

The Shanghai Alleyway House: A Threatened Typology

Gregory Bracken

The Shanghai alleyway house was a rich and vibrant generator of street life.¹ Unique to Shanghai, it occupied the ambiguous space between the traditional Chinese courtyard home and the street. The system of 'graduated privacy' within its alleyways ensured a safe and neighbourly place to live.² Due to rapid redevelopment in recent decades this once ubiquitous typology is under threat. This paper takes a look at the history of the typology as well as at three recent redevelopments of it in the city: Xintiandi, Jian Ye Li, and Tianzifang, to question what future there can be for a typology that seems to have outlived its usefulness.

At a time when China was reeling from the humiliation of the 'unequal treaties', the city of Shanghai was producing a new and remarkable housing typology: the alleyway house. A nineteenth-century commercial development, most were speculative real-estate ventures and consisted of large blocks, typical of inner-city Shanghai, which were divided into three or four smaller blocks approximating 100 dwelling units each and developed separately. The residences were accessed by alleyways, with the main alleyway being 4 to 5 m wide and running perpendicular to the access street. Larger compounds had smaller alleyways crossing the main one at right angles. [fig. 1]

Commercial activity was confined to the houses facing out onto the boundary streets, although some informal commercial activity also occurred along the

main alleyway. Access to the alleyways was via a gate, which was closed at night. There were often more gates, but as these tended to close at different times it meant that the alleyways, which could act as excellent shortcuts, tended to be used only by those who knew them well, because if someone tried to get through a gate at the wrong time of day they could find their handy shortcut turned into an annoying dead-end.

The houses themselves were two to four storeys in height and varied in size and opulence, with the basic unit being anything from 60 to just over 100 m², typically with two rooms per floor. As the typology developed, this basic house type grew larger and more elaborate, with the new-style alleyway house (which resembled a Western townhouse) and the garden-style alleyway house (which had space on either side and sat on a larger plot of land) being the largest. The alleyways were home to a variety of communal activities, from work to play, and the chief factor in their flexibility of use was the hierarchical system of 'graduated privacy' that was obtained as one moved from the public street to the private home.

The alleyway house is known by a variety of names, *lilong* being the most common, while *longtang* is the local Shanghainese name for it. There is also *shikumen*, a particular type of alleyway house which takes its name from its elaborately carved doorway, a throwback to the *paifang* or ritual

gateways that marked the entry to residential wards in Chinese cities.³

This application of Western decoration, and the fact that the houses are laid out in terraces, has led some to speculate that the alleyway house was somehow a hybrid of Eastern and Western building traditions, but there is little evidence to support this view. The builders of the typology may have copied some Western detailing but that is as far as this hybridity goes. The alleyway house's genesis is clearly Chinese. The fact that they were built in terraces is more to do with the fact that this is an efficient use of expensive land, while the multi-storey dwelling, which is generally considered quite unusual in Chinese traditional architecture, does have a precedent in the shophouses of Guangzhou. Finally, to dispel any notion of similarity with the Western terrace, nearly all of Shanghai's alleyway houses were built facing the same direction, namely south. This was done to obey the precepts of *feng shui* and meant that the fronts of houses faced the backs of their neighbours, an arrangement unheard of in the West.

Use of Space

The term 'graduated privacy' is an important one for any attempt to understand the use of public space in the alleyway house compound. Developed by Nelson I. Wu in his seminal work *Chinese and Indian Architecture: The City of Man, the Mountain of God, and the Realm of the Immortals*, it is more usually applied to the traditional Chinese courtyard house where it denotes the progressive sequence of spaces that operated within a traditional Chinese home, where the street was public; the entry vestibule semi-public (a place for the reception of casual visitors); friends and family would be allowed into the main courtyard and its adjacent halls, which were semi-private; while the deeper recesses of the house would be reserved for the family's activities and were completely private. [fig. 2] The typical alleyway house compound also followed this

hierarchy to a remarkable degree, with the main street being fully public; the main alleyway semi-public (a place where casual acquaintances could interact or conduct small-scale commercial transactions); the side alleyways being semi-private (a place where inhabitants could interact on a more intimate level, or engage in household chores – their homes being so small); and the house itself, which was fully private. [fig. 3]

