Locating Shanghai: Globalization, Heritage Industry,

and the Political Economy of Urban Space in a Chinese Metropolis

A dissertation presented

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Locating Shanghai: Globalization, Heritage Industry, and the Political Economy of Urban Space in a Chinese Metropolis

Abstract

Given the rapid urbanization of Shanghai in the past three decades, how might we attempt to understand the changing meanings, usages, and values of urban space and the built environment, as occupied, lived, and experienced by its residents? In this dissertation, I use ethnography to explore the complex processes of urbanization and globalization in Shanghai – China’s largest and most urbanized city – examining the myriad ways that space orients and even determines the actions, commitments, and everyday sociocultural practices of the various agents and stakeholders involved in this transformation. By investigating how residents, planners, and local officials variously conceive of historic preservation and urban renewal programs, and by eschewing the artificially coherent image of the city promoted by state planners, I paint a more nuanced picture of the specific challenges faced by the populace and their creative methods of negotiation, adaptation, and appropriation in the face of a rapidly changing landscape. My primary case study is the Shanghai’s traditional alleyway neighborhoods (known locally as the *lilong*) through which I investigate issues arising from their restoration and preservation: state discourse and law enforcement, globalization and local heritage, place-making, and aesthetics. What my research demonstrates is how knowledge of the global not only informs but encourages pragmatic residents to "foresee" a different future and voluntarily get involved in the process of urban renewal to enhance their interests. In this dissertation, I develop new concepts such as "gentrification from within," to explain
this unique process of demographic change involving capital investment and cultural reproduction, in which the original residents themselves are agents. Also developed in this dissertation are the concepts of "traditionalism as a way of life," and "emancipatory masculinity," which explain the undergirding tension between the traditional belief of homeownership and the economic reality of modern life resulting in unprecedented patterns of social reproduction and familial formation.
for my mother
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Preface

This dissertation is a product of love and a constant battle with my own self-doubt.

It is a product of love for the city of Shanghai, the city I have spent the last decade of my life studying. It is also a product of my love for the Shanghainese people. The three years I have spent doing research in Shanghai were the most intense yet productive years of my life, as I learned as much about myself as I did from those I meant to learn about.

When I began my study, I had placed more of an expectation on the city and its people to understand and appreciate my reason for being among them, and therefore made myself vulnerable to experiencing deep and immediate sadness – even a sense of betrayal - when those expectations were not met. At the darkest moments, I questioned not only the merits of my research, but also my role in the anthropological community. It was during these low times, however, that I was reminded of the wise words of Lord Buddha, “the more you love, the more you suffer from it.” Eventually I would discover that my expectations were the result of my own simple misguided ignorance, and that even though I had known in principle that I was there to learn from these people, I had – in actuality – believed that they would have much more to learn from me. With this
in mind, I would find that the irreconcilable conflicts I witnessed between neighbors could in time become stories to laugh about with the new friends in my adoptive community. I learned to understand myself better, and – ultimately - I learned the disarmingly simple and seemingly trite truths regarding the virtues of humility, observation, learning from the experience, and never, ever, taking anything at face value.

Always like a father figure to me, my Ph.D. supervisor Professor Michael Herzfeld deserves the deepest gratitude. This project is a result of not only my respect for his astute knowledge, professionalism, and dedication to anthropology, but also our friendship. It was he who had initially provided me with the argument that architecture and anthropology could benefit from each other, and over my three years in Shanghai, Michael has visited me in my field site at least a half a dozen times. Thanks to my mentor Saipin Suputtamongkol, Michael’s former student who introduced us to each other exactly ten years ago in 2006, I had the opportunity to meet a truly remarkable scholar who did not think that my goal of making good architecture through understanding social interactions was too idealistic or shamelessly impractical. It was Michael who not only encouraged me, initially pointing me in the right direction, but also never doubted my ability to pursue something in which I wholeheartedly believed. His trust and refusal to give up on me has pushed me to do more and to be better.

I also owe my dissertation’s committee members a debt of gratitude. Both Professors Arthur Kleinman and Theodore C. Bestor have visited me at my field site, making me the only anthropology graduate student in the history of the department whose field site had been visited by his entire committee (even though I also realize that it might be unfair to other graduate students to claim such a historic stature, given the globalizing nature of my site, and the unusually lengthy time I
spent there!) Arthur has always been kind and critical in teaching me how to think like a true China scholar. I have benefited greatly from his extensive experience doing research in China and supervising students. His many stories represent a deep understanding of the multiple and complex moral worlds of the Chinese communities he has studied. Arthur also has shown me that a good anthropologist must balance the sense of professionalism with personal emotion, understanding our informants in their local moral worlds. Arthur has introduced me to the joy of reading moral philosophy along side anthropology, and it was precisely this feeling of great pleasure that kept my sanity in check especially during the first year of my fieldwork when I was living in physically difficult living conditions. It was also the moral and philosophical way of life by which Arthur lives that makes me want to continue on my path of becoming a China scholar and anthropologist. The “Kleinmanian” way of thinking can be seen throughout this thesis.

Professor Bestor was also no less influential to my thinking about anthropology. One of the first books in anthropology I read was Ted’s classic ethnography of urban life in the perceived lower quarter of the world’s most economic viable city in the 1980s, *Neighborhood Tokyo* (1989). Inspired by his book during my graduate study in architecture at MIT, I was determined to write my master’s thesis on patterns of urbanization in East Asia with the focus, of course, on Shanghai, the city that would soon become my main topic of intellectual inquiry for the next decade. I was fortunate to have been assigned to be his academic advisee from the start, and to have the opportunity to serve as a teaching fellow for his extremely popular general education course Societies of the World 33: Tokyo in Spring 2013, during which I had the opportunity to re-read *Neighborhood Tokyo* and re-think my approach to my own dissertation project. I owe a great debt of gratitude to all three of my mentors: Michael, Arthur, and Ted.
During my three years in Shanghai, Brown University Professor Matthew C. Gutmann has been an unofficial committee member of this dissertation. Having been a fan of his work, I did not think that I would be fortunate enough to get to know him in person. The first few months of my fieldwork in Shanghai in the summer and fall of 2013 happened to overlap with his leave of absence from Brown to return to China to conduct research. After a thirty-year hiatus since his undergraduate years at Berkeley where he was a student of Sinology, he had decided to return to China. Coincidentally, I happened to learn from one of his students that he was coming to China, so I decided to write him to introduce myself. Despite the time difference between Shanghai and Rhode Island, he replied to that email in less than a minute. During the past three years, I was extremely lucky to have countless opportunities to tag along with him to wherever he traveled to conduct his research. From him, I have learned invaluable fieldwork techniques and research ethics from multiple angles. With directness and sophistication, Matt has shared with me his experience in the field and helped me frame my research to answer the questions that I had set fourth to ask. I cannot thank him enough for his care, help, and support.

At New York University Shanghai and Fudan University where I had been kindly hosted and generously provided with research support, I have benefited from friendship and conversation with Naran Bilik, Yuan Cheng, Duane Corpus, Alan Crawford, Miao Feng, Magnus Fiskesjö, Daniel Guttmann, Diane Geng, Anna Greenspan, Barry Hashimoto, Noriaki Hoshino, Roderick Hills, Christopher Ivanovich, Jeffrey Lehman, Yanwanqian Lu, Maria Montoya, Arina Rotaru, Charlotte Nicett San, Harold P. Sjursen, Tianshu Pan, Alexander Von Hagen-Jamar, Benoît Vermander, Joanna Waley-Cohen, Taka Yamamoto, Jun Zhang, Meiyin Zhang, Chang Zhao, and Jianfeng Zhu. Magnus and Dan, especially, have shared with me their valuable time in order to provide me with insightful commentary on my dissertation.
MIT architecture Professor Jan Wampler may think he would be off the hook when he had agreed to write a letter of recommendation for me to go and study anthropology at his alma mater Harvard. He, in fact, is deeply responsible for my becoming an anthropologist. It was Jan who first taught me how to appreciate architecture through the happiness of the people for whom the architecture is meant to serve. I first met Jan when I arrived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the fall of 2005. As a 23-year-old junior architect from Thailand, I came to the US with little prior knowledge of its education system or western architecture (or, for that matter, the English language.) I came to MIT on a modest scholarship to learn from its world-class educators with the intent to return to my home country in order to facilitate change there. Owing to my linguistic incompetence and cultural barriers, however, I was not able to understand much, and adding to the current trend of using “high postmodern theories” to describe architecture, I quickly felt overwhelmed and out of place. After the first few weeks of class at MIT, I was deeply confused and almost gave up my studies altogether. Then I met Jan – he told me to drop the “Professor Wampler” the moment we met. Not only was he interested in my work, but also encouraged me to continue to pursue what I was interested in regardless of how “unfashionable” it may have felt. With him, there was no language barrier whatsoever – we spoke to each other in the language of visuals, and through our shared moral values. Jan did not tell me what to do but instead laid out to me the grand blueprint of possibilities that I could accomplish only by looking at architecture not as a lofty profession pertaining to some convoluted theories, but as the thoughtful making of space for people – all people.

In 2007, I had promised my former thesis supervisor at the MIT that I would never again write a ten-page-long acknowledgment. “Keep it short, and to the point,” said my then supervisor, Professor Stanford Anderson, who just passed away in January. It was his Advanced Seminar on
Urban Form that I took in the Fall of 2016 that afforded me the opportunity to study the lilong in
detail, and to discover the beauty of the socio-spatial side of architecture which eventually led to my
decision to pursue this research. The last time I saw Stan was before I left Cambridge for Shanghai
in 2013. As always, he never missed a chance to show me his incessant support. It is sad that he did
not get to see the product of my love for knowledge, especially when he played such an important
role in inspiring it. Whatever I have learned about architecture in the larger social context as well as
its cultural role, I shall always be indebted to him.

I also want to thank Professor Reinhard Goethert for his unwavering support for me to pursue a
career in academia. I came to Reinhard as a confused student who did not know what he was doing
in the fall of 2005. Not only was Reinhard kind and understanding, he was also sensitive to my
concerns regarding the way in architecture was taught. It might have been the high architecture
theory that brought me to MIT, but it was Reinhard’s class on affordable housing and settlement
upgrading that I took in the winter of 2006 that excited me the most, and which ultimately changed
the course of my career for good.

Tess Johnston, a long-time resident of Shanghai who needs no introduction for a handful of classics
in the study of Shanghai’s pre-1949 Western-style architecture, is an institution. I first learned about
the fascinating history of Shanghai architecture in 2005 from her book *A Last Look: Western
Architecture in Old Shanghai*, which we had at our Rotch Architecture and Planning Library at MIT. It
was already a dream come true to get to know Tess in person in Shanghai, let alone have the
permission to spend day after day in her personal library of historical books that she had cultivated
over three decades living in the city. I want to thank Tess for her support, friendship, and true
dedication in documenting and writing about Shanghai’s architectural heritage for the past four decades.

Because all roads lead to Shanghai, I have benefited greatly from the visits from my colleague Florin-Stefan Morar, who almost single-handedly lifted me up from the well of misery so that I could prove to myself (and, of course, to him) that I had enough dignity to finish what I had started. I might have dropped out of the Ph.D. program because of my self-doubt had Florin not visited me in the spring of 2015 to tell me frankly how stupid my idea was. I also benefited from visits by physicians Komatra Chuengsatiansup, Alastair Donald, Byron and Mary-Jo Good, Hsuan-Ying Huang, and Shunyao Yang who pointed to matters concerning the physical and mental health of urban citizens, helping me go back to my field site to acquire deeper social data. Having family members, friends and colleagues visiting me in Shanghai has proven to be extremely helpful to my thinking about my research project, as I have had to think constantly about how to present what I was doing to them in a meaningful, interesting, and understandable way. What has proven to be the case is that the more people I get to walk through my research on site, the more articulate, clear, and eloquent I become. Curious freestyle questions from my dear visitors from a wide variety of angles have also been helpful for me in terms of thinking about how I would like to present my data. The structure of this thesis represents how I often walk my visitors through my research in situ. I, therefore, would like to thank Bradley Butterfield, Lydia Chen, Jérémy Cheval, Hao Laurence Dang, Jeff Dobereiner, Erik L. Harms, Edward Akintola Hubbard, Leilei Fang, Marcia Johnson, Eugene Lee, Alex Nelson, Leslie Sklar, Jie Li, Shanshan Li, Henrik Kloppenborg Møller, Boonanan Nattakul, Philippe Peycam, Chunxiang Qian, Gumporn Suwannachim, Jenny Tang, Emily Whewell, and Xin Tannia Xia for the opportunities to show them my field site and for their patience to listen to what I had to say about the project.
Saving an ignorant non-native writer from all forms of linguistic oblivion are friends extraordinaire: Kevin Beier, Alex Nelson, Leo Pang, and Reilly Rabitaille. All of them have read the entire dissertation with great patience, and made scrupulous suggestions that make this dissertation readable and therefore possible. Reilly, in particular, has been not only my role model on how to write ever since I begun to learn to write anything at all in English, but has also been a great friend who often, if not always, knows better than I what I want to say, and does so with grace and enviable clarity. Despite his busy life as an architect in New York, Reilly has always made time to help me craft my writings: I cannot imagine having written this dissertation without his great support.

