The Shanghai lilong
A new concept of home in China
Gregory Bracken

The Shanghai lilong flourished during the 19th and early 20th centuries, becoming the most common building type in the city up to World War II. Once the Communists took over in 1949 the lilong entered a decline. It was seen as a reminder of an era the Chinese would rather forget: the Treaty Port era (1842-1943). As a result, the lilong became increasingly run-down and disfigured, as well as overcrowded and unsanitary due to the lack of development in the city from the 1950s to the 1970s. When capitalism was reintroduced from 1978 onwards, the lilong came under even more stress because of the increased space constraints in the city-centre and soaring land values, which meant that such a low-rise house type was no longer seen as economical or a good use of space. Vast swaths of them were abandoned, to be replaced by high-rise offices, hotels, and apartment complexes, often with large shopping malls in their podiums. Perceptions began to change, however, in the first years of the 21st century when the architectural merit of this charming house type was once again beginning to be appreciated; they have been enjoying something of a revival ever since.2

China did have some long-term positive effects because wherever opium went, other goods did have some long-term positive effects. The British saw the opium trade as an unmixed evil.3 Opium may have begun as illegal, but it was legalised on 8 November 1858 and remained legal in China until 1917. Jacques M. Downs tells us that China, quite naturally, saw the opium trade as an unmixed evil.4 It corrupted, it demoralised, and it drained national funds. The more the Chinese tried to get away with whatever they wanted. The new conduits of trade also brought other, more legitimate activities. The new conduits of trade also brought other, more legitimate activities. The new conduits of trade also brought other, more legitimate activities.

The lilong is an attractive, versatile, and socially vibrant house type that developed in Shanghai in the 19th century. It came to be seen as such a feature of the city that it is almost an icon as the Bund itself. Stylistically it is a hybrid of Western architectural details and traditional Chinese spatial arrangements; but it is more than architecturally interesting. It is socially very important. Apart from generating a vibrant street life in the city, it was also instrumental in changing the concept of home [jia] in China. Traditionally, a home was something to be handed down through the family, from generation to generation, but the Shanghai lilong changed all that. Home-ownership came to assume a more Western attitude, where the house was seen more as a commodity than an heirloom, something that could be easily bought and sold.
this modernisation because, according to Robert Nield, their schools introduced Western concepts such as democracy to increasingly politically aware students. These ideas, along with a new attitude to trade, meant that China was beginning to transform. This may have been painful at first, but it eventually allowed the country to blossom into the globally competitive giant it is today.

Chinese commerce and trade would have probably developed anyway, even without British prompting, but the presence of British commercial culture certainly accelerated that change, and it was in the Treaty Ports that the conundrums of this trade made their biggest mark, as we shall see.

Shanghai as Treaty Port

Shanghai was, without doubt, the most important Treaty Port in China. It was bigger, it was richer, and it was more sophisticated than any other city in the country. It began life as a fishing village before growing into a small walled city, whose location at the mouth of the Yangtze made it ideal for trade. The British recognised this and within twenty years of becoming a Treaty Port, Shanghai became the world's sixth-largest port. It became so well known that decorated the Bund and the smarter parts of the city centre, but most ordinary Chinese saw themselves as separate, even identifying their city with another, Confucian walled city, whose location at the mouth of a river was different.

The Shanghailanders worked and socialised in parts of the city that was in charge and had little interest in mixing with the most ordinary Chinese. The French Concession, the original Chinese city, dominated by an International Settlement, was a self-governing entity governed by British laws. It was bigger, it had the region's tallest buildings, freest press, and mostomatic commercial activities were confined to those houses facing onto boundary streets, but there was still some informal commercial activity on the main alleysways. Smaller alleysways were used for household chores, informal meetings, and for recreation. The chief factor in their flexibility was the hierarchical system of graduated constraint, producing what could be seen as a transferable commodity rather than a permanent home.

The layout and use of the Shanghai Lilong

Treaty Ports were popular with Chinese looking for work, or fleeing from the upheaval and distress of the civil war in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of those who came to Shanghai lived in lilong. Lilong were gated, hierarchically organised residential compounds, laid out in large blocks subdivided by alleysways. The name lilong means ‘neighbourhood alleyway’ (meaning ‘neighbourhood’ and long, ‘alleyway’). They are also sometimes known as longtang, the Chinese word for canyon (which can (and regularly does) close – into the semi-private side alleys, where locals and friends can keep a close eye on activities, before finally moving into the house itself, which is totally private). In fact, in Shanghai, a house in an alleyway was like a small island in the middle of a sea of people. The houses themselves were usually two to four stories high and varied in size and decoration. Invariably small, the basic unit was a space approximately 105 square metres, with only two rooms on the first floor. Commercial activity was confined to those houses facing onto boundary streets, but there was still some informal commercial activity on the main alleysways. Smaller alleysways were used for household chores, informal meetings, and for recreation. The chief factor in their flexibility was the hierarchical system of graduated constraint, producing what could be seen as a transferable commodity rather than a permanent home.

The Shanghai Lilong was a new concept in home in China

A large proportion of Shanghai’s population in the mid 20th century, both Western and Chinese, were known as sojourners, temporary residents who saw the city as a place to get rich before returning home. This had an effect on their attitudes to the concept of home. The word for ‘home’ in Chinese is jia, which also denotes ‘house’, and even, concepts that cannot be separated as they are in the West. The ideograph for jia consists of ten strokes and is said to represent a pig under a roof, a symbol which can mean a related group of people who eat out of one pot. This can be meant literally, as in the daily meals, or figuratively, by the sharing of family income (traditionally, from the raising of pigs). The family could therefore be seen not only as a system of relationships who could combine or separate as they pleased, but also as a basic economic unit of society by producing that commodity.

Shanghai’s rapid growth saw every part of the city develop at a staggering pace. The cost of an acre of ground went from around £500 in 1850 to £20,000 in 1862.4 The city was recognised this and within twenty years of becoming a Treaty Port, Shanghai became the world’s sixth-largest port. It became so well known that decorated the Bund and the smarter parts of the city centre, but most ordinary Chinese saw themselves as separate, even identifying their city with another, Confucian walled city, whose location at the mouth of a river was different.

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