The richness and vibrancy of the spaces of the Shanghai alleyway house were due in large part to the subtly graduated yet highly rigid hierarchical system of alleyways that led to the houses. This enabled dwellers to inhabit the alleyways that connected the houses, and, through them, the rest of the city. The alleyways also act as a filter to control and protect the compounds from unwanted contact. The alleyway house policed its streets and alleyways by the simple expedient of enabling neighbours to look out for one another.

The visibility that was possible in such a hierarchical arrangement of streets – where strangers and residents could be monitored by one another – not only reflected the way in which Chinese society makes use of its cities' streets, but, in Shanghai's specific case (with the Western ethos of its foreign concessions), this was further mitigated in pockets of the more traditional Chinese way of life. In fact, it could even be argued that these finely grained alleyways managed to engender their unique street life *because* of their opposition to and contrast with the rest of the Western-style city. They can be seen as similar to Beijing's *hutong*, yet their use of space is subtler. They have more scope for this subtlety for the simple reason that they have more space in which to operate.

It was the healthy and mutually beneficial system of street surveillance (by neighbours, for neighbours concerned with one another's welfare) that made the Shanghai alleyway house such a wonderful

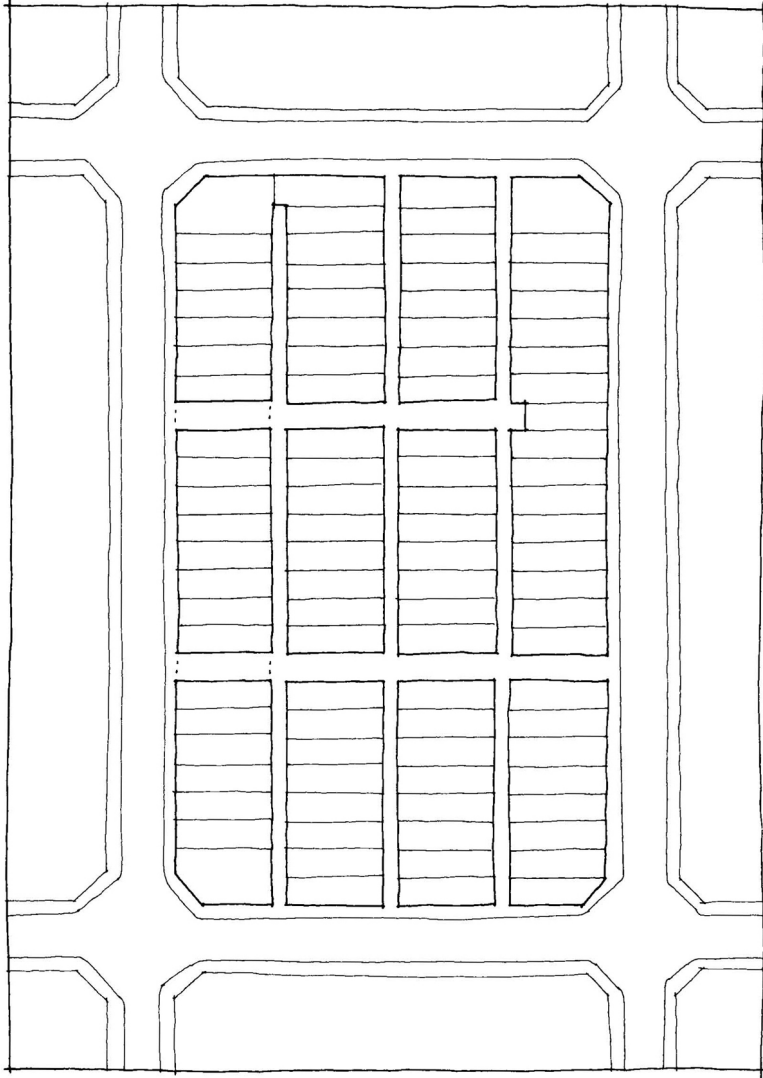


Fig. 1: Plan of a typical alleyway house compound. © Gregory Bracken.

generator of healthy and vibrant social life, and it is this that is being rapidly lost in the double blow of redevelopment (which is seeing the typology all but vanish from the city), and, just as devastating, the One Child Policy, which has been in place for over a generation and is leading to the traditional extended Chinese family becoming a thing of the past.

