

# The Shanghai *lilong*

## Approaches to rehabilitation and reuse

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The Shanghai *lilong* is an attractive and vibrant house type.<sup>1</sup> Originating in Shanghai in the 19th century, it came to dominate the city by the 20th century, before declining into decrepitude under Communist rule and then suffering from mass destruction when capitalism was reintroduced after 1978. Since the beginning of the 21st century, however, perceptions have begun to change again. The *lilong* may not be in such danger from destruction any more but there is another danger, one that could prove almost as devastating unless we pay attention to how the remaining stock of this unique house type is redeveloped in the city. This paper looks at four *lilong* redevelopments that have taken place since 2000. Xintiandi and Tianzifang are vibrant commercial areas, Jiayeli is a residential redevelopment, and Jing'an Villa straddles the commercial and the residential. All four exhibit different approaches to rehabilitation and reuse in Shanghai. They will be compared here to see which approach is best suited to ensuring the *lilong's* continued vitality.



Above: Tianzifang. Photo by author.

potential (although, ironically, it was the lack of development in this era that had done the real damage to the city's potential for generating wealth in the first place).

Another factor in the city's lack of development during this period was the fact that, well into the 1980s, the city's leaders were sidelined from national decision-making processes. Shanghai, as a result, was unable to lobby for more favourable policies and as a result it experienced its only period of (relative) recession after what had been a century and a half of otherwise stellar economic growth.

Eventually, in 1984, Beijing allowed Shanghai to open itself up to foreign investment. The Yangtze River Delta was opened up the following year and by 1986 Shanghai was able to set up three small economic zones. It was a start, but not enough, because so much of southern China had already begun to boom, leaving Shanghai far behind. Then in April 1990, Shanghai's Mayor, Wang Daohan, launched a Special Economic Zone in Pudong and finally Shanghai was able to reassert itself. The city is now home to more skyscrapers than Manhattan, and they are not all to be found in Pudong. Ironically, it is this revitalisation of the city that is posing an even greater threat to the city's stock of old buildings than anything that happened under the Communists.

Cities are extraordinarily resilient, they can, and do, recover from fire, flood, and warfare. The one thing they often find hard to withstand is a sudden and catastrophic influx of cash. Torrents of new money will scour away old buildings and streets and places, not to mention the lifestyles associated with them. All the old well-established networks

and ways of life that took generations to build can disappear overnight, and this is what happened to Shanghai when it reopened to the world in the 1990s.

### Rehabilitation and reuse

The stock of Shanghai's *lilong* became severely dilapidated during the three decades of Communist rule. They survived, but neglect and overcrowding meant that many of them were getting to be beyond repair and were increasingly unfit for human habitation. Peter G. Rowe points out that the squalid, run-down condition of these houses was allowed to happen because they were seen as a reminder of a way of life the Chinese would rather forget: the Treaty Port era.<sup>4</sup> Rowe also reminds us that

historic preservation in East-Asian cities tends to be weak. It was only really in the early years of the 21st century that Shanghai finally began to realise the cultural and tourist potential of its dwindling stock of *lilong*.

One other aspect of Chinese life that has been a big factor in the erosion of the *lilong's* attractiveness (and also increasing the popularity of the Western-style apartment or suburban home) is the One Child Policy, which operated from 1979 to 2015. People were obliged to have small families, this was compounded by the fact that, according to Rowe, the "traditional practice of housing extended families, including the elderly, [has] also eroded substantially in East Asia".<sup>5</sup> Many people now prefer to live in newer, cleaner, more comfortable and spacious apartments, even if they are located outside the city centre.

Yet, since the beginning of the 21st century, a number of old *lilong* enclaves have been redeveloped. Below is a brief examination of four such redevelopments, looking at the role different actors have played in them, from large, top-down private developers to small, bottom-up individuals, to determine which approach comes closest to preserving the once vibrant spirit of the *lilong*.

