What Remains: A History of Six Lanes in Shanghai

From a time before high-rises.

By Yalan Bao | Photos by Brandon McGhee | Sep 25, 2019

Shanghai is big, bold, boisterous and beautiful. It's easy to get wrapped up in the towering high-rises and busy thoroughfares. But the city isn't just about what is immediately visible. To dig deeper, you've got to go into the lanes.

Lanes are to Shanghai what hutong are to Beijing. Known as both longtang and lilong (the Shanghainese name for them), they started as a Western concept and ended up as something quintessentially Shanghainese.

"There is nothing more emblematic of Shanghai than these longtang," Mei Qing, professor of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning at Tongji University told me. "Without them, Shanghai would be just another mega city".

The History

The earliest began in the mid-1850s, with thousands built by 1860. For the next century and up until the 1990s, the majority of people in Shanghai lived in lanes. In the 1940s, **nearly three million people lived in the city's 9,000 lilong**, more than half the total population at the time.

According to the statistics of Fudan University, the number of the lilongs shrank as much as 60% from 2000 to 2008.**Today**, there are only **an estimated 200,000 residents** living in the remaining lanes, or less than 1% of the city's population.

In his book Lanes in Shanghai, professor Luo Xiaowei writes, "there would be no Shanghai if there were no lanes, nor would there be any Shanghainese". Academics think that the lanes have shaped the fundamental character of the people. How?

Lanes are dense neighbourhoods, with many perpendicular branches running off a main artery. They jam all kinds of people, of all different ages and social classes, together. The public and shared spaces, like kitchens and courtyards, mean residents are always in contact with their neighbours.

As anyone who has actually lived in a lane can tell you, that's not always a good thing. Disputes and disagreements are inevitable when you shove so many people together in a tight space. But lanes force people to resolve their differences, the thinking goes, because where else are they going to go? There's no hiding in a lane.

There's a Chinese proverb that sums up the positives of lane life: Good neighbours are more helpful than far-away relatives.

At least part of the Shanghainese reputation for open-mindedness and business savvy are said to come from lane culture. So they say.

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Over the course of the last month, **I visited six remaining lanes or former lanes** to suss out their history, and/or see how they are holding up in this era of residential compounds and high-rise development.

The Lanes

Young Allen Court (景林庐), 1923

260 Zhapu Lu near Kunshan Lu

Listed as Excellent Historical Architecture in 2005

This lane has stood for nearly a century at 260 Zhapu Lu, one of Shanghai's earliest food streets. Once a residential street surrounded by shikumen houses, Zhapu Lu blew up in the 1990s with more than 100 restaurants. Today the street is rather desolate, with many businesses closed and buildings demolished for urban renewal.

The origin of Young Allen Court goes back to 1860, when American Methodist missionary Young John Allen (Lin Lezhi, died in Shanghai in 1907), who was 24 at the time, purchased the land along Wusong Lu, south of Tanggu Lu. Quite unusual for the period, **Young was a strong advocate for women's education**. In 1892, he set up the McTyeire School for Chinese girls in Shanghai. In his memory and in appreciation of an enduring legacy, particularly in education, the Allen Memorial Church (now known as the Hongkou Methodist Church or Jingling Tang) was built in 1923 at 135 Kunshan Lu, right across the street from the school.

In order to meet the housing demand precipitated by the emergence of church and schools, this **new-style lilong block with a gold-roofed octagon tower** was built in 1923. Initially, it was home to missionaries and members of the church. Today the lane neighbourhood is primarily occupied by elderly residents. Some of the interiors have been

renovated for modern living, but the rest remain almost unchanged.

Xintiandi (新天地), 2001

181 Taicang Lu near Madang Lu
Redeveloped in 1999

We're talking about the old Xintiandi, not the new re-development that tore down the lanes and rebuilt them to suit restaurants, bars and retail shops. The neighbourhood used to be known as just Taipingqiao (Peace Bridge).

Long before the re-development, the Taipingqiao district (including the two blocks of Xintiandi located on the west side of the area) was a residential area of more than 200 old-style shikumen lanes built between the 1900s and 1930s, covering a million square meters.

Most of the shikumen houses in Taipingqiao were built by French developers in the 1920s and designed for middle-class families. Following the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, the shikumen houses **fell under state ownership** and were subdivided into smaller units to be rented out at low rates. Tenants were allowed to use but not own. The result was a shift in demographic towards the working class. Many families lived in what had previously been a single-family home.

It wasn’t an uncommon practice for these residents to tear out interior toilet and kitchens to make room for more family members, said Jin Zhou, a representative from Shui On Group, the Hong Kong developer involved in the redevelopment project. As a result, the area became overcrowded and the physical condition of the buildings fell into neglect and disrepair.