Alex Nelson is my anthropologist-in-arms. He is a careful writer and genuine ethnographer. Having him as my reader keeps my prose clear, my writing critically engaging, and my expression articulate and elegant. Having kept in touch with Leo since we first met each other at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) where he was a graduate student in 2011, I was lucky to have the opportunity to continue building our friendship in Shanghai, as he was also conducting his Ph.D. fieldwork there during my second year in the city. Leo has taught me so much about anthropology and food studies – the field of his doctoral dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London. Lively, humorous, and sincere, Leo has always been selfless in sharing with me what he knows about Shanghai, which is extremely valuable to my research. I have benefited greatly from his introduction to many of his own informants who are now my very good friends. Thanks to him and him alone, I have learned how to eat healthily (very important!) and live strong amidst the pollution and the crisis of environment degradation in Shanghai. His humility will make him want to disagree with me that I believe that his natural anthropological brilliance is
bottomless, but he will also know that I really mean it. He is an honest friend and rigorous scholar from whom I could always learn.

The neuroscientist Dr. Kevin Beier is a scientific researcher who thinks like us anthropologists. Moreover, he gives as much consideration to the sociocultural aspects of research as he does controlled subjects in his laboratory. Kevin is the kind of person who would point out to me what he thinks is too abstract and therefore should be removed from the text. He is a conservative – indeed a radical conservative who is mistrustful of abstraction and suspicious of theoretical ideas that do not yield any real world contribution. He is a genius of common sense. I have benefited from him being as far from an ideologue as one could possibly be.

Over the course of my doctoral trainings, I have presented drafts of what later became chapters of my dissertation, and benefited from the reading and comments from the following professors and colleagues: Holly Angell, Takeshi Arai, Kate Baker, Antonio Bernacchi, Joseph Bosco, Jeremy Cheval, Jeffrey M. Cody, Julie Chun, Nicholas Lawrence Caverly, Ryan Carter, Ren Chao, Nicola di Cosmo, Qingqing Chen, Steven Y. N. Chen, Xiangmin Chen, Hasta Colman, Claire Colomb, Robert Cowherd, Patrick Cranley, Benjamin Elman, Jie Feng, Alan Crawford, Ke Fan, Marilyn Goodrich, Harry den Hartog, Christian Hess, James Hevia, Elizabeth Hingley, Peter Hibbard, Shenjing He, Jed Horwitt, Gloria Fazza, Marianne Fritz, Felix Giron, Wenjun Ge, Susie Gordon, Qinggong Jiang, Tina M. Kanagaratnam, Ernst Karel, Yoshitaka Kawase, Silvia Kettelhut, Eun-Mee Kim, Johann Krammer, Alicia Lazzaroni, Alex Lee, Anru Lee, Qing Li, Elizabeth Liao, David Lingerak, Shao-Hua Liu, John Logan, Eriberto “Fuji” P. Lozada Jr., Michael Lestz, Fei Anna Li, Sam Liang, Heng Liu, Peggy Liu, Jason D. Luger, Harsha Menon, Nandu Menon, Sean Mallin, Charlie Matthews, Rachel Marsden, Gordon Mathews, Constantine V. Nakassis, Rohit Negi, Thien-Huong Ninh, Johannes
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Raymond Possick and my intellectual brother Apiwat Rattanarawa provided me with the best place from which I could ever ask to go through the final phrase of my dissertation writing, namely revising. Only after I had immersed myself in the complete tranquility of their lake house in Monson, Massachusetts could I begin to find strings of egregious errors in my own writing. Monson was the same spot where Apiwat himself finished the writing of his remarkable dissertation almost a decade ago. In that setting, not only could I perform much better in revising my own words, but was also able to rearrange them for clarity. The Possick and Rattanarawa house on Paradise Lake
reminded me of how Henry David Thoreau described his reason for wanting to build a house to live by Walden Pond: “I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” I was more productive during my two weeks by Paradise Lake than the entire year in Shanghai, where the background traffic noise and the cacophony of urban life did nothing but overshadow my own inner voice.

My fellow anthropologist Cris Paul at Harvard has been a true friend and a true teacher in life. She has been truly supportive of my studies, research, and my life both when I was residing in Cambridge and away in Shanghai. Her liveliness and sensible encouragement always point me to the right direction whenever I was faced with professional dilemmas. Without Cris, my experience at Harvard would have been very different – it would have been less meaningful. Cris is a true friend and I am deeply grateful to her support and faith in me. Seeing an old friend like Cris – as well as Harsha and Nandu, Matt, Reinhard, Reilly, Ren, Wirun, and Hongjie – at my dissertation defense was the secret to my unusual possession of linguistic confidence, wit, and energy despite the sleep deprivation and sickness with which I had to deal on that very day.

This dissertation project has been generously funded by a number of scholarships, fellowships, and travel grants. It was the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI) Doctoral Fellowship that first gave me the opportunity to re-visit the lilong as a master’s student in Modern Chinese Studies at Oxford University. The HYI was generous to allow me to transfer the second part of the fellowship for use at Harvard when I transferred to the PhD program in anthropology in 2010, and had been the main source of my PhD funding until the end of my coursework in 2012. I cannot thank professors and colleagues at the HYI enough for their ceaseless support of my endeavor. For my unusually long
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I thank my family for all their help and support. During the past decade of my intellectual endeavor 
to get three master's degrees and a doctorate, I have lost three grandparents and a father; all of 
whom I had been very close to. As I had been living abroad, I could only weep in silence and alone. 
Every time I heard the news I felt as though it would be fine if my life were to end that very 
moment. What keeps me together, away from home, are words and support from my extended 
family, especially the Chamsuwan family with whom I grew up: my uncle Supot and his wife 
Supawan, and their children Sutee, Sumonwan, and Sunita. My aunts Aree and Ausanee Chamsuwan 
always provided moral support from my hometown in the rural northeastern region of Thailand to 
keep me going after all these years. Victor Alexander Wong has been instrumental to my becoming 
an academic ever since I arrived at his home in Oklahoma City as an exchange student in 1998. 
Victor, whom I call “Dad Wong,” has always been nothing else but a caring father.
Finally, I would like to thank my parents. I still remember my father’s excitement when he heard that I got accepted to the Ph.D. program in anthropology at Harvard. I was at Oxford at the time finishing up my master’s degree in Modern Chinese Studies. I was hoping that there would be some gap between the two degrees during which I would return to Thailand to see him and tell him in person that all of this was for him. Unfortunately, there was no time for me to go home to see him. I had decided, with my father’s encouragement, to enroll in the summer academic enrichment program that Harvard had generously provided for us overseas students in order to prepare ourselves for the rigorous doctoral training ahead.

My father wanted to see me, but he, as always, did not want me to be worried and be distracted from the task at hand, especially when that task was one of the very few in which he wholehearted believed, namely education. My father did not come from a well-to-do family. He had fought so hard throughout his entire life to stay afloat economically. He believed in education and he was, in fact, a rather remarkable student graduating with honors from both high school and university. Yet, his life circumstance did not allow him to pursue his study beyond the bachelor’s level, which, I believe, was the reason he was so happy to see me getting scholarships to study abroad. He told many of his close friends that he was happiest when he and my mother traveled to the US to visit me in the summer of 2006. He was, indeed, very happy as far as I can recall. During the last month of his life, he did not tell me how serious his health condition was, and I was so busy with the summer academic enrichment program that I almost did not have time to contact him. Because of the 12-hour time difference between the east coast and Thailand, I kept postponing calling him, thinking that I would, “just call him after my first day of the PhD program to tell him both how much I want him to be proud of me and how great this place is.” Unfortunately, I found out from my brother on the first day of my Ph.D. program that my father had just passed away. I had planned
to call him that evening. It was sudden and unexpected. Nor would I never get to see him again, but I never had the opportunity to tell him that all of this was for him.

With the whole world crumbling down, and when I lost interest in continuing, it was my mother who helped me come to my senses. She has been supportive both spiritually and emotionally. Her sensible words keep me from dying from within. Her rational narratives keep me from blaming myself for things I could not possibly control. Her understanding of my emotion saves me from my own destructive thoughts and encourages the better angel of my being to make crucial decisions. Her true belief in good faith is the foundation of my own belief in my ability to finish what I have started, which I believe to also be what my father would have wanted me to do. I do not think that there are any words that I could use to describe my love for my mother. This dissertation is dedicated to her.
Locating Shanghai
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Figure 1: A map showing the location of Shanghai in the larger geographic context of Asia. Source: CartoDB Software as a Service (SaaS). Details of the map are embedded by the SaaS at the bottom right corner of the figure.
Figure 2: A map showing central Shanghai where the field site of this dissertation research is located. Source: CartoDB Software as a Service (SaaS). Details of the map are embedded by the SaaS at the bottom right corner of the figure.
Introduction: Locating Shanghai

To *locate* is to find or fix the position of something, usually with the connotation that an agent is doing the finding or fixing... *Locate* has an additional meaning of to fix or set up in a particular place.

-- Theodore M. Bernstein (1965: 265 - 266)

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. Even though my perceptions are fleeting and I am a bundle of different perceptions, I nevertheless have some idea of personal identity, and that must be accounted for. Because of the associative principles, the resemblance or causal connection within the chain of my perceptions gives rise to an idea of myself, and memory extends this idea past my immediate perceptions. A common abuse of the notion of personal identity occurs when the idea of a soul or unchanging substance is added to give us a stronger or more unified concept of the self.

-- David Hume (1960 [1888]: 252)
Every Shanghainese who lived in Shanghai before the economic reform and opening up era of the 1980s-90s has memories of the *lilong*: a typology of British-styled low-rise rowhouses first built by the foreigners in the concession areas during the Treaty Port period (1842 - 1942). The *lilong* housing typology was originally invented ad hoc in the latter half of the nineteenth century to accommodate the influx of population as a result of both the political upheavals in the nearby provinces and the sudden increase in the demand for accommodation for working-class residents in the then-new treaty port city.

During the treaty port’s heyday, these houses were once everywhere in the former concession areas, as they were homes to both Chinese and foreigners living under and protected by the jurisdiction of the foreign powers. According to an estimate, in the 1940s before the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the lilong houses covered about 60%-70% of the city’s (Bracken 2013; Zhang 2013). A closed compound formed by lilong houses made up a lilong neighborhood. Aerial images of detailed maps of Shanghai from that period may best illustrate this claim: the fabric-like shape of the hundreds of thousands of lilong neighborhoods was the dominating urban form of Shanghai.

