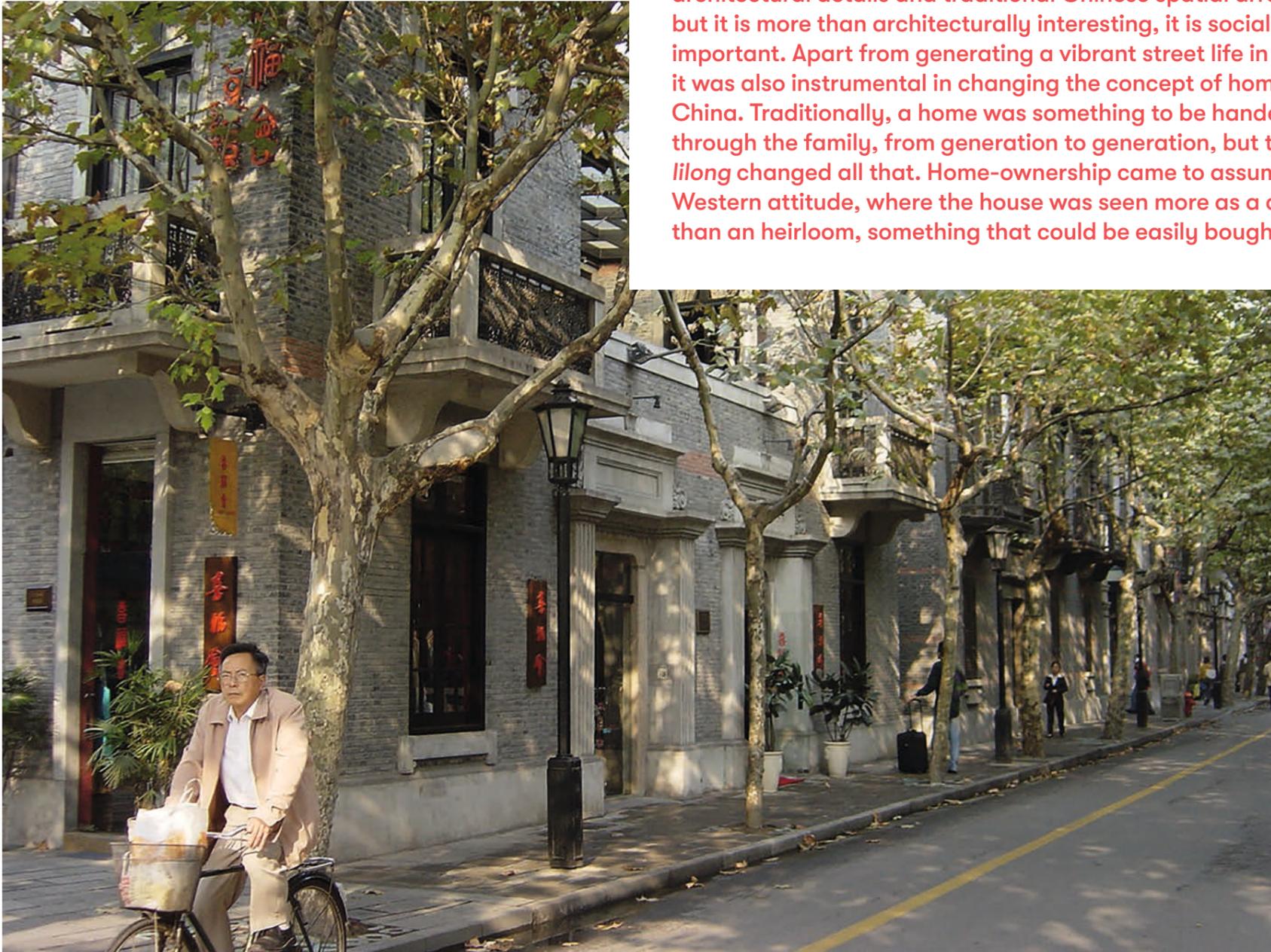


The Shanghai lilong

A new concept of home in China

Gregory Bracken

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 as much of 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.



Left: Restored *lilong* on Xingye Road, Xintiandi. Photo by author.

