

# Leaping beyond nostalgia: Shanghai's urban life ethnography

Nostalgia has consistently been a motivation for the study of contemporary Chinese urban life. Scholars have produced an abundance of work on urbanism from a pro-historic preservation perspective and, for example, have long claimed that the *lilong* house ('li' means neighbourhoods, 'long' means lanes) is an efficient form of housing for the residents of Shanghai. Non Arkaraprasertkul argues, however, that these studies fall short in terms of future city planning, as they omit the personal experiences and viewpoints of urban residents regarding the efficiency of such dwellings.

Non Arkaraprasertkul

SOON AFTER SHANGHAI BECAME A TREATY PORT in the 1840s, British developers built *lilong* houses to provide basic accommodation for Chinese labourers. A typical *lilong* neighbourhood is a walled community composed of a main lane running all or half-way across each housing block, connected by perpendicular branch lanes.

## Lilong: a critical history

The idea behind the *lilong* is to pack as many housing units, as economically as possible, into any single cluster. For instance, the original design of the *lilong* included lanes which function not only as the main and only access to individual residential units but also back-of-the-house service paths. This has the added benefit of minimising construction costs, since the two different functions pertinent to mobility in the community are combined. Before long, however, residents had transformed this thoroughfare into an everyday 'community corridor,' utilising these lanes as space for almost everything from hanging out to chat and for community meetings, to cooking, washing clothes and selling stuff to gambling and so on.<sup>1</sup>

This is a good illustration of how adaptations within *lilong* neighbourhoods respond to the multiple social functions of the community, allowing its physical elements to serve several purposes simultaneously. The success of the first series of *lilong* led to demands for the next. In fact, within a century of the first construction, more than 200,000 *lilong* dwelling units – of approximately 60 to 150 square metres per unit – had been built and the *lilong* had become the dominating characteristic of the urban fabric of Shanghai (see fig. 1 and 2).

Benefitting both servant Chinese and served Westerners, *lilong* houses became the epitome of communal and modern Chinese housing culture and were in high demand until a series of wars and local uprisings disrupted foreign industries, which was in essence the backbone of Shanghai's economy, and which were followed by the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Foreign commercial investment and employment disappeared due to the wartime turbulence and the radical changes brought about by Mao Zedong's socialistic central fiscal planning policy that followed it. During the hardship of this ongoing period of economic decline, residents were continually adapting the physical form of the *lilong* to accommodate changing social and political circumstances. The residents adopted unique methods in order to flexibly utilise the formal space – in ways the original builders did not plan – to meet their daily needs. The result was a change in the social structure both of the single unit and of the neighbourhood. Each unit was sub-divided to house more families and allow for more commercial activity.

Since the 1970s, *lilong* houses have become increasingly popular among Shanghai's burgeoning middle and upper classes. Despite the *lilongs'* serious infrastructural problems, due to the increasing population and adequate provision of maintenance in these ageing houses, many people see them as a viable alternative to expensive high-rise apartments. As this interest in the *lilong* houses increases, it is becoming increasingly necessary to understand how the flexibility of these urban spaces works. It begs the question, is it the residents who are flexible or the *lilong*, or perhaps both? (see fig. 3).

Today, Shanghai is undergoing unprecedented urban development, which can be attributed to the process of social reform (*shehuigaige*) and skyrocketing land values, both of which tend to encourage high-rise building. During the first decade of Deng Xiaoping's social reform (1978-88), the Communist Party used political power to interfere with the economy, pressing the country towards capitalism. This resulted in the large-scale destruction of a number of *lilong* neighbourhoods, making way for monumental open spaces and high-rise development. These top-down transformations – documented extensively in academic literature – fail urbanistically if the operation is carried out without recognition of local people's needs. Furthermore, in the late 1990s Shanghai's local government fully adopted property-led redevelopment schemes in order to maximise revenue from under-utilised land. These schemes included

demolishing existing older, low-density neighbourhoods in favour of high-rise developments that could instantly provide much more leasable – i.e. profitable – space. No consideration was given to social issues such as family displacement, gentrification, or social stratification, let alone more complex issues such as cultural identity and historical value. This dramatic reduction of social space for interaction within the community results in the diminishing of social capital. Furthermore, in terms of the wider social perspective concerning 'filial obligations', recent ethnographical research, shows that this change of housing infrastructure could be a threat to the support and security of the elderly vis-à-vis social segregation.<sup>2</sup> (see fig. 4).