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1 As noted by many scholars and historians (e.g., Lu 1999), the two Chinese characters forming the name of this particular architectural style of row house could also be pronounced “linong.” Both “lilong” and “linong” are correct pronunciations of the name and used interchangeably by the local Shanghainese, although the former is more widely used among the older generation of the local Shanghainese residents. In this paper, therefore, I use “lilong,” as it is the more common term among scholars studying Shanghai architecture and urban housing.
After the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), most of the original owners of these houses fled Shanghai to seek refuge from the socialist persecution. Consequently, these lilong houses were transformed into worker housing (Liang 2008; Wang and Chen 1987). It was during this period that the meaning of the lilong shifted from houses representing the economical design of full-fledged capitalism to the collective living arrangement of socialism (Morris 1994a). No additional lilong houses have been built after 1949, as the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) understood the typology to be closely associated with the bourgeoisie (qichan jiejii) owing to its relatively spacious arrangement, ornamentation, and labor-intensive design (Lu, et al. 2001). The lilong have, therefore, fallen out of favor for Soviet-inspired “socialist” architecture, namely low-cost six-story apartment
buildings. It was also during this period of heavy use that the lilong houses rapidly deteriorated. Originally built for a single family, each row has since been subdivided into multi-family worker housing to maximize the building’s occupancy (Zhao 2004). The combination of heavy use, for which these houses are unplanned by the builders, and the lack of maintenance over a period of more than half a century has resulted in the rapid decline of the physical condition of these lilong houses. Some of them have reached the point of becoming unhealthy places to live, creating not only fire hazards but also sick building syndrome as a result of the lack of ventilation, sunlight, and adequately hygienic conditions. Despite all of these shortcomings, however, these old cramped, and rundown lilong houses have unexpectedly become the defining characteristic of Shanghainese dwelling culture. Most of the city’s residents have lived in them for the decades after the 1940s (Pellow 1993b).
Since the economic “reform and opening up” era (gaige kaifang) of the 1980s-90s, more than two-thirds of the lilong have been demolished to make way for buildings that are better equipped with modern amenities that better suit the lives of today’s residents. With the decollectivization of worker housing being the main socioeconomic policy of the era, seen as progress by both the local government and the residents themselves alike was the razing of old low-rise buildings such as the lilong houses to make way for high-rise apartments. Both the local government and the residents saw this process as economically appropriate, especially in serving a much larger urban population in need of housing at the time (Bao 2000; Peng 1986; 1987). Some of the amenities, such as contemporary bathrooms and kitchens, which would be considered rudimentary elsewhere, were
considered “modern” to Shanghai at the time the city emerged from the shadow of collectivism and high socialism. In general, Shanghainese residents saw the removal of the lilong houses during the first two decades of the economic reforms and opening up era as improving their living condition, especially in raising the standard of housing and public spaces for millions of urban residents. Consequently, most Shanghainese residents born after the 1990s no longer had experience with lilong life. While the physical hardship was clearly felt, many Shanghainese who lived through the high sociality era would still answer that their most vivid memory of living in Shanghai before the economic reforms was the “sense of community in the lilong.” Because the condition of these lilong houses was sub-standard, Shanghainese residents had to help each other to get through the hardship (Huang 2000; Morris 1994a; Wu 1999). It was a way of life unique to Shanghai beyond the idealized and grandiose “postcard images” of the collection of high-rises gathered around the bank of the new ultra-modern district of Pudong, or the historic waterfront packed with the sophisticated British colonial edifices of Puxi. Lilong culture represents the lives of ordinary Shanghainese citizens.

Lilong: Heritage or Housing

The lilong represent the sociocultural history of the city and its people. This justification alone, however, was initially not enough for the local government to make the effort to preserve them in the economic reform and opening up era. Given the housing shortage and available space in the central city, the lilong were no longer being recognized by the local government, as the most economical form of urban housing the way it was. Furthermore, given their short history compared to other heritage architecture in other parts of China dated by more than a millennium, one could argue that these lilong houses did not possess the same historical legacy, let alone archeological value, that would make it worth the preservation effort (Non 2010b). That said, in the wake of the
globalizing economy of the 1990s, there was a decade where Shanghainese academics searched for
the city's sense of uniqueness (e.g., Fan 2004; Fang 2001; Mo and Lu 2000; Tang, et al. 2001; Wang
and Mo 2002; Zhang 2004a). They were arguing about that which could, in effect, put Shanghai on
the map of globalizing cities on par with its geographic counterparts such as Tokyo and Hong Kong.
The local government and these academics alike have agreed that lilong would be the citywide
architectural heritage to globally represent the “uniqueness of Shanghai” (Brook 2013; Sassen 2009).
Preservation of the lilong would have the effect of slowing down the pace of the rapid urban
redevelopment program that was turning the entire urban landscape of the city into a generic urban
form (Urban Land Institute 2014). That said, it was not until the late 1990s when the first wave of
attempts to preserve the remaining lilong houses had arrived, making razing and replacing them with
a more economically viable building typology possible only in some areas (Chen 2001; Fan 2004;
Ruan and Sun 2001; Wang and Chen 1987). As many have argued, galvanizing this first wave of
preservation efforts was the success of an adaptive reuse commercial project (Peh 2014; Tsai 2008).
Ironically, the aim of said project did not have much to do with the idea of historic preservation.
Rather, it only used the uniqueness of the lilong architecture to boost sales among high-end
consumers.

In the past two decades, the local government, with the support of academics in Shanghai’s higher
education institutions, especially those in the departments of architecture and urban planning, has
taken a vested interest in the preservation of these “historically significant” buildings. A recent
report in 2013 has shown that there were less than 100 lilong compounds left in the city, compared
to 150 just five years before (Yang 2013). Each of these remaining neighborhoods contained
between one and four thousand residents. The local government, however, had been pursuing a
particular type of preservation program; most of which concerned only the superficial revamping of
the façade of the lilong buildings to look as though they were not so rundown. This so-called “beautification” process (Non Forthcoming; Chan 2014; Tsai 2008) was understood by many as still better than nothing and has garnered some support from academics and architects alike. This particular type of preservation effort, however, did improve the residents’ living conditions. At the time of this research between 2013 and 2016, many residents with whom I had interacted over the years were still living in squalid conditions, often with inadequate space, ventilation, natural lighting, and shared amenities such as bathrooms and kitchens. This observation is a crucial point of my argument about the different perceptions regarding the lilong – as housing or as heritage. I will return to paint the picture of this living arrangement in Chapter Three. While some lilong residents did not have any other options than to stay put, owing to their lack of financial resources, many residents deliberately chose to remain in the houses in which they had spent most of their lives.
Figure 5: A cover of March 2014 issue of the Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (Vol. 73 No. 1), featuring the lilong houses in the urban landscape of Shanghai, representing “alley-based community living, much beloved but now quickly disappearing” (Chan 2014; Jiang and Xu 2012; Law 2012; Urban Land Institute 2014)
Urban Social Change

This dissertation analyzes the process of urban change, resulting from the interaction between the urban residents and the state through space. In my research, I have found two groups of new residents attracted to life in the remaining lilong neighborhoods: rural-to-urban migrants and non-corporate and independent local and non-local entrepreneurs, including foreigners. What these two groups have in common is how they see Shanghai as their (temporary or quasi-permanent) homes; hence, their demand for housing in the city. Growing out from my initial analysis of the lilong as heritage in a globalizing city is an ethnographic study of both the necessity of these two groups of nonlocals and the economic mindset toward homeownership among the locals, which I cover in detail in Chapter Two.

Making up more than a third of the city’s 24 million population are the “floating population migrants” (liudongrenkou) from rural China – the first group of residents who are attracted to the lilong owing to the cheap rent in these dilapidated century-old lilong houses. Since the beginning of the economic reform and opening up era, these migrants have been drawn to Shanghai and many of China’s other urban areas by employment opportunities in the industrial and service sectors. The structural forces that constantly pull these migrants to the city are those of imbalanced economic development arising from preferential state policies toward the coastal regions. Although there are over ten million migrants in the city, their access to basic necessities such as schools, health care, and housing, and participation in the public realm of urban areas, is limited (Liu 2014: 134), as they lack registration permits (hukou) required to access local social services. Many migrants have to deal with not only the hardship of making ends meet but also making sense of their difficult circumstances, especially when they are surrounded by exquisitely high-end shops and other trappings of
consumerism in the city in which they contribute their labor to economic development while being perceived and treated as second-class citizens. Although the locals \((bendiren)\) are benefitting from the extra income they receive through renting out spaces to these migrants, they often do not accept these migrants into their community. As my ethnographic findings show, the locals often discriminate against these migrants based on several identifiers, such as their use of non-local dialects, sartorial style, and the location where they live.

The second group, consisting of non-corporate and independent local and non-local Chinese entrepreneurs (whom I will refer to as “residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship in Chapter Six), as well as foreigners, made Shanghai their home for small and medium-sized businesses. These new residents were attracted, in particular, to the lilong houses in much the same way as another historic yet affordable district located close to a city center, Brooklyn, NY, attracted young immigrants to settle in the 1990s. The distinctiveness of the lilong edifices was cultural capital that helped to boost the uniqueness of the brands, products and services that these new residents wanted to market.

Contrary to what many may presume, these new residents did not turn lilong neighborhoods into homogenous urban units. Instead, they brought diversity to the original lilong communities, and new sources of income to the local residents of these communities. For many old residents (such as those who had lived there since the high communist era and therefore are old age-wise) these newcomers brought with them contemporary forms of livelihood. Some of these newcomers have become friends with their older neighbors, helping children in the community learn English, for example. With the decline of the “iron rice bowl” policy that provided a lifelong social safety net, older locals also benefit from much-needed extra income by renting out their spaces to these newcomers. This
young “gentry” also make the original residents more aware of the time and place in which Shanghai is. Many of the old residents shared with me that they felt as though they had to make a conscious effort to change personal behaviors, such as spitting on the street, speaking loudly, and not keeping the front of their houses clean, so as not to embarrass themselves in front of their new, educated, and cosmopolitan neighbors. There were, however, also negative impacts, such as the decline of trust among neighbors. With a more diverse community, there were more strangers and passers-by in the neighborhood. Some of these strangers did not understand the local way of life and disturbed the peace by drinking belligerently at night and being too noisy, preventing the locals (mostly retirees) from sleeping. Also, some neighbors might be financially better off than others because they were able to rent out their places at a higher price. Those who did not enjoy the same benefits were often jealous. Making matters worse, some tenants become landlords themselves, thereby deceiving the old residents and subletting their spaces for large sums and pocketing the difference. These are issues that I will further elaborate on in Chapters Five and Six.

**Locating Shanghai**

Since the early 2000’s, Shanghai has, again, become China’s hub for the service economy. With land area only slightly larger than 0.1 % of the entire country, Shanghai’s share of China’s overall gross domestic product (GDP) is more than 3 % and the income per person was ranked among the top of major cities in China (Solinger 1999). As China’s most globalized city (Trading Economics 2016), Shanghai has enjoyed the boom in both the local and international service sectors that constitute around two-thirds of its GDP (Chen 2009). The high-rise buildings on the east side of the Huangpu River (known as Pudong), where transnational corporations and the Shanghai Stock Exchange are located, make up half of the city’s mesmerizing skyline. There is no doubt that the
commercialization and internationalization of Shanghai have had an impact on the changing aspects of urbanism in the city. As more residents are now living in the urban parts of the city than ever before, the defining characteristic of the twenty-first century Shanghai is unquestionably that of the urban, all thanks to the shift toward service-oriented economies and the emergence of industries catering to the demands of contemporary consumerism. Still ringing true are the fundamental aspects of the urban suggested by classic urban sociological theories (Tsang 2014): rapid population growth, the increase of population density per square kilometer of land, the rise of heterogeneity of residents, and the intensification of legal complexity as a result of those three aspects of urbanism.

While technological advancement, innovation, and creativity are direct by-products of urbanization, some undesirable consequences such as widening income inequality, pollution-related health problems, social deprivation, mental illnesses, and high divorce rates are acutely felt by most of the city’s residents (Debord 1994 [1970]; Jacobs 1961; Simmel 2004 [1903]; Whyte 1943; Wirth 1938). Urban populations, in other words, are faced with how to deal with the fast, massive, and intense move toward an arguably better quality of life, while also handling an underlying deeply troubled sense of personhood.

The primary areas of inquiry of this research concern the aforementioned changing meanings, usages, and values of the lilong, as understood by both the old and the new residents, given rapid urbanization. This dissertation is an attempt to understand space and the built environment not only in sociological but also anthropological terms. Historians and scholars of Shanghai have been making similar remarks about the rapid – almost incomprehensible – change of the city’s urban landscape. I, too, have the same impression having returned to Shanghai almost every year for the past decade. There is no place to which I have been that has experienced the process of physical change as fast as Shanghai. It was Shanghai where I first realized the power and speed of
urbanization: where I visited today might not exist the day after tomorrow. What, then, constitutes Shanghai? It seems to me that what we know about Shanghai is nothing but a bundle of successive impressions or perceptions. The local government’s attempt to impose the idea that there is an underlying, stable thing called “Shanghai” can only convince visitors of its coherent image. But to residents and keen observers of the city alike, it is the process of change that constitutes the “Shanghaineseness” of Shanghai. Having returned to Shanghai every year for the past decade and having studied Shanghai from a historical perspective throughout, I cannot but think, as in the words of the philosopher David Hume, that an attempt to find a fixed identity of what constitutes Shanghai would be a wasteful endeavor. The Shanghai that exists over time is merely a bundle of impressions of a transient and non-persisting variable things. For an anthropologist, the idea that Shanghai is constantly changing in the way similar to the idea of how culture operates, however, makes the city an ideal case study on how the process of change affects the way of life of its residents, both the locals and non-locals.