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 dilapidated, 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 swathes of them were demolished, 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.

This paper looks at how the *lilong* came into existence in the first place. It also briefly explains the historical backdrop of the Treaty Port era, a time when Shanghai began to develop into the glittering global city it is today. It then goes on to examine what life

was like in the *lilong* on a daily basis, taking Nelson I. Wu's concept of "graduated privacy"¹ (which he used to explain the sequences of spaces in the traditional Chinese courtyard house or *siheyuan*) to show how this graduated system of space was mirrored in the layout and hierarchical arrangement of the streets and alleyways of the *lilong*, where it became what we could call a graduated *urban* privacy; it was this that was instrumental in allowing the *lilong*'s famous vitality to flourish.

Treaty Ports in China

China was forced to open itself to Western trade in the 19th century, primarily by Britain. At that time the country was still dominated by Confucianism, where society was divided into four basic classes: scholars, peasants, craftsmen, and merchants (in descending order of importance). Robert Nield saw the Western powers' belief in trade as being as natural a human function as breathing; these powers believed that countries should be able to trade with whomever they pleased.² China did not share this view. Chinese mandarins, the scholar-gentry elite who ruled the country for most of its history, saw trade and indeed any sort of commerce as vulgar, low-class, and unrefined, not the sort of activity appropriate for a cultivated Confucian gentlemen [*junzi*].

China in the early 19th century was complacent. It had good reason to be. It was stable, it was rich, and it was producing some of the world's most sought-after products – things like tea, silk, and porcelain. As a result, the country was gradually absorbing a substantial portion of the world's supply of silver. The British (who had taken to tea more than most) were envious, not to mention out of pocket. Wanting to redress this financial imbalance, they decided on importing something lucrative of their own, notoriously deciding on opium. They fought two wars to do so (the First Opium War was from 1839 to 1842, and the Second from 1856 to 1860). These Wars led to a series of treaties, beginning with the 'Treaty of Nanking' (Nanjing) on 29 August 1842. Known as the 'unequal treaties', they were foisted by Britain (and later, by others) onto an unwilling China and have rightly been seen as a low point in the country's history ever since.

Under the terms of the Treaty of Nanking, China had to pay a massive indemnity of \$21 million, it also had to cede the island of Hong Kong to Britain in perpetuity (it was handed back in 1997 when it became a Special Administrative Region of China). The Treaty also stipulated that five ports were opened to foreign trade: namely Canton (Guangzhou), Amoy (Xiamen), Foochow (Fuzhou), Ningpo (Ningbo), and Shanghai. Henceforth known as 'Treaty Ports', these were the first in an ever-increasing series of settlements that spread

themselves across China throughout the 19th and early 20th century, until the system was finally ended after 101 years with the signing of the 'Sino-British Treaty for the Relinquishment of Extra-Territorial Rights in China', on 11 January 1943.

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.³ It corrupted, it demoralised, and it drained national funds. The more the Chinese tried to stop it, the more it took hold because higher bribes meant greater incentives to subvert the law and made corrupt officials rich. The British government had always acknowledged China's right to prohibit the drug, but, as Downs points out, the trade's economic value outweighed its moral turpitude. Besides, British military and naval strength at the time enabled them to get away with whatever they wanted.

Bad and all as this was for China, it did have some long-term positive effects because wherever opium went, other goods soon followed. Downs highlights how this trade in opium led to other, more legitimate activities. The new conduits of trade also introduced something else into the country: modernisation. And this could be seen in the changing attitude to home-ownership that began to emerge in Shanghai with the *lilong*. Even missionaries played a role in

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 conduits 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 rich and powerful in fact, that Shanghai's leaders proposed turning it into an independent republic in 1862. This was rejected as being unrealistic (besides, it would have contravened the whole Treaty Port system).