Street Life

To the average Shanghainese, life in the alleyway house was as remote from Western influence as if the foreign concessions were another world, which indeed they were. Samuel Y. Liang says that the alleyway house should be considered as a distinct space, not merely a traditional type in a linear historical process; it needs to be seen as something that embodied a Shanghainese or a Chinese modernity, one that was full of complexities and hybridities and as such in sharp contrast to the Modern, as marked by purist design and functionalist planning of the sort to be found in the foreign concessions.⁴

What Hanchao Lu refers to as 'small town mentality' was typical of rural towns in North China, especially in Sichuan and Jiangnan provinces, but it also seems to have existed in metropolitan Shanghai.⁵ Although many of Shanghai's residents would have considered Nanking Road to be the centre of the city, it was a place they rarely, if ever, visited, for the simple reason that they could get most of their daily needs without having to walk farther than an alleyway or two. Their daily shopping activities took place within the confines of their alleyway house compound, where there would invariably be shops like the traditional sesame-cake seller.⁶ In this way Hanchao Lu shows how these shops acted as if they were located in a standard market town, while Nanking Road operated at the level of the provincial metropolis or *xiancheng*.⁷

Chinese society had traditionally patrolled the borderlines between elites and the lower classes in a most vigilant manner. The Confucian ideal of

the social continuum that included everything from the high point of the state down to the basic unit of the family was embodied in similarity of architectural layout for buildings with different social functions, but which had similar physical forms. It did not matter whether the building was a palace, a temple, or a simple home, these different typologies all followed the uniform layout consisting of a walled complex and a series of entrances, courtyards, and halls. The city, as Samuel Y. Liang has pointed out, reversed this because it was where 'the obscure became prominent and the traditional social hierarchy was reversed'.⁸ He sees this reversal as being the result of not only the impact of the West on Chinese society in Shanghai, but also from an erosion of the established social order of both the West and China that resulted from their cohabitation in what he calls a 'hybrid colonial environment'.⁹

Courtyard, Skywell, and Street

Located somewhere between the traditional enclosed courtyard house and the open street, the alleyway house occupies an ambiguous space. Samuel Y. Liang suggests that transgressive behaviour was hardly prohibited in the 'fluid space of the *li* neighbourhoods', indeed, it almost seemed as if the alleyway house actively encouraged it.¹⁰ Maybe not quite consciously, but the propinquity that resulted from such constructions seemed to encourage communities to become more close-knit, and to make less distinction between interior and exterior, a thing that had since Confucian times been determined by the system of class relations existing in Chinese society.

The fact that the alleyway house was also amenable to any number of different uses meant that the typology, in its robust flexibility, helped encourage its own dynamic diversity of street life. This is what Samuel Y. Liang sees as 'the true image of the social space of the *li*, where the courtyard adjoined the street', and it is this very diversity that makes for a healthy street life.¹¹ In many ways