“Locating,” therefore, is an apt golden thread that situates it where it matters most, namely in space in which social activities take place. As opposed to talking about Shanghai, I am locating Shanghai: in space, place, and time. This attempt to locate Shanghai is rooted in my intention to reveal the Shanghai that has been occupied, lived, and experienced by its true residents, and not by the media or distant critics. It is in this Shanghai that my attempt to re-think its urban policy must find its roots for any policy implementations to be effective. Building on the spatial study of the patterns of habitation, trade, and mobility spearheaded by the anthropologist G. W. Skinner (1964; 1965a; 1965b), this dissertation argues that social data in an urban setting can only be ethnographically collected and meaningfully analyzed in spatial terms, as social patterns are best understood when they are placed in their particular geographical context. Shanghainese urban culture has been
forcedly and abruptly shaped by a series of radical sociopolitical and economic programs, ranging from extraterritorial capitalism during the treaty port era to radical collectivism during the PRC’s nationwide socialist attempt to “leap forward,” and to today’s export-led market and service economy. Throughout Shanghai’s short urban history, only dating back to the mid-19th century, the lilong has structured in space the social activity of the city’s inhabitants. Through time, it has also re-orientated the habitation patterns that integrate social, political, and economic systems into the emerging and ever-changing urban culture of the city. A house is no longer just a house but an economic indication of a person’s socioeconomic status, which is particularly complex given the collectivism of housing provision just a few decades ago. Indicative of the character of the lilong is one of the most diagnostic moments I encountered during my fieldwork, when an informant asked me where I lived as a way of getting to know me. Questions such as “Why do you live here,” “Do you live alone?” “Do you have your own kitchen or bathroom in your room?” and “Do you have a window opening toward the south?” may sound rather strange for people who were just getting to know one another elsewhere, but were common among the locals in urban Shanghai.

Before I realized what was going on, this informant had gathered enough information about my socioeconomic status based on my reason for wanting to live in a lilong house, the geographic part of the city in which I lived, the size of my room, and the spatial hierarchy of my room (this was the reason for asking whether or not I had a window opening southward). The picture of my socioeconomic status that this informant had painted about me based on my short answers was incredibly accurate. It was not until I had met with another informant who asked me the same set of questions that I had begun to realize that information about space and place were socioeconomic indicators which my local Shanghainese informants used to justify my worth as their friend, and, more interestingly, as a potential partner for their daughters (the ethnographic details of which I will
turn to in Chapter Seven). Suddenly, I realized that I was looking at Shanghai differently. This Shanghai was not the same Shanghai that I had been visiting almost every year since 2006. It may be the case that the city had changed rapidly over the course of a decade, but it was more the case that it was me who had changed. More specifically, the lens through which I looked to understand social phenomena had changed. Through an ethnographic lens, I was able to see “deeper” Shanghai in both spatial and mental terms.

In my hand, while landing at the new terminal of the Pudong International Airport in Shanghai in the summer of 2013, was a postcard showing the juxtaposition of the two skylines given to me by the Tourism Authority of Shanghai during my first trip there seven summers ago. The grandeur of this postcard image shows the juxtaposition of these two sides of the Huangpu River, a tributary of the Yangtze River and the main waterway dividing Shanghai into two parts ever since the Warring States Period more than two millennia ago. I had kept the postcard because it was what most struck me when I first learned about Shanghai, despite the fact that there was always some sense of skepticism at the back of my mind every time I looked at it. “Is this the Shanghai experienced by some twenty million people living there?” My attempt to “locate” Shanghai in this dissertation is to put space and the built environment at the center of anthropology and to situate post-economic reform Shanghai where ordinary lives are lived and beyond the “postcard” image of the globalizing metropolis. Having spent three years living among the locals, I will delineate detailed narratives concerning everyday life living in a room in the lilong in Chapter Three.²

² Some of my colleagues have suggested that perhaps “to re-locate” may be a better phrasal verb describing what I want to express. That said, it is my belief that Shanghai has yet to be located in the current tenet of urban anthropology; hence, it goes without saying that which is yet to be located cannot be re-located.
Another set of constraints by which this dissertation takes shape is that of the governance of the PRC. There was a prevailing assumption that the state’s monopoly on power limited urban residents’ attitudes toward their roles in the ever-globalized community – that the residents would strictly follow the order of the powerful state. This viewpoint, however, is limited, as I will further elaborate with ethnographic details in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. Ordinary residents are using all kinds of tactics to find ways through their precarious situations by making those in power believe that they and their neighborhoods are worthy of their support. In the residents’ own words, they are equipped with the knowledge of precedents in the local government’s history of brutality. These residents know that both the media and the masses are on their side. As mentioned earlier, the commercialization and internationalization of Shanghai have had a profound effect both on urban policies, the idea of historic preservation of the lilong, as well as the residents’ lives. This effect is clearly seen in how the old and new residents adapt their ways of life to cooperate with one another.

**The Urban Family**

In this dissertation, I begin with the question of how the role of local government in preserving the lilong, amidst the pressure to urbanize in a tearing-the-old-and-building-the-new fashion, has shaped the community. If this preservation process is to prevail, the question that needs to be answered has to do with the growing family size of the residents living in the lilong houses. That is, how to accommodate a larger family size within the same aging structure whose capacity to expand is limited? Complicating this issue further is the notion of marriage and family in Chinese society of which the idea of homeownership is at the center. In Shanghai, homeownership entails multiple layers of complexity, ranging from legal ambiguity as a result of the nature of China’s infantile property law after the high socialist period, to the lingering traditional value regarding
homeownership as a rite of passage, and to the macroeconomic system with particular regard to the inefficiency of its banking and financial system that counterproductively promotes mass involvement in the housing market as the most reliable form of investment (see Shepard 2016a; 2016b; 2016c). As the ethnographic findings presented in this dissertation show, the situation which the residents are in is much more complicated than the oversimplified picture painted by the media and scholars relying heavily on secondary sources and quantitative survey data.

If there was no private property and everyone lived in shared houses before the 1990s, from which domains does the discriminating sentiment that the local Shanghainese have toward nonlocals come? It has been widely documented by historians and economists that the rise of Shanghai as an economic powerhouse has since turned the residents of Shanghai into millionaires. In fact, this was the case for most of the cities designated as special economic zones (SEZ) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Once these cities had received permission to construct foreign trade-oriented areas with substantial benefits from preferential policies such as lower tax rates, reduced regulations, and special managerial systems from the National People’s Congress, they immediately attracted entrepreneurs, workers, and foreign investors alike to set up factories, industrial parks, and service economy headquarters. Consequently, agricultural land that once had little value from an investor’s perspective became targets for investment in real estate, including the real demand for accommodation as well as speculation (Huasheng 1991; Roberts 2014). Being built alongside the massive commercial infrastructure were infrastructures for transportation, education, health, and modern urban life, which further served as magnets to attract more people to the SEZs. Millions of Shanghainese have benefitted from this side effect of economic reform and opening up. It was by design that Shanghai, like all of the SEZs, would attract new residents from other parts of China who would either be paying rent to local landlords, or buying apartment units from the locals or
from real estate developers who had compensated the locals for the loss of their homes to build a housing project.

One of my key informants, for instance, shared with me that he thought that he was lucky to be in Shanghai at the right time. In the early 2000s, he sold his house which was given to him for free by his work unit in the mid-1980s to a real estate developer, from this transaction he received almost 3,000,000 yuan (about half a million US dollars at the time of this research) which he, almost immediately, invested back in the thriving real estate market to acquire passive income from rent.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t think I deserve any of this money, as I didn’t work hard for it at all,” this informant said to me with a smile on his face. Encountering hardships and difficulties for the decades to come were local residents who did not manage to lose their houses “at the right time,” as elaborated by historians and journalists (Non 2016). There seem to be patterns of how these unfortunate residents attempt to subvert the system (Wu 2013). Further elaborated in the latter chapters of this dissertation are many similar stories of those who had won and lost in the process and the strategies that they used to maintain their sense of survival, dignity, and agency under the surveillance of a larger system that technically left little room for negotiation.

From this information, how does this attitude toward housing then affect the family? The preliminary answer to this question is what plunges this dissertation, also, into the sub-field of economic anthropology. At the top of the list of social pressures in urban China is undoubtedly the pressure to purchase a home, especially in the designated top tier cities such as Shanghai where home ownership serves both as accommodation as well as a form of high-return investment. The problem of escalating urban housing prices continues to worsen in Shanghai because of the PRCS’s spatial concentration of resources and services. Like one of my key informants above who possessed
housing units before the economic reform in the 1980s, local residents were guaranteed housing for life by the government; hence, they do not have reason to be concerned about the situation. Those who feel the greatest degree of economic pressure from the unaffordability of housing in urban China, however, are the two groups of new residents previous mentioned, as well as some local residents who do not possess estates that could be conveniently converted into cash. This problem stems both from the low income earned by these demographic groups and the acute lack of governmental support.

A widely accepted explanation for the steady rise in real estate prices across mega cities in China is the lingering impact of traditional Chinese values (Chalk 2011; Guilford 2013b; Ren 2014a; The Economist 2013). The possession of a house serves as both a form of psychological fulfillment and a rite of passage for newly married couples who typically remain in the homes of their parents until marriage. Also, as the interest rates for fixed deposits has been kept low by the central bank while the demand for housing in the city has been rising, many urban residents also see home ownership as a major, if not the only viable, form of investment. During the time of this research between 2013 and 2016, housing prices continued to rise despite the sluggish economy and slowing economic growth. Hence, the housing market was kept intact by the demand of those who wished to invest, and the anxious residents who do not see themselves benefitting from this system anytime soon.

Regarding access to housing, those who are in the greatest need pay a high price for rent, leaving them only a small portion of their income for other purposes. This situation gives them further financial pressure. In addition, the opportunity to purchase a house is only accessible to residents with household registration, most of whom are local residents. Non-local residents who have lived in Shanghai long enough may be able to purchase a home, but many of them could not even begin
to fathom the idea given the value of the mortgage they would have to take out in relation to their income.

So, how does a housing market affect family formation? In the case of Shanghai – China’s largest city – from which I derive most of my ethnographic data, offspring of marriageable age tend to submit to some extent to the authority of their parents in the selection of their spouses, since parents are the would-be funders of the newlyweds’ home. As is the case with residents of marriageable age in China’s first-tier cities, parents often discouraged their young Shanghainese children to get married to non-Shanghainese or “outsiders” (waidiren). These parents often claim that cultural differences lead to an incompatibility between local Shanghainese and outsiders in intimate relationships. The more convincing argument, however, is a socioeconomic one: that these so-called outsiders do not possess a home and a household registration – two things that, I argue, have physical importance to the individual and are critical symbols in the maintenance of “face” for the couples’ families.

Men, in particular, not only face the pressure of traditional mores requiring them to possess a home, but they must also contend with their lack of ability to acquire other material and symbolic means. In Shanghai, the anxieties of single life find expression in various forms and on multiple platforms such as online dating, open Internet discussions on issues relating to sexuality, and in the mass media. The most revealing expression of this anxiety is what is known to the western audience as the “marriage market” where parents of unmarried young adults meet on a regular basis with the hope of finding appropriate matches for their offspring. When asked about the most important criterion for a potential husband for their daughter, most, if not all, parents answer, “he must have a house.” At a deeper level, the underlying factor maintaining the socioeconomic incompatibility mentioned
above is the parents’ and children’s constant battles to maintain and maximize their opportunities in a modernized economy, as well as to gain acceptance from others – both of which have intrinsic relations with home ownership. Looking at lilong houses, not as architecture but home, helps to reveal how changing ideas of personhood, sexuality, family, and urbanity provide ways of thinking about the root causes of the Chinese housing bubble, the country’s rising divorce rates and the decrease in the quality of community relations. Chapter Seven is devoted entirely to the study of this particular phenomenon concerning housing in Shanghai.

**The Anthropologist**

Even though I came from an ethnic Chinese background, growing up in Thailand with parents who had to suppress their culture in the face of strong anti-Chinese sentiment led me to have only a little knowledge (let alone interest) in anything related to China.³ So, it was quite by accident that I stumbled upon a research-oriented international workshop that brought together architectural students from Beijing’s Tsinghua University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where I was a graduate student at the time, to solve urban problems pre-Olympics Beijing was facing. This was the trip where I discovered the deeper meaning of urbanism, which not only

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³ To take all responsibility for the presentation – and possible misrepresentations of my ethnographic findings – I would like to provide here a brief biographical statement of myself, laying out my personal history and personal interest in that subject matter in which I have engaged in the past decade. The truth is that I did not realize that even before coming to anthropology, I always thought that being reflexive was a must. I personally never believed that any of us could claim objective knowledge, but not many people seemed to share with me this way of thinking until I had discovered anthropology (or anthropology had discovered me). Because I had studied and worked in rather positivistic fields before coming to anthropology, one could probably imagine how much backlash I had received from my advisers, employers, and even colleagues for wanting to be “reflexive.” That said, in my own master’s thesis written almost a decade ago (see Non 2007), I did manage to write a preface reflecting precisely on my stakes in the project and where I was coming from regarding the limit to the objective presentation of the production of knowledge.
changed the way I saw the role of architecture in society, but would also inspire me to write an entire Master's thesis on the subject (Non 2007), get a second Master's in Chinese Studies (Non 2010a) learn Mandarin Chinese, and eventually write this dissertation to receive a doctorate in Anthropology.