It is thought that the younger generation of Chinese, especially those working in the service sector, find the smaller spaces of an apartment more preferable for day-to-day living. The advantages of a high-rise apartment unit with a studio-type room include low maintenance, modern infrastructure (heating system, air-conditioning, hot water, etc.), cheap rent, good ventilation, and natural lighting – something that the *lilong* simply cannot provide.

## The 'missing middle ground'

Needless to say, research from both sociological and historical perspectives that advocates the preservation of *lilong*, indicates that high-rise development could be responsible for diminishing the social bonds and the relationships of the people in these communities. There have been a number of studies of the *lilong* made, in a variety of disciplines. Those from the field of architecture are perhaps the most concrete in terms of implementation; yet they still rely on the extreme *tabula rasa* approach – i.e. how to rebuild a 'new' *lilong* neighbourhood – rather than the trying to establish a middle ground that tries to incorporate both preservation and urban development.

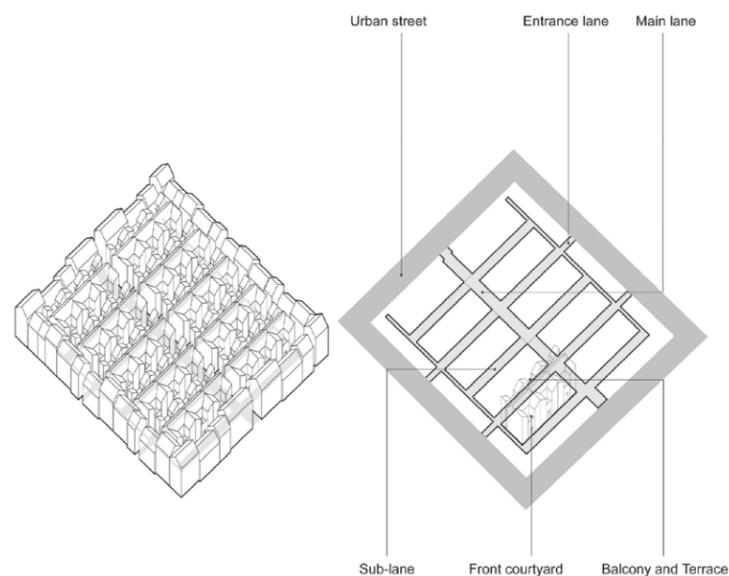
As a result of the One Child Policy (*dushengzuzhengce*), there have been changes in the preferences for housing among multi-generational Shanghaiese residents and immigrants for which *lilong* may or may not be the answer. The study of the relationship between the physical infrastructure of *lilong* and the social formation of neighbourhoods is important to the process of urban housing policy planning and could provide a counter-balance to high-rise development. Within the context of China's unprecedented social reform, the knowledge and ideas gained from cultural and social anthropology are essential.

In an earlier paper, 'Towards Modern Urban Housing: Redefining Shanghai's *Lilong*', this author presented a comprehensive study of the history and architecture of *lilong* and offered a new way of looking at the design of new housing in contemporary Shanghai. The idea was put forward that the low- to medium-rise and high-density (LMHRD) housing is the most suitable for the city, but with a caveat that the author was 'aware that this research might not completely fill the noticeable void in contemporary thinking on architecture and urban housing in Shanghai.'<sup>3</sup>

This paper is not an extension of this previous work on the *lilong*, quite the opposite in fact, this paper aims at disrupting and renegotiating the common perception – an axiom if you will – about the study of urban housing and design. It adamantly rejects the value of scholarship (including some of the author's own work) as it ignores some of the most important aspects of design – that is, the understanding of the community-in-action from an anthropological perspective. Needless to say, as the introduction of this paper discusses, there are differences in several academic attitudes and perspectives towards *lilong*, which are important to the thorough understanding of housing design.