By 1997, there were **70,000 people**, or 20,000 families, living in Taipingqiao. That was the year the city government approved the ‘Taipingqiao Residential Area Redevelopment Project’ which involved: Taipingqiao Lake and Park, the largest man-made lake in downtown Shanghai; Corporate Avenue, the Grade A office building; Lakeville, a high-end residential community; and Xintiandi, the retail part. Xintiandi as we know it now opened in 2002.

No, Xintiandi is not original. What is now Xintiandi was about 100 shikumen houses, some of which were preserved. Other buildings were constructed with materials from the demolition sites of other lanes in Taipingqiao. Associate professor Liu Gang from Tongji University might have been stating the obvious when he told me that Xintiandi is not so much a cultural or historical preservation as it is urban redevelopment.

Finding an original resident of the two blocks that became Xintiandi proved to be a difficult task: **they were relocated more than two decades ago**. Instead I spoke to an employee at the Shikumen Open House Museum, a refurnished, original shikumen residence mirroring the life of a middle-class household in the 1920s and 1930s. Perhaps predictably, she called the relocation "life-changing for the thousands of original occupants" who were given "a chance to live elsewhere and start a new life".

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Cité Bourgogne (步高里), 1930

287 Shaanxi Nan Lu near Jianguo Xi Lu
Protected by law as Excellent Modern Architecture in 1989

The first wave of lanes in Shanghai were stone-gate houses, or shikumen. They were around from about 1870 to 1920, when the international areas of the city still had plenty of space for expansion and development.

But by the early 1900s, space was starting to be more in demand, and developers started building lilongs known as **new-style shikumen** (or “improved” shikumen) to house the influx of manufacturing workers coming into the city. Built by French businessmen during the 1930s, Cité Bourgogne is exactly that: a new-style shikumen. It’s dense. As of 2019, about 450 families live in the lane.

One of the things about new-style shikumen was that they had smaller living spaces, which then forced people out into the lanes to socialize, cook, read newspapers, exercise and nap. Children played traditional Chinese games like shuttlecock and marbles, and skipped rope.

By shrinking the house size, the developers **inadvertently created a pretty valuable community culture**, the primary thing that contemporary people lament when they talk about the dramatic loss of lane life in Shanghai. (Again, as anyone who has actually lived in cramped lanes will tell you, it's silly to romanticize what are often difficult actual living conditions.)

Jing'an Villa (静安别墅), 1932

1025 Nanjing Xi Lu near Jiangning Lu

Listed as a cultural relic and protected in 2002

Jing'an Villa is an anomaly in modern Shanghai: a beautiful red-brick traditional neighborhood right in the middle of the glossy new malls and shops on Nanjing Xi Lu. It's also Shanghai's largest new-style lilong complex. It's easy to visit, through the big black gates, but was not always so welcoming.

When it was first completed, the developer is said to have charged extortionate rents to be

paid only in gold bullion. A large majority of the first-generation residents were foreign bank executives, socialites and celebrities.

It was not until 1942 that Kong Xiangxi, a former Minister of Finance in the Nationalist government, bought most of the property and made it accessible to blue-collar workers. During that time, **as many as nine families would be crammed into a single block**, sharing basic amenities and utilities including bathrooms, balconies, kitchens and water taps.

For a period there in the late 2000s, a lot of original residents began renting out first-floor space and a number of creative and artsy shops flourished, including bookstores, music studios and art studios, in addition to the regular services used by the residents: hair salons, dry cleaning and fruit and vegetable stalls.

But **that caused conflict** between the residents on upper floors, who weren't benefiting from the new commercial angle of the lane, and the residents on lower floors, who were. It attracted significant media attention (particularly from Shanghai Daily, perhaps because their office is just around the corner) and that led the lane's management to eventually kick out the shops that weren't geared towards residents.

Today, **it's a quiet and calm lane**, great for pictures if you can get past the guards at

the front gate. One tip: it might be easier to enter from the back entrance on Weihai Lu if you want to take a look.