Indeed, no one was more surprised than me to find that this workshop (Tsinghua-MIT Beijing Studio, for short) would change my entire life's work: moving me from one academic domain to several others, relocating me across three continents, and transforming me from a professional architect into an academic, writer, filmmaker, and urban historian. In 2005, one year before the Studio, I had just arrived in Cambridge as a Fulbright scholar from Thailand. Traveling halfway around the world from a warm tropical climate to a strangely cold city on the US east coast, my single goal then was to obtain a degree in History, Theory, and Criticism of architecture (HTC), which was perceived by most of my colleagues as a rather erudite field focused on abstract ideas with minimal application in the real world. Many of my peers were in fact surprised by my interest in HTC given my ethnic Chinese background (and probably my poor English) and my otherwise practical architectural skills in sketching, drawing, physical model making, and rendering. Even though I knew how far removed the HTC paradigm was from reality, it was precisely this aloofness that was attractive to me. I felt that I had had enough of pragmatism and wanted to learn more about abstract ideas. I made sure to make my enthusiasm for learning “from the western architectural world” heard.

Almost by accident, a classmate thought that we should check out a session introducing the Tsinghua-MIT Beijing Studio to students interested in participating. Being mired in the pile of books I had to read in preparation for an upcoming HTC pro-seminar, I was in desperate need of a break
and decided to tag along. There, I was unexpectedly captivated by the briefings. Image after image of the “non-postcard Beijing” — dilapidated traditional courtyard houses or *hutong*, rapidly-built highways, and thoroughfares under which lay densely populated housing, and massive urban projects in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Olympics — quickly brought me back to reality. I had never seen any of these before. I thought Beijing was all about the glamorous Forbidden City. The project proposed to the potential participants to tackle that year was an exciting urban challenge — the design of a residential mixed-use neighborhood and transit hub in a globalizing city poised to host the Olympics. I thought I was at MIT for high theory, but, in fact, what most excited me was the idea of building for the public, and designing affordable housing. Hence, I decided to apply and was ultimately selected to take part in the Studio. The Tsinghua-MIT Beijing Urban Design Studio ended up becoming one of the most pivotal moments in my life, as it had changed my interest from “HTC Architecture” to “Architecture-for-the-People.”

Tsinghua-MIT Beijing Studio introduced me to China, a place I never thought I would be interested in going. The studio began in Shanghai. Arriving at the newly built airport located on the outskirts of a large metropolitan area and traveling on the gigantic elevated highway connecting the airport to the sophisticated waterfront of semi-colonial Shanghai, I was amazed by basically everything I saw: the urban symbolism made the city appear grandiose but also difficult to read. I felt as though I was in a dreamland where everything was embellished for visual pleasure, yet every day I probed I discovered deep meanings in the urban space. Then I discovered the lilong houses. Noting how the lilong provided a dense residential fabric with a sense of neighborhood community, I took an interest in them immediately, and, given the programmatic requirements of our Beijing site, I found the lilong worth exploring as a potential starting point. Through the course of developing the Beijing site, I found many of the features of the lilong highly adaptable – its mixed-use perimeter spaces provided
a basis for meeting points in the community, and its alleyway mentality created a fabric encouraging exploration for visitors and a sense of an “urban village” for residents. In the end, our project was well received, but finishing the Studio left me wanting to discover more about this unique type of housing reflecting a Chinese city already beginning to globalize in the early parts of the 19th century.

Then I discovered anthropology (or it could have well have been the other way around), which has since continued giving me joy and excitement in exercising freely my diverse intellectual interests, comprehending different sociocultural milieus, and making sense of the particular sociality by which I was surrounded. It was precisely the moment I discovered anthropology that I also realized that architects and planners did not usually take into account the fact that common sense was not common to all. In the past decades – even centuries – architects and planners have been trying to achieve the supreme domination of the so-called “universal design,” with which, for some unsettling reason from within, I never felt comfortable but had to stick with because using the “one-size-fits-all” universal design template was the most convenient way to bring in projects with the ultimate goal of “sustaining the architectural design practice” – a euphemism for collecting design fees from clients in order to run businesses in a capitalist world. In addition, there were not any other intellectual mediums through which I could voice my intellectual and moral discomfort. I knew that there was something not right about the current practice of architecture in which I was engaging, but there were not any other options in the discipline itself I could explore. It was this moment of

4 The most vivid moment about this came to me after I had submitted to a respected architectural journal an experimental paper I authored on how architects often used the term “ethnography.” My argument in that paper was simple: Most practicing architects used the term without the etymological, epistemological and methodological understanding of it in the field from which they had borrowed it to embellish their presentation to the clients. I received a rejection almost immediately from the editor who did not want let the paper be sent to reviewers. This editor was quoted, “The author of this paper [i.e., me] does not understand architecture enough to criticize architects…Also, the use of the personal pronoun in this paper renders the paper too subjective for
encountering these cognitive dissonances that I decided that I would like to spend a few years embarking on a different kind of project with which I was hitherto familiar.

Before I knew it, I was going back for my master’s thesis research in 2007, and then again in 2008 for a personal research project, in 2009 to conduct even more research and learn Mandarin Chinese, and nearly every year afterward for my doctoral research. China would become the country that I would return to almost every year to learn Mandarin Chinese and conduct research in history, sociology, and anthropology. From the summer of 2013 to the time of the submission of this dissertation – for almost three full years – I have been living in Shanghai, where most parts of this dissertation have been written.

Structure of this Dissertation

This dissertation primarily presents findings from my three years in Shanghai, consisting of the 16-month-long ethnographic fieldwork beginning in the summer of 2013 in a particular lilong neighborhood in Shanghai, and the next 20 months residing elsewhere in the city. After leaving the neighborhood, I moved to a high-rise apartment to which some of my informants from the neighborhood had moved to study their lives after relocation. Some of the findings, however, also come from the additional 20 months of my residency in the same city after my formal ethnographic fieldwork was over in the fall of 2014. Built between 1928 and 1932, the Tranquil Light a respectable journal such as ours.” After several attempts trying to explain to this editor that I had a professional degree in architectural design, which had qualified me a professional practicing architect, and a master’s degree in architectural studies, the editor still did not want to consider the paper.
Neighborhood, a pseudonym given to this lilong neighborhood, was where I conducted my fieldwork.  

According to the “Hong Book,” a popular directory and address-finding book for foreigners living in various cities in China published by Foreign Commercial Press, the population of Tranquil Light in 1932 may have been around 500. It was a gated neighborhood for upper-middle-class residents. The residents included both foreigners and local Chinese who could afford to live in one of Shanghai’s most prime locations. A household of three to five members occupied each of the Tranquil Light’s 163 three-story units inside the compound, and the 20 additional commercial, similarly three-story, units on the periphery. The population, however, increased almost threefold to around 1,400 after 1949 as these luxury “crescent-styled” townhouses were turned into compact social housing.

According to official data provided publically by the local neighborhood committee in 2013, the new residents, including myself, accounted for 438 out of the total 3,172 residents. These were the residents who were “actually living in the neighborhood” (changzhurenshu, as opposed to those only having their names registered as residents but not actually living there). I have crosschecked these data with the census available in the almanacs of the district in which Tranquil Light is located.

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To protect the anonymity of the informants from whom I gathered information for this thesis, the specific names of places, and the name of the neighborhood itself as well as of informants are pseudonyms. The descriptions of the location and sources mentioning the location are limited so that the neighborhood’s exact location cannot be ascertained.

I am grateful to the research support from Tess Johnston, arguably the most respected historian of western architecture in Shanghai, who over the course of my field research in Shanghai had meticulously looked up, crossed-check, and compared information on the population of this particular neighborhood and its changes in demography, nature of business operation, and so on, for me from the Hong Books and a variety of Shanghai directories for the following years: 1921, 1923, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1939 and 1941 (which was the last pre-war record).
There were no publicly available data during 1949 – 1999, which may have been the result of both the constant shuffling of residents from one neighborhood to another, as well as the lack of unified and systematic data collection by the local work units who were in charge of the housing distribution in a lilong compound such as Tranquil Light during the era of high socialism. According to the available almanacs, the population of registered residents did not fluctuate much during 1999 – 2011: the number of families (hu) was between 1,280 and 1,558, and the number of residents (ren; headcount) was between 3,893 and 4,423, assuming that data collection was done correctly. From an interview with neighborhood officials at the neighborhood committee, the seemingly uncoordinated fluctuation of these numbers was a result of the influx of migrants who moved in and out of rooms rented from the original residents. Although there is a set of detailed data that precisely shows this influx – the difference between registered changzhuren (long-term tenants), and registered and non-registered short-term tenants – was only available to the government, and not me.

Picking up on this data is “Chapter One: A Community at the Center of the World” with the goal of painting an ethnographic portrait of the community. Information presented in this chapter includes the findings from systematic participant observation in Tranquil Light such as the basic structure of the neighborhood, daily interaction, economic activity, and political organization, to frame the rest of the dissertation. Drawing from both historical and architectural studies of the famous traditional alleyway houses in both English and Chinese, this chapter also sheds light on the history of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood vis-à-vis the history of the particular typology of the community known as the lilong – how they came into being and the reasons for them to be understood as “heritage” despite, as I will also later point out, their short history compared to the several-hundred-year-old heritage architecture found in other parts of China – as well as the local history told by the residents.
In “Chapter Two: Traditionalism as a Way of Life,” I turn to the lives of three individual residents of Tranquil Light. Through narratives concerning lives of three different groups of residents – the local, foreigner, and migrant worker – I show their sense of home, which can be understood through their shared approaches to the practicality of valorizing the past and traditional way of life. Although their senses of livelihood were defined by completely different socioeconomic factors, they used similar ideas of “tradition” as a way of improving their socioeconomic opportunities in their individual battles for economic return. Using the theoretical framework of urban sociology and anthropology as well as political science, I present the concept of “traditionalism as a way of life” as a generational notion describing how the performances of past practices, living in historic surroundings, and accepting a shared past could facilitate these residents’ socioeconomic life in their own local moral worlds (Kleinman 2009). These performances, however, are to be understood only within the highly contemporary framework, in which enacting or embodying “the past” has value in contemporary Chinese economic and globalized structures.

In “Chapter Three: A Sad Trope,” I will introduce the field site. The goal of this chapter is to present reflexive descriptions of my encounters with the physical and social over the course of 16 months of living in a room in a lilong neighborhood as a registered resident as well as an anthropologist. As the title of this chapter entails, these descriptions are presented in the reflexive fashion of an anthropological classic *Tristes Tropiques* (1961) by Claude Lévi-Strauss. The ethnography in this chapter is driven by practical questions such as, given the history of housing reshuffling and conflict among neighbors experienced over two generations of tenants, how the

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7 After I had moved out from the neighborhood, I continued to reside in Shanghai for the following one and a half years as a resident of Shanghai during which I regularly returned to visit former neighbors and continued to follow up with long-term participant observation.
neighbors interacted with one another. What were the rules, both written and unwritten, governing the use of shared facilities?

How do ordinary citizens get what they want in a system in which they have no say? In “Chapter Four: Street Corner Society and the Anthropology of Displacement,” I attempt to develop an ethnographic perspective on displacement, providing a more nuanced picture of this process arguing that it is not all about, as a few sentimental scholars would like to project, the maltreatment of the low-income residents. As in the previous chapters, this chapter uses a framework of urban sociology to present how the residents did not give in to the powerful state but instead helped each other out by equipping one another with shared knowledge to defend themselves against possible abuses of power. Contrary to the common perception that residents living in a powerful state are often passive receivers at the end of the political structure, these residents used both the local and global knowledge to their advantage in searching for ways to enhance their bargaining power. Locating the mobility and the dissemination of such knowledge in space, I point to the particular corner of the neighborhood where the old neighbors and residents exchanged their ideas relevant to the contemporary socioeconomic situation, presenting an alternative understanding of displacement that is different from the popular narratives concerning forced eviction and the unjustified use of eminent domain. This chapter provides an ethnographic explanation of how and why Shanghai has been able to urbanize at unprecedented speed despite its residents, who are also widely known for their economic mindset thanks to the city’s history as the most prosperous treaty port in the Far East less than a century ago. In this chapter, my ethnographical findings speak to many larger issues: internal migration, gender and sexuality, housing mentality, coveted political participation and subversive resistance, among many others. All of these issues have come about as a result of the
impact of the two major changes: rapid and massive urbanization, and the mobility of information and service sector economy, thanks to the broadly defined notion of globalization.