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1. Diagram showing the basic structure of *lilong* neighbourhood: A walled community composed of a main lane running all or half way across each block, with branch lanes connecting perpendicularly to the main lane. The diagram was drawn for the purpose of giving an instant picture of the structure of the neighborhood but not of giving accuracy: The lanes are much smaller in reality. Source: Wenjun Ge.



2. An aerial photograph of Shanghai (overlooking Puxi) in the 1930s showing the dominating pattern of *lilong* houses. Only along the waterfront (the Bund; by the Huangpu River at the top of the picture) were other types of buildings located; most of them were foreigners' houses and their business headquarters. Source: Virtual Shanghai Project, Christian Henriot (IAO - Lyon 2 University).

**Addressing the missing middle ground**

To reiterate, given the scholarship of historians (particularly that from the 1980s to the present time) who have long claimed that the *lilong* has been an 'efficient' form of housing for Shanghai residents, this paper seeks to ask a deeper question, from a community perspective, about whether or not *lilong* should be considered as part of the future planning of Shanghai? The research on urban housing should be based on the study of the relationship between space and people, rather than just being led by a nostalgia for the *lilong*. This approach is necessary to define how space is utilised, justified, and re-justified by the resident users, the people who stand in the middle ground between the physical form of their micro-communities and the ever-changing culture of China's largest city. Does Shanghai accept the *lilong* as its dominant dwelling culture? Or have financial factors resulted in these houses and neighbourhoods becoming as important as they have done?

The suggested primary research methodology is a 'lighter' version of ethnography as presented by Jan Wampler and this author in the work *Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for LMRHD and Urban Design* (2008). In this paper, some basic study methods were suggested, such as participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which architects and urban designers can employ in order to understand the dynamic of communities. From this study of the community, the strategy paper proposed a series of experimental designs that represented ideas of 'community-oriented housing'. That is to say, mixed-use, mixed-tenure, and mixed-housing type developments, as well as humanised and walkable neighbourhoods, and high-density, integrated open space, and environmental morphology. The study revealed that the process of familiarisation is crucial to architecture. In other words, 'the site visit' is a pathway to the preliminarily understanding of the quality of space alongside the requirements of any programme. Without this first process of deep familiarisation with the locality of the site, architects will fail to derive a design that works and, as Jan Wampler points out, '[i]n fact, many architects contributed to the problem by designing buildings [and their space] that do not fit with the culture or the landscape and do not make places'.<sup>4</sup>

However, it would be uneconomical for an architect, commissioned to study and design a housing project, to spend a week or a month 'hanging out' like an anthropologist in the community to try and understand how things work in order to produce a good design. Instead, the lighter version of ethnography for housing research requires architects to pay attention to what they observe and to ensure they be keen to ask questions about the rationality behind certain activities that take place in the community, rather than to just look at the characteristics and physical condition of the existing architecture. That is, it is possible –and feasible –to conduct an ethnographic study of an urban community in order to derive the true understanding of the community for design.<sup>5</sup> (see fig. 4).

Such fieldwork aims at assessing the nature of *lilong* neighbourhoods via: a) the organisation of public space in such communities; b) the casual formation of semi-private space; c) the social networks (community networks including clubs, exercise groups, religious groups, chess clubs, etc.), which constitute spatial arrangement; and d) the personal experience of inhabitants actively creating and/or maintaining both.

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The principle methodology would be participant observation. While this could be construed as a 'passive method', ethnographers can never really be passive in reality. In fact, people are going to expect contributions back from the field ethnographer and that is always a *negotiated process*. Regarding the participatory research, this research clearly distinguishes such methods from Participatory Action Research (PAR) which requires full involvement of people in every aspect of research towards a goal (in best cases, of their choosing) for progress or development.<sup>6</sup> Another viable method is Participatory Appraisal (PA), which employs techniques such as 'Photovoice' –giving selected groups a disposable camera and have them photograph their neighbourhoods to record the communities' strengths and concerns. The aim of the method is twofold: firstly, to get the participants to engage in a group process of critical reflection on the community and secondly, to develop an opportunity to look into the deeper content of the community that cannot be seen using the outsider's perspective. In fact, the PA method (developed by Robert Chambers) is widely used in international development studies, with the aim of incorporating the knowledge and opinions of people in the planning and management of development projects.<sup>7</sup>