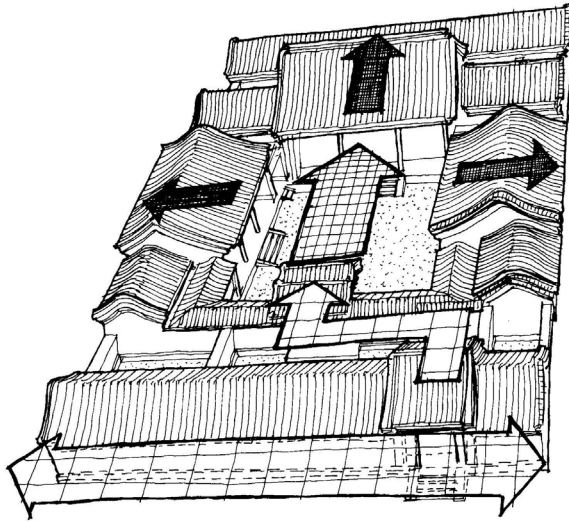


Fig. 2

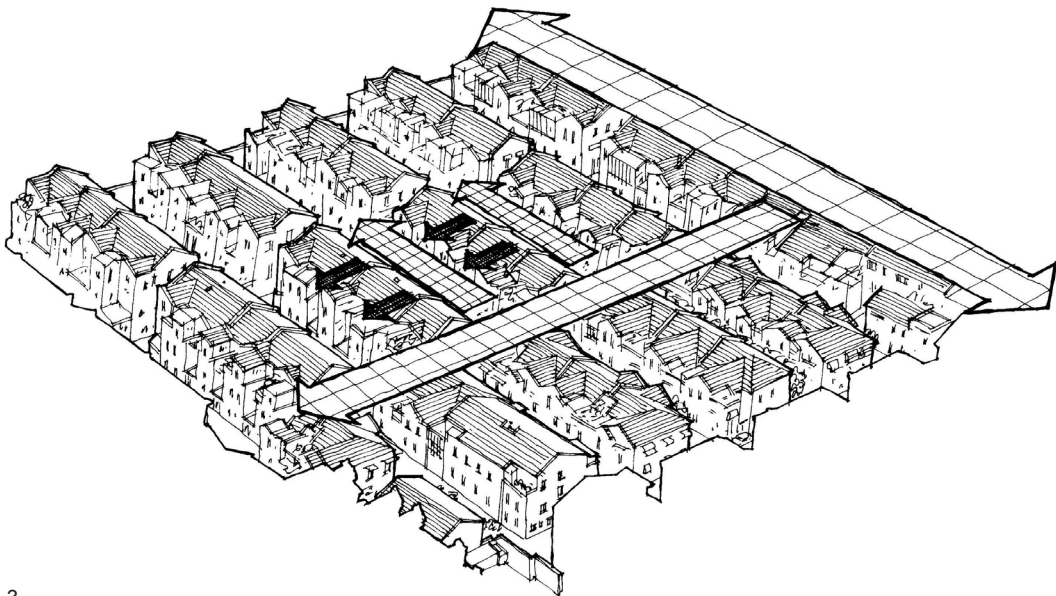


Fig. 3

Fig. 2: 'Graduated privacy' in a traditional Chinese courtyard house. © Gregory Bracken.
Fig. 3: 'Graduated privacy' in an alleyway house compound. © Gregory Bracken.

the fact that anything could happen is one of the key factors in defining the alleyway house as good public space.

One other factor that altered special hierarchies was height (once the traditional courtyard or skywell had lost its central standing thanks to the innovation of the alleyway).¹² The wide windows and elegant balconies of the alleyway houses' upper floors compensated for the loss of the skywell-hall's importance at the centre of the house. The visual advantage of these more open, yet relatively aloof upper floors tied the alleyway house closer, at least visually, to the street, something the courtyard house could never have done. As Samuel Y. Liang says, 'they could see the street while remaining above and apart from it'.¹³

The increased blurring of interior and exterior that occurred within the alleyway house compound made the houses more open and the street better observed. Samuel Y. Liang notes that the skywell-hall (which he refers to as a courtyard-hall), remained an integral part of the alleyway house yet also functioned, most of the time, as a working space where servants did their various household chores. If the house was kept open to the alleyway to allow for better ventilation, it also meant that the skywell was visible to passers-by and formed a continuum with the street.