In “Chapter Five: Aspect of Change,” I propose the concept of “gentrification from within” to explain the phenomenon whereby communities become more diversified. Unlike in most places where gentrification has had a rather negative impact by depriving low-income residents of their homes, the process of “gentrification from within” has had the reverse effect of making the community more diverse (as more new residents are moving into the lilong), more financially sustainable (by way of the original residents renting their extra spaces to outsiders), and more livable (as people from different age groups, classes, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds are living together and learning from each other). Through both the conventional and current theoretical debates on social change and gentrification, this chapter uses Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s idea of artificial demand created by the financially privileged to keep the low-income residents yearning for what they could not possibly possess as a point of discussion for the concept of gentrification from within, which, I argue, is the reverse of Rousseau’s idea. It, however, is still too early to say whether this process can be considered viable in the long run because it relies solely on the effort of individuals who are trying to make the best out of the situation in which they find themselves. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to present my argument that the local policymakers need to understand this dynamic and the benefits of involving ordinary residents in the process of sustainable social change.

What happens when hundreds of educated young residents move into a centrally located neighborhood originally occupied by retired residents? Gentrification may be the first answer on the minds of many; yet, the answer from Tranquil Light can be surprising. In Chapter Six: “The Death
and Life of Creative Entrepreneurs,” I investigate the roles of different actors in the process of tourism development through the promotion of heritage and creative industries, for which Tranquil Light was once known. Utilizing the heritage structure of the traditional Shanghainese alleyway houses, the new residents engaged in new forms of value-added economic. These new residents benefited from the affordable rent of old and rundown buildings in a prime location. This chapter shows how the development of this commercial form of value-added entrepreneurial businesses was initially accepted and tolerated by the local state, as all parties – the new and old residents, and the state – benefitted. The presence of businesses run by these new residents was concurrent with the Shanghai’s government’s attempt to re-use architectural heritage to emulate the urban landscape of well-known global cities. Illustrated in this chapter, however, is how the perception of these emerging value-added entrepreneurial businesses and the visitor economy has gradually changed, as unequal distribution of the benefits from the growing tourist trade became clearly felt by the local residents. Engaging with various anthological, urban studies and creative economy frameworks (often referred to as "creative economy," but with a caveat, see Florida 2005), this chapter demonstrates another form of protest and resistance – against the implications of the new value-added entrepreneurial activities, and the visitors they attract, in a historic residential neighborhood.

“Chapter 7: The Meaning of Being a Man” is the last ethnographic chapter as well as the most theoretical chapter dealing with theories of masculinity, sexuality, family organization, and urban change. Constantly leaving and going back to Tranquil Light – making connections between the neighborhood and the rest of the city – this chapter presents the key sense of personhood of Shanghainese residents: Housing. In particular, I look at how the traditional institution of marriage plays a role in shaping an urban community through the residents’ attitudes toward housing. In Shanghai, parental perceptions of their involvement in helping their children find partners reveals a
duality of purpose: These parents often believe that direct parental involvement in matchmaking solidifies their (and their children’s) connection to Chinese tradition, while this same “tradition” reinforces a sense of modernity, since the parents view it as a way to relieve their busy, working children of the hassle of finding a spouse. This chapter reveals how the changing ideas of personhood, sexuality, family, and urbanity provide ways of thinking about the root causes of the Chinese housing bubble, rising divorce rates, and the decrease in the quality of communal relations.

Finally, the last chapter presents a few concluding remarks of what my dissertation hopes to demonstrate: how the knowledge of the urban process driven by the global value not only informs but encourages pragmatic local residents to “foresee” a different future and voluntarily get involved in both the physical and non-physical processes of urban social change to enhance their own interests. Although this dissertation is anthropologically unique and valuable in its own right to Shanghai, its theoretical contributions are also relevant in situations in many other urban places.
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Tucked away from one of Shanghai’s busiest streets is Tranquil Light, an 80-year-old housing compound consisting of 198 three-story row houses. Despite its 1930s British crescent-styled edifices and its tall symbolic steel gate, busy Shanghai pedestrians often walk past its entrance without even realizing that it was there. The neighborhood is located in the heart of the city’s most commercially vibrant district. The few who happen to notice it may be puzzled by how such a place could look so different from the indistinguishable high-rise buildings that surrounded it. Adding to the antiquated appearance of Tranquil Light was the presence of the neighborhood’s senior residents, who, dressed in their pajamas or dated leisure attire, would emerge from the gate every few minutes during the morning rush hour to meander over to the wet market and mobile vendors to buy vegetables, meat, and other ingredients to cook their daily meals. Standing across the street, viewing the neighborhood through the vertical bars of the entry gate only recently rebuilt to conform with the city’s historic preservation efforts, one can see how these walking anachronisms contribute to a rather contrasting juxtaposition of the city’s mobility dynamic. In the foreground, bumper-to-bumper traffic and throngs of blue and white-collar pedestrians form a wall of movement through which, every once in a while, senior residents dressed from another time would appear. Making little attempt to merge into the fast-paced world around them, these senior residents
would unobtrusively navigate their way into the slowest current of pedestrians, staying as close to the perimeter wall as possible so as to not only avoid the impatient office workers but also to have a vertical surface to support them as they conducted their own errands. Because the handful of small corners outside Tranquil Light where they used to sit and have conversations with friends had long ago given way to the central business district, these senior citizens often returned home as soon as their private mission was complete. Since most of these senior residents were in their late 60’s to early 70’s, the nature of their retirement did not have much to do with the businesses outside this small cloistered neighborhood. Since some vegetable vendors even offered home delivery via their mobile tricycles, the residents’ incentive for leaving Tranquil Light weakened with each passing day.

As most of these senior residents had already retired, going to the market to buy these raw materials for their meals was the only “work” that they had for the day, but then those who paid a little bit more attention to their way of life would see them not only in the morning but throughout the day walking back and forth inside the thoroughfare alleyway of the neighborhood as a way of exercising. This slow-paced scene might mislead one to think that Tranquil Light was a neighborhood for the elderly.

With the old-looking buildings in the background, and senior residents moving slowly in the foreground – in a crowded urban district dominated by a jungle of high rise buildings – many working-aged pedestrians might wonder how this neighborhood could still exist, given the skyrocketing price tag of such a prime business area as a result of the speed of urban redevelopment in China’s most economically viable city. In other words, how could a low-rise neighborhood like this still exist in the landscape of high-rise buildings in the globalizing city of Shanghai?
On the one hand, it could be the case that the municipal government of Shanghai has been successful in preserving the city's diminishing historical structures (Davis and Friedman 2014; Gutmann 2007; Kleinman, et al. 2011; Zhang 2011), in which case, the preservation of Tranquil Light would be an example of the government’s recent success in making room for the physical remnants of the city’s short history despite the dominance of rapid economic development that tended to favor tearing down the old and building the new from the ground up (see Levin 2010; Ren 2008; Tsai 2008). On the other hand, it might be conjectured that this neighborhood has already been gentrified, similar to many historic neighborhoods in downtown Manhattan with millionaire or celebrity residents, owing to the economic rationale that a larger number of richer tenants seem to make possible the survival of a much less dense use of land than that of typical prime real estate areas. In other words, to make up the monetary losses from not utilizing such a prime space for projects with much higher spatial density and therefore profits, the neighborhood had to welcome a process of renewal and rebuilding that would transform it into a high-end historic residence for exclusive, high-income tenants (see Urban Land Institute 2014). There are many such projects in Shanghai, housing upper-middle class transnational employees. Given the economic status of the majority of its residents, this was obviously not the case for Tranquil Light.
The idea of this dissertation grew out of the difficulty in answering the question of how Tranquil Light existed as stated above. While these two answers were not completely off target, they were rather oversimplified. Tranquil Light is neither a state-sponsored welfare neighborhood, similar to an assisted living facility, nor a gentrified urban place for the upper-middle class. In fact, the neighborhood was diverse with a mixture of residents from different age and income groups, as well as ethnic backgrounds. The retired senior residents still occupied more than two-thirds of the available rooms, while the younger residents between the ages of 6 to 30, who accounted for the other third, were often not seen during the business day because they were at work or at school,
leaving the daily street life during the daytime to be almost exclusively conducted by the elder residents.

The effectiveness of the historic preservation program was hence a much more convincing answer. That said, the execution of the program far from fulfilled its objective to protect and maintain historically significant architecture. In Shanghai, each district has its own local property group designated by the Shanghai Municipal Bureau of Planning and Management of Land and Resources to be responsible for restoration. The special document providing multi-color graphic illustrations, three-dimensional renderings, and outlines of the key guidelines for the rehabilitation of Tranquil Light published in 2013 contains the following “three recommendations for planning” (jiubi jianyi):

1) Fully respecting the exterior features of Tranquil Light and preserving, as a priority, the original ornamental elements and motifs of the buildings;

2) Repairing buildings with a strict reference to the original blueprints (attached in the report) focusing on the rehabilitation of their architectural structure and interior space; and,

3) Managing the surrounding environment of the buildings as well as the traffic planning around the area. The harmonious relations with the rest of surrounding buildings should be taken into consideration. The number of businesses operated inside the compound should be controlled.

In a follow-up interview with a deputy director of this group, he spoke with me about the plan he received from the Bureau in 2007 and 2013 for Tranquil Light: “our group has been doing our best to replicate the appearance of the original (yuan lai) buildings, by seeking historical materials originally (dao di) used in the original design about the neighborhood, including a blueprint of its original (di dao) iron gate.” The adjective meaning “original” (“authentic”) had been mentioned, in different forms, frequently during the interview. When asked about the interior of the building, this deputy

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8 Although this report is public, I do not reveal the official name and the document number to continue to protect the anonymity of the neighborhood.
director shared with me that the responsibility would be “shared between his property group and the residents themselves,” as the main responsibility of the group was to restore the façade of the buildings, including the distinguished steel gates on both sides of the neighborhood. The residents had been altering parts of their houses to fit their individual needs, which differed from one family to another, both for their own residence as well as those they rent out. The most obvious and common modification was to the 4 x 4 meter courtyards in front of the south-facing houses. Thanks to the nature of this empty courtyard, this was the part of the house in which it was most convenient to construct new structures. Many residents had built rooms to create spaces for additional tenants and functions, such as additional bathrooms and kitchens, which were not parts of the original structures, built in the 1930s.

Figure 7: A computer-generated rendering of a cross-sectional view of a typical row house in Tranquil Light showing both the courtyard on the south-facing side frontage of the house and the space on each floor. Rendering by Steven Y. N. Chen
Most of the open-air rooftops and balconies had been enclosed with walls and partitions to make extra space for additional interior rooms. Although the architecture of these 198 three-story row houses might appear unified from afar thanks to the brick line on all sides of the buildings, up close every building looked different owing to the different modifications on each and every single one of these buildings at the owners’ convenience. That is, the preservation effort seemed fruitful, but only insofar as the collective façade viewed at a distance was concerned. The local government’s preservation efforts may have been much more effective than those of a decade ago (Li and Zhang 2008); yet a major criticism made by scholars and the media alike has been whether or not the goal of the preservation effort itself is to cater to the upper-middle-class residents who perceive living in historic structures as a source of cultural capital (Yang 2013). Since skepticism concerning these two answers lies in the role of the new urban residents in transforming the former working-class quarters, this dissertation takes, in conjunction with the notion of heritage and historic preservation, the process of urban social change often referred to as “middle-classification” (zhongchanjiejihua), which local scholars would like to translate into the concept commonly known in English as “gentrification,” as its theoretical point of inquiry (see Ren 2008).

I had tried to find a nuanced answer to this question by living in Tranquil Light to conduct ethnographic research. For a 4 x 2 square meter room that was once the storage room of the house, I was paying a meager rent of 1,200 yuan per month (about US$200 at the time of this research)9 to a local Shanghainese landlord who lived nearby. Owing to the fame of the street outside the north gate, most people I knew in Shanghai thought that I must have recently won a lottery when I told them that I was living in Tranquil Light: “Wow, you are so rich! I thought you were just a student

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9 The exchange rate between the Chinese Renminbi (used according to the eleventh edition of The Economist Style Guide (2015) as yuan; also used are RMB or CNY) is between 6.05 – 6.47 yuan per US dollar. Source: Microsoft Money
doing research about Shanghai!’ said a 33-year-old Shanghainese colleague at a local university who grew up in a neighborhood similar to Tranquil Light in the 1980s. This colleague thought so for a good reason, as it would be unimaginable to not get a similar reaction if I were to tell people that I lived in Downtown Manhattan. From time to time, I also could not help but feel puzzled by how affordable my “shoe box room” was, given its central and convenient location at the center of the city. The rent may be appropriate because the room in which I rented and lived was essentially a tiny enclosed space with only a small window, and all amenities were shared with half dozen neighbors. On the other hand, there were moments when I felt such cheap rent was appropriate. These moments included when I had to deal with the physical difficulties confronting all of us residents daily as a result of both the building’s aging structure and infrastructure, such as the lack of heating, natural ventilation, and adequate lighting in the corridor, and when I had to wait for a long time to use the bathroom when someone else was using it. It was precisely these difficulties I faced, which I will further elaborate on in Chapter Three, that made me even more intrigued by the existence of this neighborhood. It was physically falling apart, and the only mechanism preventing it from being taken over by gentrification was the superficial preservation program.