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 £50 in 1850 to £20,000 in 1862.⁴ The city was dominated by an International Settlement, which was a self-governing entity governed by a Municipal Council. There was also a French Concession, the original Chinese city, and an ever-expanding periphery, which was Chinese administered. A tiny colonial elite was in charge and had little interest in mixing with the vast majority of the city's native population, except when they had to. They saw themselves as separate, even identifying themselves as 'Shanghaiers', as opposed to the native Chinese who were 'Shanghaiers'. The Shanghaiers worked and socialised in the massive neoclassical and Art Deco buildings that decorated the Bund and the smarter parts of the city centre, but most ordinary Shanghaiers lived in the much humbler *lilong*.

By the early 20th century Shanghai had become synonymous with modernity; it had the country's first trams, first stock exchange, and first nightclub. Not only did it have the largest population of any city in Asia (around three million by 1930), it also had the region's tallest buildings, freest press, and most dazzling social life (as well as Asia's most notorious gangsters, drugs, and gambling dens). All of which came to an end, however, on 8 December 1941, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and annexed Shanghai's foreign concessions, and the city found itself under one jurisdiction for the first time in a century (albeit Japanese rather than Chinese). 1943 saw the revocation of the Treaty Port system, and after World War II Shanghai went through a brief boom followed by a cataclysmic period of corruption and economic mismanagement before being taken over by the People's Liberation Army on 24 April 1949. The People's Republic of China was declared later that year, on 1 October, ending once and for all the one-sided foreign incursions into China.

The layout and use of the Shanghai Lilong

Treaty Ports were popular with Chinese looking for work, or fleeing from the upheavals that convulsed the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Most of those who came to Shanghai lived in *lilong*. These were gated, hierarchically organised residential compounds, laid out in large blocks subdivided by alleyways. The name *lilong* means 'neighbourhood alleyway' (*li* meaning 'neighbourhood' and *long*, 'alleyway'). They are also sometimes known as *lilongtang* (the term most often used in Shanghai). *Lilongtang* actually refers to an entire cluster of houses (*tang* meaning 'sitting room' and *longtang* being the alleyway-house itself, i.e., 'alleyway-sitting room').⁵

The alleyways were differentiated, with a main one, which could be up to four or five metres wide and ran perpendicular to the public street from which it was accessed,

and smaller ones crossing it at right angles. Access to the compound was via a gate, closed at night (sometimes during the day as well). There were often a number of gates, depending on the size of the compound, but as these tended to close at different times it meant that shortcuts could only be used by those who knew the daily rhythms of the *lilong* well.

The houses themselves were usually two to four storeys and varied in size and decoration.

Invariably small, the basic unit was 60 to 105 square metres, with only two rooms per floor. Commercial activity was confined to those houses facing onto boundary streets, although some informal commercial activity occurred on the main alleyways. Smaller alleyways were used for

household chores, informal work, or simply for recreation. The chief factor in their flexibility was the hierarchical system of graduated urban privacy. 'Graduated privacy' was a term first coined by Nelson I. Wu to explain the use and sequence of spaces in traditional Chinese courtyard houses [*siheyuen*]. It explains the series of spatial progressions within the house, where certain visitors would only be allowed as far as the entry vestibule, but friends and family could come right into the courtyard and its adjacent halls. The deeper recesses of the house were reserved for family members.

Taking the concept of graduated privacy and applying it to the urban layout of the Shanghai *lilong* allows us to see how these spaces actually worked. There is a sequence of space in the *lilong* compound that almost exactly mirrors the traditional Chinese house. Visitors and/or residents can move from a public street, through a main alleyway – which is semi-public because it is behind a gate that can (and regularly does) close – into the semi-private side alleyways, where locals congregate and can keep a friendly eye on activities, before finally moving into the house itself, which is totally private. The *lilong* is in fact able to form an almost village-like neighbourhood (not unlike the old *lifang* residential wards of ancient Chinese cities, although more complex, given its more subtly differentiated alleyway structure).