The traditional notion of the walled courtyard or skywell as a space of sanctuary was jettisoned, initially for economic reasons, and then, increasingly, for social ones, as the alleyway houses became more closely imbricated with one another. Their spatial connectedness helped knit together the city's street spaces and foster community identity. As Samuel Y. Liang puts it: 'Every one [*sic*] could see and be seen by others, as if the city were one busy street.'¹⁴

One key difference between the street and the

alleyway, which we have already seen mentioned, is the fact that on the street houses face one another, while in the alleyways they all face the same direction. Daily transactions were usually conducted via the house's back door, and this included things like mail delivery.¹⁵ Another interesting anomaly is the fact that the main alleyway had no houses facing onto it at all. It may have been almost twice as wide as the side alleys but it was less effectively surveyed (or, to use the newer and more effective American verb, 'surveilled'), because it was only the side gables of the ends of the terraces that had any windows overlooking it. This had an effect on the sort of activity that took place there. The side alleyway, with houses facing directly onto it, was a safer place for children to play and more private for doing household chores, whereas the main alley, being larger, busier, and less well observed, would be less ideal for these kinds of activities.

Jia

Alleyway houses, and not just the peripheral shophouse ones, were often a working space, a place where business was conducted and money made. Domestic life and commerce could be combined, something which resonates strongly with the meaning of *jia* in Chinese, which defines the house, home and/or family as a place that generates wealth for a family (terms that cannot be separated as they are in the West). The importance of this understanding of *jia* to the Chinese cannot be stressed enough. In attempting to analyse what goes on in the Shanghai alleyway house it is important to understand the strong ties to family, clan, or *tongxiang* (place of origin) that the Chinese would have felt in inhabiting them. That and the fact that in the alleyway house people from different provinces of China were interacting together for the first time, undoubtedly enriching the city's street life.

Of course many of these houses were not regarded as the inhabitants' permanent homes; sojourners saw them as provisional lodgings to

be used primarily for business activities, leaving the resident with a concept of home that had to be reinvented. To meet the high rents in Shanghai, families had to make the best use of their talents, as well as anything else that came to hand, including the space they called home. Thus the alleyway house was not only seen as a home, it was also, and perhaps more importantly, a space that facilitated the constant flow of capital.

One important result of this shift in thinking, which Samuel Y. Liang has also highlighted, is the fact that the ownership of an alleyway house was no longer something that a family would hand down through the generations; this was in marked contrast to the traditional courtyard house. Of course, the alleyway house typology's lack of flexibility in terms of expansion or contraction, one of the courtyard house's most useful features, was simply not possible in the tighter confines of a city like Shanghai, with its high land values, and it must have been a contributory factor to their being seen as 'transferable "commodities" rather than permanent homes to which generations of residents had a strong sense of belonging'.¹⁶

This 'one size fits all' mentality also explains how the alleyway house came to be used for such a wide variety of functions, from the most common, the family home, to the shophouse on the periphery, and even to other 'house' types that straddle the commercial and the homely, namely the brothel. This polyvalence might seem to point to a bright future for the typology, but this, sadly, may not be quite so simple, and for a variety of reasons.

A Threatened Typology

Deng Xiaoping's Open Door economic reforms of 1978 did not begin to take effect in Shanghai until 1984, and it was not until the development of Pudong in 1990 that growth and redevelopment in the city really got underway. Up to this time the alleyway house accounted for as much as 80 per

cent of Shanghai's built-up area. The rampant redevelopment that accompanied, and enabled, Shanghai's global reintegration has in fact signed the death warrant of this once almost ubiquitous housing typology. Unique to the city, the Shanghai alleyway house had survived civil war, world wars, internal revolution, and political upheaval only to find itself under threat thanks to the onslaught of capitalist enterprise.

Some developers have begun to see the value (at least in monetary terms) of the alleyway house in recent years and have started to rehabilitate small pockets of them. Places like Xintiandi in the former French Concession is a good example of this. Wood and Zapata's 2001 redevelopment of two city blocks (bordered by Taicang, Zizhong, Madang, and Huangpi South Roads) is part of the larger Taipingqiao redevelopment (which also includes luxury hotels, office towers, and residential facilities). This imaginative redevelopment has allowed people to see the alleyway house in a new (and more lucrative) light.