**Conclusion**

The study of contemporary urban housing in large and emerging Chinese cities should be a fundamental attempt to understand residents' lives and their inevitable processes of adaptation to the social and cultural realms controlled by a set of formal and informal rules and regulations that is different from other places in the world. The latest developmental stage of community-oriented urban housing design sparks important debate on the relationship between people and the built environment in the recent study of spatiality. This is a place where the limiting knowledge to physical space alone is redundant and where ethnography and anthropological work can fill in the gaps. What I have learned specifically from my study of *lilong* is the 'condition of resistance' in the environment of a community that has an important role to play in the design of social space. With the understanding of such conditions, architecture and urban design could break new ground for design with –more than just psychological –anthropological realism.

Whereas previous studies from various angles prescribe two extreme paths toward the development of Shanghai urbanism in order to cope with political change and economic reform, it is hoped that the suggestions contained in this paper could help to establish a long overdue 'missing middle ground'. Deeper study of the actuality of the community is urged. The goal is by no means to suggest policy or to advocate the preservation of *lilong* but, rather, to contribute towards a useful argument on the benefit of a balance between history and the contemporary condition of the city. Indeed, the aim of this paper has been to contribute vital substance to academic discourse on such housing typologies through an *ethnographic view* of dynamic communal life and the socio-spatial impacts of property led development in Shanghai's *lilong* neighbourhoods.

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1. See D. Louise Morris, *Community or Commodity? : A Study of Lilong Housing in Shanghai* (Vancouver: Centre for Human Settlements, School of Community and Regional Planning, University of British Columbia, 1994), 8-12; Chunlan Zhao, 'From Shikumen to New-Style: A re-reading of Lilong Housing in Modern Shanghai' *The Journal of Architecture* 9, no.1 (2004): 57.
2. Elisabeth J. Croll, 'The Intergenerational Contract in the Changing Asian Family,' *Oxford Development Studies* 34, no.4 (2006): 475.
3. Non Arkaraprasertkul, 'Towards Modern Urban Housing: Redefining Shanghai's lilong,' *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 2, no.1 (2009).
4. Jan Wampler and Non Arkaraprasertkul, 'Community-Oriented Urban Housing Design for Beijing: Strategies for Lmrhd and Urban Design,' in *The Seventh China Urban Housing Conference* (Chongqing, China: Center of Housing Innovations, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2008).
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7. Robert Chambers, *Participatory Workshops : A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities* (London ; Sterling, VA: Earthscan Publications, 2002).

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3. Aerial photographs of Shanghai in the 1930s (left) and 2008 (right) comparing the pattern of urban fabric. A large number of *lilong* houses, which were the dominating fabric of the city in the 1930s, have been razed since the early 1980s resulting in a mixed-fabric of high-rise buildings and *lilong* house as shown in the photograph on the right. Sources: Virtual Shanghai Project, Christian Henriot (IAO - Lyon 2 University); Google Earth Image.

Summary of attitudes towards *lilong* from different academic angles, which serve as a theoretical (cursory) study of this paper

PERSPECTIVES	PRO-LILONG	ANTI-LILONG
Historical	Historically important; dating back to the 19th century	Labourers' housing; history replaced by Chinese nationalism
Development Studies & Planning	Diversified environment; Counter-balancing high-rise development, which alone is not conducive to urban life	Inefficient use of space; dilapidating condition; obsolete infrastructure
Sociology & Cultural	Shielding family displacement, gentrification, diversity, social segregation	Slum condition; crime; drugs; changing structure of Chinese family in urban areas needs the efficiency and the low-maintenance aspect of high-rises
Architectural & Physical	Flexibility of urban space as example of livable community; Efficient typology of traditional housing settlement	Bad ventilation; inadequate infrastructure; environmental and health hazard
Tourism Studies	Selling point of 'real' Shanghai	Bad image of for the city's tourism



4. A typical *lilong* branch lane where all types of activities ranging from drying clothes to community gathering are normally taking place. Photo: Author.