### Jiayeli

We begin by looking at Jiayeli, a residential redevelopment by the American architectural firm of John Portman and Associates. This project, near the corner of Taiyuan and Jianguo West Roads, includes 51 houses and 62 serviced apartments and is aimed at the luxury end of the housing market. Most of the original 1920s' buildings have been dismantled (only one third were restored rather than rebuilt). This has been done so that they can be more conveniently modernised (with amenities such as plumbing, electricity, and heating – most of which were absent from the originals) as well as to allow for other modern requirements, such as parking and better fire safety.



Above: Jiayeli. Photo with kind permission of Bart Kuijpers.

### Lilong under threat

By the time of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, approximately 50 percent of the total built area of Shanghai was covered by *lilong*.<sup>2</sup> They accounted for almost three-quarters of the city's residential dwellings, with 70 to 80 percent of the city's population living in them.<sup>3</sup> As late as 1990, it is estimated that there were well over 9,000 clusters of *lilong* in the city, but since that time they have been rapidly disappearing. Why?

Shanghai was, until 1949, a conspicuously successful apparatus for capitalist accumulation. Then, under the Communists, it became a paragon of state control. Yet despite its importance to the Chinese economy in the Communist era, and its willingness to accede to Beijing's wishes, the city suffered badly between 1949 and 1990. The central government was, according to the old Chinese proverb, 'draining the pond to catch the fish'; it saw Shanghai as a generator of wealth that could be used to fuel development in other parts of the country.

When Deng Xiaoping introduced the Open Door policy in 1978, he set up four new Special Economic Zones (SEZs), but decided to do so along China's south-east coast. He had toured Asia's 'tiger economies' (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) and was convinced that capitalism was the way to go, yet he was understandably wary of importing yet another Western ideology, since Communism had so conspicuously failed to deliver on its early promise. He was also reluctant to introduce anything that might damage Shanghai's wealth-generating





Top: Xintiandi. Above: Jing'an Villa. Photos by author.

What is interesting here is that the luxury market has now begun to take an interest in the *lilong*. Clearly there is a demand for this type of housing, something which might seem to bode well for its future. Jiayeli could, at first glance, be seen as a healthy sign for the future of the *lilong*; at least it is residential, but in fact this sort of redevelopment is nothing more than gentrification and actually subverts the house type by being for the rich. It has also killed off the outdoor life that was the *lilong*'s main contribution to Shanghai's streetscape. As a potential future direction for the rehabilitation and reuse of *lilong* it is something of a dead end.

### Xintiandi

Xintiandi (which means 'new world' in Chinese) is a hugely successful commercial redevelopment designed by another firm of American architects, Wood and Zapata. Consisting of two city blocks bordered by Taicang, Zizhong, Madang, and Huangpi South Roads, it forms part of the larger Taipingqiao redevelopment, which includes hotels, office towers, and residential facilities. Opened in 2001, it quickly became one of Shanghai's most popular shopping and entertainment hubs. One of the reasons Xintiandi proved so popular was that foreigners thought they were seeing the 'real' Shanghai, while Chinese saw it as exotically foreign; misperceptions that worked in the area's favour.

The *lilong* that house the area's glittering new retail and entertainment outlets were newly built using brick recycled from old demolished *lilong* in an attempt to lend the area an air of authenticity. There is, in fact, a long tradition of reusing building materials in Shanghai; Samuel Y. Liang says that the Sassoon family frequently reemployed materials from demolished houses in their real-estate developments.<sup>6</sup> But the concept of authenticity is somewhat different in China than the West. Li Shiqiao says that newly built buildings can be thought of as authentically old to the Chinese because they are seen as a continuation of the past. This too is a very ancient tradition in China. Westerners may be tempted to dismiss Xintiandi as some sort of Disneyland-like reconstruction, but the Chinese conception of memory that these buildings contain is not a confusion of the real with the imitated, this is because the Chinese possess what Li calls "immaterial authenticity"<sup>7</sup> in their collective memory, something that is maintained through (not in spite of) spatial and temporal relocations – even if this seems odd to Westerner observers.