The Lilong Houses and Shanghai

There has been much debate as to when the period of “modern China” began. If one is to rely on the popular perception that China became modern as a result of the influence of western modernity (usually by force), then the defeat of the Qing Empire in the Opium War in the mid-eighteenth century marked the beginning of modern China. Shanghai, then, was the epicenter of this modernization. The city, along with Canton (Guangzhou), Ningbo, Fuzhou, and Amoy (Xiamen), were the five coastal cities that the defeated Chinese empire was forced to allow foreigners to enjoy
extraterritorial rights as new treaty ports. Over the course of a century, Shanghai’s geography would be drastically transformed from a small town into the most important port in Asia, where the world’s largest trading and banking city came to be located (Bergere 2002; Howe 1981; Murphey 1970). During the initial stage of the treaty port era in Shanghai, the city was growing owing to the demand for housing as a result of the major uprisings in the Chinese territories and nearby provinces, such as the Small Swords Uprising (1853 – 1855) and Taiping Rebellion (1850 – 1863, which only affected Shanghai from 1860 onwards). After three flourishing decades in the twentieth century, a series of wars and political campaigns would eventually disrupt the city’s growth. Still, the treaty port era Shanghai represents the most vivid and fruitful materialization of western modernization. The eclectic architectural style represented in the urban landscape of the city at the time also reflects the culmination of globalizing forces that physically shaped Shanghai (Wasserstrom 2009).
Shanghai is situated on the tract of sediment deposited at the mouth of the Yangtze River, China’s longest river, originating from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau flowing into the East China Sea. Today, the Yangtze River Delta, the name by which this area is commonly known, has been a center for machine and shipbuilding, textile and chemicals, serving as China’s leading industrial and technological base, which was not the case before China’s involuntary opening up of trade to foreign powers as a result of its defeat in the Opium War in 1842. Until then China was an insular empire allowing only limited and controlled contact with other empires unless they were tributaries. Since 1842, Shanghai had been the most convenient point of access for foreign goods traveling to China by sea to enter its hinterland, as well as for Chinese products traveling outside of China. As
commerce blossomed, Shanghai also became urbanized. The British were the first to come to Shanghai right after the end of the Opium War. British developers re-organized the city’s spatial structure to accommodate the treaty port’s commercial activities. By way of what they called “the land regulations (of 1845, and later of 1854)” they imposed a new comprehensive plan on the traditional organically-grown medium-sized market town (Balfour 2002; Bergère 2009; Johnson 1995). Owing to Shanghai’s flat geography, the European-style grid structure was conveniently imposed. Rectangular blocks became the basis of land division and property investment. The British were credited with changing Shanghai into a “modern” city in the Western sense. They introduced modern infrastructures such as gaslight electricity, paved roads, and trams. The British also introduced, for the first time, western architecture for commercial use. As the logic of the extraterritoriality entailed, the British were allowed to set their own wages in hiring local Chinese laborers for their businesses (Goodman 1995; Henriot 2001; Lee 1999a; Lu 1999).
Since Shanghai was originally a market town, it had no infrastructure to support large-scale commercial activities and industries. During the Small Swords Uprising in the mid-1850s, a large Chinese population had no other choice but to flee the Chinese walled city east to the French Concession area to seek refuge. Since there was not enough housing to accommodate such a large exodus, a new form of housing had to be invented. It was obvious at this point that typical Chinese courtyard houses would be too luxurious for the laborers, and the foreign businesses needed housing that was not only quick and cheap to build, but could accommodate a large amount of people immigrating into the concession areas. Astute developers resorted to the idea of replicating
traditional British row houses, a series of short-width houses joined by common sidewalls (Guan 1996; Hammond 2006; Liang 2008). The local Shanghainese and Stanford University’s Curator of Asian Art Xiaoneng Yang (2012) sees the lilong houses as a “synthesis of Chinese and Western styles that was born out of opportunity” It was precisely because the typology of this kind of housing was easy for both quick construction and replication. The foreign developers then seized the business opportunity to meet the demand from the large numbers of Chinese refugees entering the foreign concession areas. By building simple adjacent wooden shacks in large groups to be rented out to these refugees, the foreign developers could make money quickly (for the detailed history of the lilong, see Non 2009). This typology was not only the most “economical” form of housing in Shanghai (Morris 1994b), but also, according to the architectural historians Edward Denison and Guangyu Ren (2006: 159), the single most profitable form of property development during the treaty port era: “120 of which can be built on an acre of land…the return on the investment in the building alone could be as little as two years”. Between the row houses were small lanes for access to each unit. There were no open spaces beside these lanes, which automatically served as areas for cooking, meeting, washing, and so on, which was perhaps the reason why these row houses have since adopted the name “lilong” – as “li” meaning neighborhood and “long” meaning lanes. Moreover, with the geometric structure of the row houses, they could be fit perfectly into the newly imposed rectangular urban blocks. With the success of the first few units, the developers had treated the building of the lilong neighborhoods as a profitable mode of property development. Within the next few decades, lilong had become the dominant form of housing in the city of Shanghai. Later, when China was forced to sign unequal treaties with other nations, there was an even greater expansion in the building of lilong neighborhoods from the newcomers, but with the innovation of making some of them exclusively for foreigners (and therefore larger). Although the initial typology for the lilong houses was built with cheap local materials for local laborers,
developers saw opportunities to also use the typology for residents from different social classes, such as foreigners, white-collar workers, and middle-class residents. The more lilong houses were built for foreigners, the more “super small” lilong houses were built for the local Chinese migrants, which they further subdivided. Some of these were about half of the size of the standard lilong houses, but had to accommodate at one point as many as four times the intended population of a single lilong house, as the families grew bigger and they also rented extra spaces for temporary tenants to make extra income (Lu 1999; Pellow 1993b). Owing to the heavy use and the lack of maintenance, some of these lilong neighborhoods had slowly degenerated into neighborhoods for low-income residents, and some became slums (pinminku).

Figure 10: An isometric drawing showing the structure of a basic lilong neighborhood. Image rendered by Wenjun Ge.
Since southern exposure to sunlight was important to Chinese dwelling culture, a tiny courtyard was designed in the front of each lilong house to resemble “some sense of the open space,” (see Liang 2008). Unlike the British row houses whose frontages faced each other to share access to a laneway, the frontage of the Chinese version faced only the south, where natural exposure to the sun could be maximized in order to accommodate the local residents’ need for Feng Shui, a system of laws considered to govern spatial arrangement and orientation in relation to the flow of energy. Hence, the frontage of the row, then, had to face the back of the previous row. This blurred the line between the different functions of space, as the usage of the front (entrance) was different from the back (e.g., cooking, washing, see Pellow 1993a). Since this orientation practically removed the sense of being front or back, it brought a new meaning of public space unique to Shanghai as a whole. The historian Xiaoneng Yang (2012) reminisces:

All public spaces that could be used were turned into daily life “public halls” (longtang): the coal stove in the morning, the toilets, baths in the open…Cooling oneself bare-chested, cooking side by side, eating and living on the street, selling goods from roadside stalls, looking at others from neighboring windows, whispering to one other—all these formed a special practice of the cultural and human landscape in which “it is good just to be alive.” Many of the longtang alleys became multifunctional clubhouses, guesthouses, hospitals, small factories, public restrooms… everything was there.

Those residents living on the same block in which their lilong houses were located, which were wrapped around by the “shophouses” (special peripheral units for the commercial purposes), were considered to be living in the same lilong neighborhoods (for the study of the housing typology, see Anderson and Ge 2008; Ge 2008). At the peak of its commercial boom in the 1930s, there were more than 200,000 units of lilong houses in the city of Shanghai (Morris 1994b). At the time, Shanghai’s population was around 3 million people. Most Chinese residents were living in lilong houses (Bracken 2013).
Western foreigners comfortably lived in Shanghai until the Sino-Japanese War broke out in the late 1930s, which was followed by World War II. Most foreigners had fled Shanghai by the early 1940s. After the CCP took over China from the Nationalist Party in 1949, only a small number of foreign subjects were allowed to continue to reside in China (Cheng 1987). As the original owners had fled the mainland, the majority of the lilong housing stock was confiscated and redistributed to local residents. Under the influence of the USSR socialist commune system, which provided the “iron rice bowl,” a system of free housing, schooling and health care in urban areas, the CCP had begun to implement the government-controlled work unit system (Lu and Perry 1997). The physical structure of a lilong neighborhood was perfect for this system as the residential units were enclosed by the walls of peripheral commercial units, giving both the sense of division between different work units and, at the same time, the sense of belonging to a single work unit among the residents living inside.
the same walls. During the high socialist era between 1949 and 1978, Shanghainese work unit’s workers occupied the lilong neighborhoods. The combination of heavy use, lack of maintenance, and the nature of the architecture (some were constructed with wooden frames), the lilong houses and neighborhoods had aged rapidly making it difficult for the residents to live in let alone preserve.

Since the economic reform in the early 1980s, China has experienced massive growth in export revenue and in the development of its domestic market. The 200,000 lilong units were only adequate for three million residents in the 1930s but were not enough to accommodate 11 million residents in the early 1980s. As impeding the economic growth would go against the open door economic campaign of the central government, the local government turned to the market to build more housing for the new residents. Thousands of lilong neighborhoods, no longer the most “economic” form of housing, were removed during this period to make way for higher-density housing typologies, such as mid-rise walkups and high-rise apartments (Peng 1986). From a financial planning perspective, this work unit system was nothing more than debt-financing, although one could argue that it was reasonably executed in support of other more profitable economic activities for the betterment of the economic whole (Dwyer 1986). The need for housing is a basic need; hence, access to housing needs to be fulfilled. Nevertheless, housing became an issue when the market became more open to competition from private investors and the government’s decision to take their hands out of the housing market in order to re-balance the losses from the first debt-financing stage.

In the early 1980s, there was a housing shortage making the provision of housing crucial to accommodating the growth of the urban population (Kim 1987). China’s land policy was a means of extracting cash from existing resources; hence, the leasing of land was then central to the city’s
process of capital accumulation (Harvey 1990; Wu 2009; Zhang and Ong 2008). In order to provide more housing at a rapid pace, the local government had to be untied from socialist-style housing provisions through work unit distribution and subsidization; therefore, the local government allowed private developers, including joint-ventures between private developers and state-owned-enterprises, to have a share in the market. By “resorting to” private developers, a large city like Shanghai could produce a lot of housing units to accommodate the growing population of the emerging urban center it was building (Molotch 1976; Peng 1986; Peng 1987; Wu 2001b). Not only was Shanghai a destination for Chinese job seekers (and migrants), but it was also a destination for foreign entrepreneurs and professionals including company’s executives. Real estate has subsequently played a crucial role in the spatial restructuring of the city. Yet, this does not mean that the local government abandoned social housing provisions completely. In fact, local governments have continued to run a so-called “dual-track” system; while the real estate market takes care of upper and middle-class housing, the local government continues to provide housing to existing residents through relocation and residents tied to the work-unit system through its housing subsidy program (Fleischer 2007; Hou 2009; Hu, et al. 2010; Lin 2007; Wu 2001a; Zhang 2010a). Both tracks necessitated the massive construction of housing units (Shen, et al. 2002).

Different groups of people from diverse income groups vary in their ability to afford their dwellings. The lack of urban housing registration on the migrants’ side only adds more pressure to their situation; yet, all actors, including the government, who do not highly regard their role, depend on their inexpensive labor (Chan 2010; Chang 2009; Gallagher 2005). The local government’s biased investment strategy in favor of the groups who have more purchasing power will not only lead to a severe gentrification problem, but also to an artificial bubble-like increase in prices in the property market (Wu and He 2005; Zhang 2010a). In fact, some studies have shown that this increase in
prices of real estate is the single most controversial political issue in urban areas (Davis 2010; Hsing 2010; Langfield, et al. 2010).