It can be no accident that the graduated privacy of the traditional Chinese house came to be echoed in the placement of the different activities in Shanghai's *lilong*, where inhabitants (and/or strangers) could move from a main street through the main alleyway, into smaller semi-private alleyways before eventually reaching the private home. These graduated sequence of spaces determine what sort of activities take place, and where, depending on how private or public they are. We can see this in the main alleyway, where vendors set up stalls to catch passing traffic, whereas the smaller side alleyways see residents preferring to sit and watch the street without being in the way. There were no rules for this regulation of space, people simply took their cue from the spaces themselves. This is a subtle, specialised, and strictly hierarchical use of space that determines the activities of the *lilong*. At first glance this can seem quite random, but on closer inspection it reflects a deeply logical use of space, all based on unwritten rules, and all taking its cue from the layout of the *lilong*. This use of space, in both home and alleyway, is informed by ancient and deep-seated understandings of space use and its relations to social behaviour in China, and these have mediated between the public and private realms for millennia. What emerged in the Shanghai *lilong* was a vibrant new articulation of these relations.

The Shanghai lilong: a new concept of home in China

A large proportion of Shanghai's population in the Treaty Port era, both Western and Chinese, were known as sojourners, temporary residents who saw the city as a place to get rich before returning home. And 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 'family', 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, which, according to Nancy Jervis, can mean a related group of people who eat out of one pot.⁶ This can be meant literally, as in the daily meal, or figuratively, by the sharing of family income (traditionally from the raising of pigs). The family could therefore be seen not only as a group who consumed pork, but also as a basic economic unit of society by producing that commodity.

Samuel Y. Liang sees the *lilong* (or *li*, as he prefers to call them) as having radically reconfigured China's traditional residential and commercial spaces.⁷ Visibility and openness now replace walls and containment. He sees this as a subverting of the traditional spatial order and hierarchy of Chinese space, with the borderline between elites and the lower classes being transgressed and redefined. This would have been the case in 19th-century Shanghai, where Chinese, rich and poor, were thrown together as they fled upheavals in the rest of the country. Liang also argues that the social spaces of the *lilong* demonstrate an analogous transformation, with walls and the traditionally self-contained residential spaces also being breached. It is important to note that this spatial transformation was not simply a passive response to Western influence in the city, it was actually a reflection of Shanghai's dynamism as a result of new circumstances, both opportunities and constraints, that were seen here in the Treaty Port era.

One vitally important point that Liang makes about the *lilong*, and it is something that is related to the sojourner status of so many of the city's residents, is the fact that these houses were no longer regarded as something a family would hand down through the generations. This made them radically different from the traditional Chinese house.

The *lilong* lacks flexibility in terms of expansion or contraction – something that was possible in the traditional courtyard house's more spacious compound, and which was one of its most useful features when families needed more (or less) space, depending on births and deaths and the impact they had on the size of a family. This traditional flexibility was simply impossible in the tighter constraints of Shanghai's more limited (and expensive) city space. As a result of these new conditions in the city the *lilong* came to be seen as a transferable commodity rather than a permanent home, to which generations of the same family would have a sense of belonging.

This new attitude to the home that emerged with the *lilong* may also explain how the house type came to have such flexibility in terms of its use, from the most common, the family home, to other more commercial uses, like shop houses, workshops and studios, galleries, restaurants and offices. The *lilong*'s polyvalence may seem to point to a bright future, but this may not be the case. The question now is, what role can there be for this fascinating house type in the 21st century? But, as Rudyard Kipling said, that's another story.

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Note: This article will continue in issue #87 (Autumn 2020).

Notes

- 1 Wu, N.I. 1968. *Chinese and Indian Architecture: The City of Man, the Mountain of God, and the Realm of the Immortals*.
- 2 Nield, R. 2015. *China's Foreign Places: The Foreign Presence in China in the Treaty Port Era, 1840-1943*.
- 3 Downs, J.M. 1997. *The Golden Ghetto: The American Commercial Community at Canton and the Shaping of American China Policy, 1784-1844*.
- 4 Dong, S. 2000. *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City*.
- 5 Bracken, G. 2014. *The Shanghai Alleyway House: A Vanishing Urban Vernacular*.
- 6 Jervis, N. 2005. 'The Meaning of *Jia*: An Introduction' in R.G. Knapp and K. Lo (eds.) *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese*.
- 7 Liang, S.Y. 2008. 'Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the *Li* Neighbourhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900'. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 67(4): 482-503.



Above: Neighbours chatting on a side alleyway in Jing'an Villa lilongtang. Photo by author.