Ackbar Abbas makes the point that preservation is not memory. "Preservation is selective and tends to exclude the dirt and pain",<sup>8</sup> and this, he says, results in a form of kitsch. Xintiandi, it could be argued, is a form of kitsch, yet we must not let ourselves be blinded by its kitschiness and lose sight of what is actually going on here. The real lesson to be learned from Xintiandi is the fact that these buildings, which were once homes, are now being used as shops and restaurants. Any hope of recapturing the lively street life of the *lilong* is gone. The streets are lively, it cannot be denied, but they are not lived in. There is also the rumour that the poor are excluded (supposedly by security guards watching out for beggars), but in reality, more probably by the high prices commanded by these retail outlets. What it was that made these buildings, and the alleyways between them, interesting is gone: there are no longer any people to call them home.

### Tianzifang

Tianzifang is a bottom-up commercial redevelopment a few blocks southwest of Xintiandi. Also known as Laotian (or 'old world'), clearly a reference to nearby Xintiandi. Tianzifang is a nebulous redevelopment of *lilong*, warehouses, and former factories that began to take shape between Sinan and Ruijin No. 2 Roads (just south of Jianguo Road Central) and then spread to adjoining areas as it grew in popularity.

Consisting of a confusing warren of twisting passageways, with buildings of different sizes and scales and sudden changes in ground level, it gives the impression of being more natural or bottom-up than the more rigorously planned Xintiandi. Originally home to studios, galleries, boutiques, and bars, it rapidly became something of a tourist trap, although it does preserve a mix of commercial and residential life.

Without the earlier Xintiandi redevelopment it is unlikely that Tianzifang would have developed, and certainly not in the way it did. There had long been galleries and bookshops here, but they may never have coalesced into this Xintiandi-like development had they not had such a successful example of commercial redevelopment so close by. Sadly, it is also probably thanks to Xintiandi's influence that these long-established cultural outlets have steadily been overtaken by shops catering to a more generic tourist trade.

### Jing'an Villa

Jing'an Villa is one of the best preserved *lilong* in Shanghai. It saw a brief but fascinating efflorescence of bottom-up informal commercial activity in the early years of the 21st century initiated by *haigui* ('sea turtles' – the returning descendants of former Shanghai emigrants). Ying Zhou sees this redevelopment, with its echoes of international trend quarters such as Berlin's Prenzlauerberg and New York's Williamsburg, as an interesting variant in the way creative linkages can be spatially manifested. In this case they utilise the specific spatial characteristics of this particular *lilong* to facilitate entrepreneurial innovations that have led to what she calls "gentrification with Chinese characteristics".<sup>9</sup> This is something that she sees as a potentially viable alternative to the demolition-and-reconstruction cycle more usually seen in Shanghai's urban redevelopment.

The *haigui* are 'localized cosmopolitans'. Their access to local culture helps them introduce international products and services while adapting them in situ. Their connections to transnational and local networks allow them to operate between the global and the local, and their small-scale creative enterprises began to transform Jing'an Villa in a way that was more flexible than by the imposition of heritage status. In other words, it is diversifying rather than homogenising. *Haigui* know-how enabled them to cultivate the spatial qualities of the area in a way that seems to follow the bottom-up development at Tianzifang.

Jing'an Villa was traditionally a middle-class *lilong* located between Nanjing and Weihai Roads. Ying Zhou identifies the urban structure of the *lilong*, with its semi-permeable block hierarchy and fine-grained ownership patterns, as being well suited to the commercial realisation of new consumption, as well as for creating an urban value-chain of living and working that allows for encounters that are both local and global. What distinguished this area is that, instead of the usual processes of residents simply renting out ground-floor space for commercial use, the *lilong* attracted a clustering of transnational creative activities, with cafés, boutiques, designer showrooms, and exhibition-cum-studio space all epitomising the lifestyle of the localised cosmopolitans who operated them, but also linked to an international value chain of locally situated spaces and producers.