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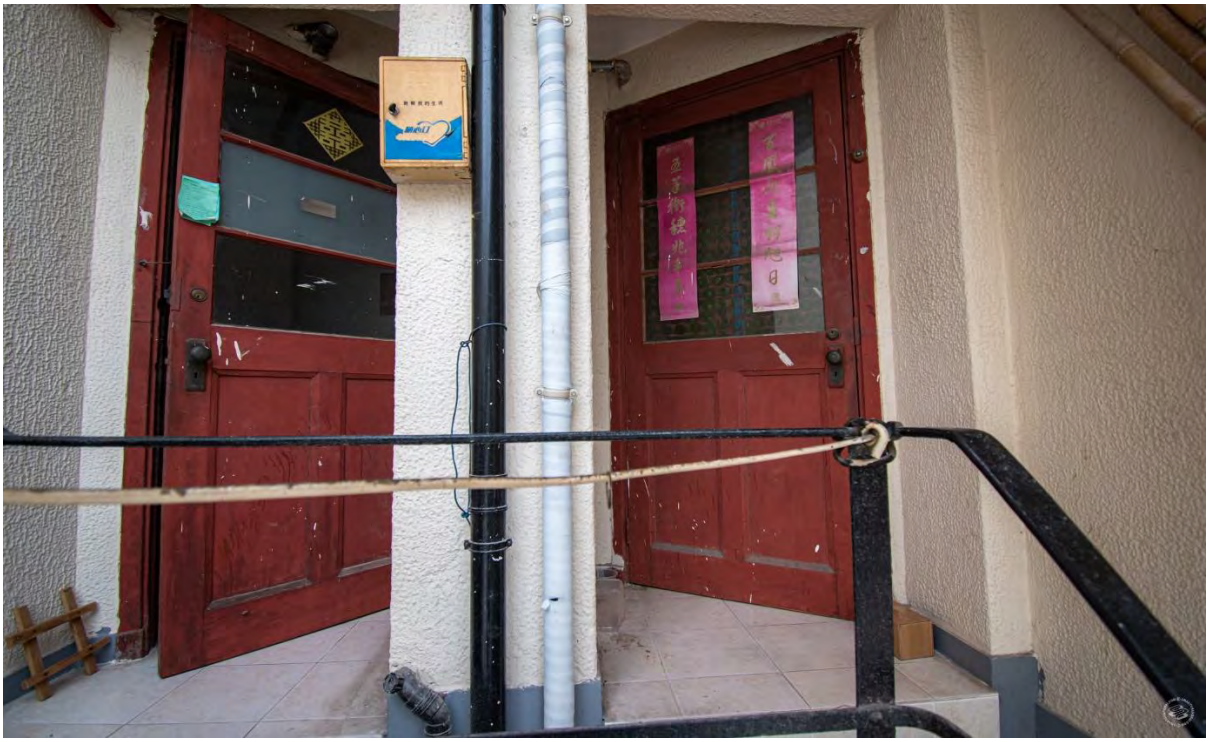
Yongjia New Village (永嘉新村), 1947

580 Yongjia Lu near Wulumuqi Lu

Listed as Excellent Historical Architecture in 1994

Yongjia New Village is a different type of lane, a later style known **a garden lilong**. The lane's history goes back to 1945 when the Bank of Communications moved back to Shanghai from Chongqing following the victory of the Anti-Japanese War. The bank purchased the land for employee housing and built eight rows of two-story apartments, with grey-green tiled roofs, semi-open courtyard walls and Spanish-style rain sheds at the entrance. That was phase one.

Phase two was completed in 1947 and is blockier.



Like the rest of the city, many of the properties here have been rented out or changed hands during the last two decades. Today's Yongjia New Village is not just for retired bankers and their offspring, but also people who bought or rented after the private residential housing market was permitted to grow in the early 1990s. Currently it's **home to nearly 1,000 people**, with almost half of them long-term (50+ years) residents.

The director of the lane's residents' committee told me that the residents are "a tight-knit, dynamic community where everyone knows everyone else", perhaps the biggest advantage (or disadvantage to those who value the anonymity of high-rises) of lanes.

Compared to its old days, today's Yongjia New Village has shrunken remarkably in size. According to one of those long-term residents, the compound once extended all the way to Hengshan Lu (500 meters away). The Nanping Apartments nearby were also part of the lane, including a football court, a basketball court, and later a Youth Sports School.

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Jixiang Li (吉祥里), 1876

531-541 Henan Zhong Lu near Ningbo Lu

Listed as Heritage Architecture in 1994

A stone's throw away from the Bund, the 144-year-old Jixiang Li is **perhaps Shanghai's oldest surviving shikumen** in Shanghai. It was built four years after Xingren Li, the earliest recorded shikumen (demolished in 1980). According to 2018's *A Short History of Shanghai Shikumen Lilong Houses*, Jixiang Li used to be 24 blocks. Eight remain today.

'Li' is an ancient term referring to a residential area enclosed by walls with an orderly layout. But Jixiang Li has not always been a residential zone as it is today. Most of the early shikumen compounds like this were clustered in the commercial areas west of the Bund. At first, many of these late nineteenth-century shikumen houses were occupied by rich merchants or gentry. In the mid-twentieth century, Jixiang Li housed a significant amount of businesses from groceries, small hotels and restaurants to banks and pharmacies.

Jixiang Li has been **associated with chamberpots** for much of its history; it didn't get extensive indoor plumbing until January 2018 when the district government paid for an overhaul of the lane's infrastructure. Before then, **up to 27 households were sharing a single bathroom** and most used chamberpots instead.

The rest of the lane has managed to remain in remarkably good condition, for being nearly 150 years old. Today it is still**a labyrinth of intimate, narrow alleys**, with life spread out for anyone to see: underwear hung out to dry, a basket of vegetables left on the stone sink, boxes of odds and ends stacked on makeshift shelves. It feels like accidentally stumbling into someone's kitchen.