wealthy had resided could not avoid these pressures. As the residential population increased, factories and other organizations moved in and unrelated people squeezed into formerly luxurious single-family residences, sharing in the legacy of the capitalist class. The gardens and Western homes, once quiet and elegant, became “big family homes,” full of the babble of human voices, for public and private use.

Under the call for “Reform and Opening-Up” beginning in 1978, Shanghai has said goodbye to much of her past. The *shikumen* buildings have been replaced by high-rises, and the poor districts are disappearing. The work units and residents living in gardens and Western homes have gradually moved out, and the population density within homes has steadily decreased; quiet has returned. Each passing day brings changes; the Shanghai of only twenty or thirty years ago has rapidly become part of the city’s history.

Because traditional Chinese architecture was based on wood-frame construction, original structures were never easy to



preserve. Due to the constant tearing down and renovation of these buildings over the generations, very few ancient residential dwellings are left in Shanghai today. Around 1990, the government carried out a large-scale demolition and urban renewal campaign, so that today only a few fragments of *shikumen* homes are preserved in the better parts of the city. Among the survivors, the Yu Garden is most representative.

Having undergone earth-shaking economic growth and thirty years of large-scale construction, and having witnessed the erection of modern skyscrapers and rows of modular high-rise apartments, the face of Shanghai has truly changed. Those searching for the Shanghai of twenty or thirty years ago will be disappointed, and those who wish to recall the lives of their ancestors in the early twentieth century will have even more difficulty: original living conditions have utterly changed, and the foundations of the new buildings run deep. Historic homes have been totally demolished and their building foundations have been completely dug out. Even future archaeologists will not know where to start—the past, down to its very roots, has been excavated. In the midst of this excitement, how could one not feel some regret over the loss of the city's tangible and intangible cultural heritage? But one may still hope that the changes are not too like “a torrent of spring meltwater flowing east” that completely sweeps away the traces of our predecessors in the none-too-distant past.

In the 1980s and 1990s, prior to the mass demolition of *lilong* neighborhoods, peddlers and craftsmen wending their way through the *lilong* alleyways were a common sight. Now that people live in high-rise buildings, the environment and ways that street vendors make a living have undergone enormous changes, and scenes

such as those described above are becoming increasingly scarce. Over the last twenty years, Pudong (the eastern bank of the Huangpu River) has transformed from an area of rural farmland to an important development district. In some areas of Pudong, housing prices are even higher than in the older Puxi District.

In the past, average families used coal-burning stoves, and rooms were crowded. It was inconvenient to boil water and there was no space to entertain guests, so people would go to boiled-water vendors to get drinking water and have conversations. Now, modern teahouses and coffeehouses have replaced the formerly popular hot-water shops, and the young spend their days in internet cafés. In the past, homes had no space for dating, and there were few places that could accommodate courtship, so people congregated on the Bund and in public parks. Pairs of lovers often sat side by side; several couples would share a long bench, with no room for intimacy, yet completely oblivious to the presence of others. Now there are an endless number of places where couples can meet privately.

After the Reform and Opening-Up, Hong Kong companies took on the transformation of the Taipingqiao area in the Luwan District, preserving the outlines of this historic block, where the *shikumen* buildings of the past century were concentrated. *Longtang* alleyways constructed of blue bricks and cement planks have been built next to each other, and *shikumen* doors with stone frames are lined up one after the other. But open the door to a *shikumen*, and one discovers that a revolution has occurred in the interior: it is a bar-cum-disco populated by fashionably dressed people, or an elegant restaurant, or a club. Here, the old can reminisce, while the young can take a look at the latest fashions and Westerners

can experience China's internationalized atmosphere. Renamed Xintiandi ("New Heaven and Earth"), the neighborhood has assumed a place as the new landmark of modern Shanghai.

## **Photographic Memories**

Even if we are now conscious of preserving historic architecture and old customs, it is difficult to recover the atmosphere and mentality of the Shanghai of the past. Despite our regret, helplessness, and nostalgia at losing the past, we can reminisce and recapture a little of the Shanghai of yesteryear through the visual experience of art, thanks to the technology of photography and the work of determined people. When objects have already disappeared, people have left, and scenes no longer exist, it is fortunate that we can imaginatively reconstruct them, at least in part, on the basis of old photographs.

The photographs presented here were not edited, accessorized, or painstakingly set up. They record disappearing Shanghainese life in a straightforward way. Using a natural and realistic approach, Jianhua Gong has captured scenes and manners that are in the process of being obliterated. The photographs do not show distinguished Western-style embassies of the past, nightclubs, customs buildings, or other public architecture. There are no shots of fancy gardens or Western mansions. Instead, these are silent records of crowded, ordinary residences and noisy *longtang* alleyways, mementos of the lives and diversions of ordinary folk. Each photograph of Shanghai's past resembles a footprint left behind by a great figure in the muddy riverbank of history. In the images we see honor and disgrace, wealth and poverty, joy and anger, happiness and sadness, leisure and contentment, social change, cultural remnants, and the entire living environment. This

is a record of past events and old things, a mirror that reflects Shanghai's spirit and human landscape. These photos capture the changes of the past thirty years in Shanghai following the Reform Era, a period during which the city has received the attention of the world.

*Xiaoneng Yang is the Patrick J.J. Maveety Curator of Asian Art at Stanford University's Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts. He specializes in Chinese art and archaeology and has organized major international exhibitions on various periods and themes, from archaeology to modern ink painting. His recent publications include The Golden Age of Chinese Archaeology: Celebrated Discoveries from the People's Republic of China (1999), New Perspectives on China's Past: Chinese Archaeology in the Twentieth Century (2004), Reflections of Early China (2000 and 2008), Tracing the Past, Drawing the Future: Master Ink Painters in Twentieth-Century China (2010), and Hello, Shanghai!: A History of Everyday Life in the Reform Era, 1978-2009 (2010).*

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### *Notes*

1. For the summary of the meanings of the term *haipai*, see Xue (2005, 206–210).

[2]. Regarding modern Shanghai architecture, see Chen and Zhang (1988, 161–168), Luo and Wu (1997), and Zhou and Wu (1999, 187–203).

[3]. Murphey (1986, 10).

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