The informality of these commercial conversions was indicated by the fact that signage of the enterprises only appeared when the venues were actually open. Without knowing of their presence, passers-by could easily miss them, a fact that increased their allure, especially for those in search of interesting and authentic-seeming local colour. Visitors who managed to find the area usually had access to selected networks thanks to top-end design magazines, or were part of a particular type of expatriate circle whose patronage of the area relished its 'under-the-radar' feel.

Ying Zhou highlights the *lilong*'s young entrepreneurs' concern for the dangers of over-commercialisation, and her research indicated a ratio of 30:70 for commercial to residential facilities here, which is in stark contrast to Tianzifang's 70:30. But even this ratio seems to have been too much for the local residents who, it seems, felt increasingly harassed by visitors (and who may also have been jealous of being excluded from the profits generated by their activities). Whatever the cause, this informal commercial activity soon shut down. The catalyst may have been the closing down of the adjacent Weihai 696, an independent, grass-roots arts community centred on number 696 Weihai Road which consisted of artists' studios, small galleries, and a variety of related creative enterprises; when it closed in 2010 this led to an influx of young designers into Jing'an Villa and may have acted as a tipping point for local residents.

However short-lived this experiment was, Jing'an Villa's combination of local agility and international perspective led to something really interesting. That skill-set is still there, especially among *haigui*. So, too, are a number of potentially appropriate *lilong*. Perhaps we could see a bottom-up flowering of informal commercial activity crop up again in some of these spaces? We may hope so.

### Conclusion

Developers now see the benefit of reusing *lilong*. Xintiandi is as popular as ever, while the trail it blazed enabled places like Tianzifang and Jiayeli to develop. These different approaches to urban rehabilitation are not really sustainable if we want to see the spirit of the place preserved. And while Jing'an Villa was an interesting, if short-lived, experiment, whether it can be seen as a viable alternative to Xintiandi, Tianzifang, or even Jiayeli remains to be seen.

The main point of this paper was not to propose a blanket approach to preservation of the Shanghai *lilong*, neither is it intended to focus on preservation of the houses alone. The Shanghai *lilong* was a remarkable generator of vibrant street life, and it is this we should be seeking to preserve. Turning them into attractive outlets for international chain stores, while it does retain some of the buildings, does nothing to preserve the street life they engendered. Neither does turning them into homes for the rich, or preserving them as a sort of decorative museum in a heritage enclave. Blind nostalgia for old architectural forms is not going to help these buildings adapt to life in the 21st century, and trying to preserve them as mere shells misses their point. If we are going to preserve anything, it should be the spirit of the *lilong*, so that they may have a future as rich as their past. By preserving their spirit, we will also ensure that these houses are once again really interesting places to visit.

If we can understand lessons that the *lilong* can teach about urban life we will have a better chance of preserving them for the future, making sure Shanghai does not become just another generic Global City, full of skyscrapers and shopping malls, where redevelopment means the disappearance of what Non Arkaraprasertkul calls the city's "living heritage",<sup>10</sup> the less benign side of preservation that is threatening the very soul of the city. Ironically, it seems that capitalism may point the way to a brighter future, which is not inappropriate, given its role in developing the house type in the first place; it may even make up for the damage that has been done to the *lilong* since the 1990s.

Not one of these four redevelopments will point to a brighter future on its own. Jiayeli proved detrimental to the street life that made the *lilong* such a wonderful contributor to vibrancy of the city, as did Xintiandi in its own way. Perhaps bottom-up informal commercial activity may be the most promising way of preserving them, an approach something between that of Tianzifang and Jing'an Villa. But it is probably by combining lessons from all four (even if only what not to do) that we may have a chance of ensuring a better approach to preserving this fascinating, unique, and still threatened house type.

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### Notes

- For a brief introduction to the history of the *lilong* see 'part 1' of this article: Bracken, G. 2020. 'The Shanghai *lilong*: A new concept of home in China', *The Newsletter* #86, pp.10-11.
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