There can be no doubt that in commercial terms Xintiandi has been a great success. The redevelopment has in fact benefitted from a double misperception that has worked in its favour: locals come here because they feel they're getting to see what it's like to live as a Westerner; whereas foreigners come here to see the 'real' Shanghai. In fact, it's a bit of both, and as such is a perfect hybrid of East and West and resonates strongly with the city's long tradition of cultural hybridity – the very thing that gave Shanghai its signature cosmopolitan sophistication during the colonial era.

It is said, however, that shabbily dressed locals are barred from sauntering down Xintiandi's streets. If this is true then it flies in the face of Shanghai's traditionally vibrant street life, where all are welcome. In fact quite a few of the locals I spoke to in surrounding neighbourhoods never bother going

to Xintiandi, indeed, they seemed surprised that I should want to do so when there were far cheaper (and, according to them, nicer) teashops nearby.

Whether the inhabitant of a city is prevented from going into a place like Xintiandi because a security guard bars the way, or they simply can't afford to, doesn't make much difference, they are both equally effective barriers, and both equally devastating when it comes to engendering really vibrant public space, space of the kind we saw in the Shanghai alleyway house.

Then there is Jian Ye Li, the John Portman and Associates redevelopment of the largest remaining cluster of alleyway houses in the former French Concession. Consisting of 51 houses and 62 serviced apartments, it is aimed at the luxury end of the housing market. Like Xintiandi, most of the original 1920s buildings have been dismantled (the original plan was that only about one third of them were to be restored rather than rebuilt). This was done so that they could be modernized with amenities like plumbing, electricity, and heating – all of which were of course absent from the originals – as well as allow for other modern requirements, such as parking and fire safety. In fact, more houses than planned had to be dismantled and altered as difficulties presented themselves during construction. The plan for a tower, which would have acted as a visual marker for the entire scheme, also had to be scrapped, and issues such as neighbouring houses' sightlines resulted in yet more alterations to the original plan.

As any architect who has practiced in Asia will know, clients can be less than sympathetic to what they see as frills when it comes to making a profit. What had started out as an imaginatively thoughtful scheme has found itself severely compromised thanks to Shanghai's competitive housing market. It remains to be seen what the end result will be, let us hope that it has not become too compromised.

But even if the result does fall somewhat short of Portman and Associates' laudable original goals, they will at least have retained one more precious section of Shanghai's original urban fabric. Indeed, by keeping it residential, they will also have breathed new life into it.

Finally, one interesting development I would like to point out is Tianzifang. Like Xintiandi and Jian Ye Li, this is also in the former French Concession. Known to locals as 'Laotiandi', its nickname is a witty reference to Xintiandi (which is located only a few blocks to the north-east). Xintiandi means 'new world' in Chinese, whereas the '*lao*' in Laotiandi means 'old', hence 'old world'. Tianzifang, or Laotiandi, is a nebulous development whose borders are hard to define. Consisting of a series of interlinked alleyways just north of Taikang Road, it nestles between Sinan and Ruijin No. 2 Roads south of Jianguo Road Central.

The Taikang Road Art Centre seems to have been the catalyst for this spontaneous urban regeneration. Consisting of a number of former warehouses and factories (with the anchor unit located in a former sweet factory), these now serve as studio spaces for a number of interesting and creative outlets, including a variety of galleries, boutiques, and bars that seem to have spread their influence throughout the neighbouring alleyway houses. Tianzifang seems to have retained an authenticity that is lacking in the revamped Xintiandi, and, unlike Xintiandi, which was a designer-led redevelopment and hence with clearly defined borders, Tianzifang is more nebulous and spontaneous, driven from the bottom up. It seems to have spread from the artistic activities that chose this quiet part of the former French Concession for its cheap rents (much like that other arts enclave, Moganshan, on the southern bank of the Suzhou River, which also made use of former industrial buildings to establish itself).

The alleyways of Tianzifang really do form a more

confusing and natural-feeling warren of different scales and sizes, with sudden changes in ground level, twisting passageways and odd turnings all providing the possibility to wander around before ending back where you started – something that is impossible in Xintiandi with its simple crossroads configuration.

Could this be the beginning of a meaningful and more widespread urban regeneration in the city? We can only hope so. Some of the alleyway houses of Tianzifang are even still lived in (something that is not possible in the fully commercialized Xintiandi), and some residents are even engaging in that time-honoured Shanghai tradition of renting spare rooms to students. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom's comment about how the new proliferation of cafés in Shanghai is less a pure novelty than a return to an interrupted trajectory seems to be borne out by Tianzifang with its lively shopping streets where locals also live, and where newcomers to the city can find inexpensive accommodation.¹⁷ This is a return to a pattern that is both welcome and long overdue.

Important as these redevelopments are, they are only small steps in the safeguarding of this precious housing typology. Those that concentrate on retaining the shells of the houses are missing the point, which is of course the dynamic street life that used to be found in the alleyways. By ripping out interiors to refit them as shops or homes for the city's wealthier citizens, all they are retaining is a shell. A prettily decorated one, but a shell nonetheless; the life that made these houses so interesting is slipping through their fingers.

While this may be what has happened in Xintiandi (and is being continued in Jian Ye Li), it is important to point out that without a redevelopment like Xintiandi in the first place it is unlikely that a place like Tianzifang would have begun to develop. Yes, there would have been galleries and bookshops, but would they have coalesced into

something so recognizably urbane without such an example nearby? Xintiandi has acted as a catalyst; it has opened people's eyes to the potential of the alleyway house. No longer seen as a dirty decrepit reminder of an era most people would prefer to forget, the era of the 'unequal treaties', suddenly it is being seen as interesting and attractive, important even, maybe even glamorous in a nostalgic kind of way.

But let us not lose sight of the fact that it was their function of social visibility that gave Shanghai's streets and alleyways their incredible richness and vibrancy. And it is this that those intervening in the city should be seeking to recapture when attempting to learn from the city's past, not simply redecorating empty alleyway houses so that international coffee-shop chains can have prettier premises in which to do business. Maybe Tianzifang can point the way to a brighter future for the alleyway house, and save it from being such a threatened typology. We can only hope so.

Notes

1. For a fuller discussion of this and other issues relating to the Shanghai alleyway house I refer the reader to my book *The Shanghai Alleyway House: A Vanishing Urban Vernacular* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).
2. Nelson I. Wu, *Chinese and Indian Architecture: The City of Man, the Mountain of God, and the Realm of the Immortals* (London: Studio Vista London, 1968).
3. Other names include *lilong fangzi*, *lilongtang*, *linong*, *linongtang*, and *nongtang*.
4. Samuel Y. Liang, 'Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the Li Neighbourhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 67, 4 (2008), p. 501.
5. Hanchao Lu, 'Away from Nanking Road: Small Stores and Neighbourhood Life in Modern Shanghai', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, 1 (1995), p. 99.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 104.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

8. Samuel Y. Liang, 'Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the Li Neighbourhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 67, 4 (2008), p. 486.
9. Ibid., p. 486.
10. Ibid., p. 499.
11. Ibid., p. 501.
12. Traditional Chinese homes were usually built around a courtyard or skywell – courtyards in the cold, dark north; skywells in the sunnier, hotter south.
13. Samuel Y. Liang, 'Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the Li Neighbourhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 67, 4 (2008), pp. 496-7.
14. Ibid., p. 493.
15. Hanchao Lu, 'Away from Nanking Road: Small Stores and Neighbourhood Life in Modern Shanghai', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54, 1 (1995), p. 106.
16. Samuel Y. Liang, 'Where the Courtyard Meets the Street: Spatial Culture of the Li Neighbourhoods, Shanghai, 1870-1900', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 67, 4 (2008), p. 493.
17. Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *Global Shanghai, 1850-2010: A History in Fragments* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 112.

Biography

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