Figure 12: A photo showing everyday life in a lilong house. Circa 1935. Source: Virtual Shanghai Project (Image ID: 25046; Title: Inside a lilong (lane); Original publication in Barz (1935: 152), digitized by Virtual Shanghai Project)
For more than a hundred years, the lilong houses had, not only epitomized, but also were, essentially, the physical form of Shanghai dwelling culture (Non 2009). It was not until the early 2000s, about twenty years after the economic reform that brought about rapid change in China’s economy, that the majority of people in Shanghai were living in buildings other than the lilong houses, such as high-rise apartments (Tang 2006; Tsai 2008; Warr 2007; Wu 2001b). From this historical sketch, one might see how the lilong is, to Shanghai, more than just a physical structure but a culture in itself. Nevertheless, amidst the social change due to unprecedented economic growth, the discussion on a non-economic topic such as “what constitutes culture?” did not gain much attention from the public, who were more interested in the prospects of the future after a long period of the obtuse economic policy. Only after the mid-1990s was the discussion brought back to light, ironically, by the influences of the western historic preservation paradigm. The local government of Shanghai looked up to “global cities,” such as New York, London, and Tokyo, with an interest in replicating them to put Shanghai back on the map (Wu 2003; Wu and He 2005). Those cities are global because their urban forms and cultures represent a blend of history and modernity. Compared to those cities, Shanghai is relatively young, and the only history it seems to have is the heritage of its colonial legacy, i.e., the historic waterfront called “The Bund,” and, of course, the once ubiquitous houses and neighborhoods called lilong. In 1992, the Shanghai local government initially listed 398 municipal preserved buildings that were yet to include any lilong houses (Tsai 2008). Eventually, this list was expanded in 2004 to cover not only buildings but also city districts in the city. Twelve districts were given the status “conservation areas,” covering ten square miles in the Former French Concession area and therefore most of the remaining lilong houses.
The Neighborhood

Back in 2011, a former Chinese classmate of mine, who was, in fact, the person who first introduced me to Tranquil Light said to us foreign visitors to Shanghai when showing us around the city of his birth:

Shanghai is the center of China, and if we could all agree that China is the center of the world, then Tranquil Light – which is at the center of Shanghai – should, by default, be the center of the world!

As tongue-and-cheek as these words from a very proud local Shanghainese might have been, they ignited lively and ebullient laughter among his friends. What immediately resonated with me was his idea that Tranquil Light is “a community at the center of the world.” Despite having studied and observed Shanghai since 2006, I had lingering uncertainties on how to explain Shanghai’s claim to be “the center of everything.” Is it due to the cosmopolitan nature of its people? Or is it due to the transitional nature of its growth? Or is it due to the contemporary look of its buildings? Tied up in all of this was the contradictory nature of Tranquil Light. I came back to visit intermittently almost every six months until I decided that I would like to spend at least a year in this neighborhood. I wanted to understand how this neighborhood – left untouched at the center of the center of the world – came to exist.

Tranquil Light is technically a gated-community because there were two physical gates on either side of the compound through which residents could enter and exit. These gates were technically not open to outside pedestrians. Also technically speaking, only residents in possession of small electronic keys given to them by the company managing the neighborhood’s facilities and maintenance (locally known as wuye) would be allowed to pass through the gates. Security guards were always posted right inside the gates. Security cameras, also, were installed by the local street
committee (jiedao)\textsuperscript{10} to provide some protection for this so-called “strictly residential” neighborhood from potential thieves or criminals. Owing to the security guards who were often slacking off when on duty, however, the neighborhood’s internal thoroughfare alleyway was often crowded in the early morning and in the late afternoon as pedestrians used it as a shortcut to get to work from the main street on the south side to a minor street on the north side and vice versa. Schoolchildren also used this internal alleyway on their way to and from a school that was located on the minor road.

Although the steel gates opening to the thoroughfare alleyway were wide enough to accommodate two cars passing each other, only a small side door was typically accessible for pedestrians. The main gate into the neighborhood sometimes opened for cars, taxis, garbage collectors, and large tricycles and vendors to come through, as it connected the two roads running parallel on its north and the south sides. As well as these vehicles there were frequently pedestrians who knew that, instead of walking on sidewalks filled with dust from the construction sites outside on the eastern side of the neighborhood, they could follow senior residents through the small gate to use the thoroughfare alleyway as a shortcut between these two roads. Walking into this thoroughfare, whose length was about twice the length of a football field, in the morning, one would see senior citizens exercising, walking their dogs, cooking, watering their plants, washing and hanging their clothes, and simply hanging out in the dozens of small lanes that branched out from the thoroughfare alleyway to accommodate the entrances of the 198 houses. The din of daily activity was often punctuated by the blaring of horns from an electric motorcycle, ridden by someone trying to cut their way through the neighborhood. In the morning, different sounds of horn punctuated the din – that of the local

\textsuperscript{10} The jiedao (Chinese: 街道; literally “street”) is the second smallest political division of the People’s Republic of China. It is also known as “sub-district,” especially in terms of official political division. Typically part of a larger urban area, it is a form of township-level division of government. The smallest unit of urban governance is juweihui (Chinese: 居委会; literally “neighborhood committee”), an important social organizational unit to which I will return throughout this dissertation.
milkman notifying the senior residents that their rounds had been delivered. The neighborhood was organized around the thoroughfare alleyway, which was seven-meters-wide (about 21-feet-wide) and eleven branch five-meter-wide lanes. All the houses in the neighborhood were three-stories-high (almost ten meters in height).

Built in the early 1930s, Tranquil Light was among the most renowned and prestigious traditional urban neighborhoods known locally as lilong as mentioned above. According to an informant whose grandparents purchased a home in 1932 when the neighborhood had just been completed, the neighborhood used to be a burial ground for a clan that emigrated to Shanghai from another region located in Pearl River Delta in the southern part of China. During the first fifty years of British rule, British subjects stabled their horses there, owing to its proximity to the racecourse, which had been a popular place to go to for British subjects since its opening in 1862 (Braester 1995). Only in the 1920s, when the surrounding areas were developed thanks to Shanghai’s rapid economic growth, did a tycoon from a nearby province decide to buy this stable and on it build a 198-building-gated-neighborhood to be known in the next two decades as one of Shanghai’s finest communities for the well-to-do. Each building was designed to serve a single household of 2-3 residents. Among these households, only very few were original owners who purchased their homes in the early 1930s. Because of its prime location, Tranquil Light in the 1930s and 1940s was home to numerous public figures, such as heads of foreign companies, high-profile politicians, movie directors, sportsmen, doctors, and educators. Because of their close affiliation with the losing Nationalists (or the Guomindang: GMD), many of them had to flee Mainland China for Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as North America and Europe just before the Communist Party takeover in 1949. After the founding of the PRC, all private housing stocks in Shanghai were confiscated and re-distributed to a
large number of workers. The structure of the community changed rapidly to accommodate around four to five times more residents than originally intended.

The 198 buildings still standing today accommodate around 950 households of one to three persons. About 3000 residents were living there at the time of this research. The original number of residents in 1930 amounted to about 500. Two-thirds of these current residents – dubbed the “old residents” – had moved in during the first decade of the PRC when workers were relocated into confiscated housing stock, and between the 1960s and the 1980s when urban workers were allowed to trade their rooms with each other. Many Tranquil Light residents who needed more space owing to the expansion of their families traded their rooms with other families who would like to move closer to the city. The remaining one-third of the residents living in Tranquil Light including myself were renting rooms from these old residents. To the eyes of many, including the local and international media, the defining characteristic of the community is the co-existence of long-term owners with young renters from a variety of backgrounds, occupations, interests, and ways of life. The local and international media were particularly interested in the “unique” experience that the neighborhood offered.

The small “pavilion room” (tingzijian) where I lived throughout my fieldwork, about which I will return to discuss in detail in Chapter Three, was located on the second floor, directly above one of the entry gates; with windows on the staircase as well as in my room that almost opened directly onto the thoroughfare. Even if I could not see clearly because the windows were not facing the direction of the road, I could hear the activity from early in the morning until late in the evening. For more than a year, this small room next to the stairwell at the back of a house between the first
and the second floors was my home for at least six days a week.\textsuperscript{11} I will discuss in detail the tingzijian and my experience in it in the next chapter. In a lilong, facilities, such as the stairs, bathrooms, parking, and storage, were located in the back of the row in which my tingzijian was located. These facilities were usually in the north facing part of the house, allowing the living space such as the courtyard, living room, and bedrooms to face the desirable solar-oriented south. The living space on the south side required a high ceiling while the facilities only required enough room to stand. The gap between the two ceilings was a practical spot to extend the flight of stairs into a small multi-purpose room, hence the “pavilion room,” which was probably so named because it was not a “real” room in the same way the bedroom or the living room were to tenants, but it was not exactly a facilities room either. Residents originally used the pavilion rooms for storage or guest bedrooms. When the housing market overheated in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, many landlords began renting out the pavilion rooms for extra income.

Unfortunately, their northern exposure made them cold in the winter and hot in summer. This, combined with their lack of private bathrooms or kitchens, made them suitable for only the poorest and most romantic writers and teachers in Shanghai! Revolutionary writers such as Lu Xun and Mao Dun had once called a pavilion room home, creating their greatest masterpieces in these harsh conditions. In light of this, one can argue that the history of the pavilion room is also a part of the history of Modern China. Though conditions are much better in the pavilion rooms today, they are still far from being an ideal place to live. Yet from the window of my own pavilion room, I have been able to observe the most intimate moments of this neighborhood with my own eyes, hear the

\textsuperscript{11} Thanks to Fudan University, the work unit where I was a Harvard-China Scholarship Council visiting student who also generously provided me with a dorm room in a four-bedroom unit at its International Student Village, I could escape from my neighborhood one day a week – mainly to write, to read, and to have a hot shower.
characteristic sounds of community going on with my own ears, and feel the intimate intensity that these sights and sounds created in their convergence – what I term the “condition of urban life.”

Politics of Urban Space

My old house was just around the corner, but it was torn down in the late 1990s – together with some 150 houses in the same area, to make way for high-rise buildings…And after that, we were given a place south of the city center, which back then was not very convenient since it was in one of the city’s suburbs, but now, since Shanghai has been growing so quickly, it’s no longer considered a suburb anymore.

This story, which belongs to an informant in Tranquil Light, was indeed similar to tens of millions of Shanghainese residents whose houses were located in the so-called “upper quarter” (shangzhijiao) of the city. This area south of the main river of Shanghai was urbanized between 1840 and 1950 as a result of Shanghai’s early foreign investment, and as such gained a reputation for culture and status implicitly considered superior to other areas – dubbed the “lower quarter” (xiazhijiao) of the city (Pan 2002). That said, with the rapid urbanization as well as the building of both the high-tech satellite towns and Shanghai’s state-of-the-art metro system, the distinction between the upper and the lower quarters has become less fixed in the mind of the local Shanghainese. This applies in particular to those who grew up during the decades when Shanghai’s GDP skyrocketed into double-digit vitality.

As part of the upper quarter, Tranquil Light shared in the early prosperity of 1930s Shanghai, becoming home to many of the city’s political and social elite, many of whom vacated quickly during the rise of the Communist Party. After the reform of the 1980s and the rapid re-urbanization of the 1990s, the upper quarter was among the first areas to be developed for the new service economy. As infrastructure such as roads, highways, and metro lines was put into place, and swaths of land were
rezoned for large-scale redevelopment, many of the old neighborhoods around Tranquil Light began to face the wrecking ball. “In the early 1990s, because we were living in the upper quarter, we were asked to move out first so that they [the local government] could reclaim the land for redevelopment,” said a former colleague. He then continued, “At the time we were excited about it, as the house we lived in was tiny…nothing could have been worse.” When asking about why he and his family moved from the upper to the lower quarter of the city, he responded:

There wasn’t any “real” advantage to being at the center of Shanghai back then – it’s only in the minds of the old people who always saw the “upper quarter” as better regardless of the hard living conditions that were the same everywhere in the city – but everything is completely different now.

The city center of Shanghai is now equipped with much more advanced infrastructure compared to other parts of the city, including roads, bridges, metro system, water and electrical supply, and telecommunication, giving rise again to the “upper quarter” as a desirable area, mainly for commercial purposes. Fortunately, the awareness of the locals of their rights with the support of the media that has accompanied the commercialization process has made it more difficult for the government to reclaim land without immediate public backlash (Zhang and Baum 2004).

The senior residents, becoming increasingly concerned about the future of their own neighborhood, had begun to educate themselves on everything from their legal rights to negotiation strategies through a variety of sources, including realty websites, microblogs, online databases of housing prices, community newspapers, and word of mouth. A major lesson gleaned from this type of research was learning how to deal with the central government’s two primary and contradicting strategies. The first and most straightforward was the “all for one” strategy in which the entire neighborhood collectively negotiated the terms of their relocation (Dowall 1989). Nonetheless, it was also possible for residents to negotiate independently from the collective, leading to a second,
more insidious strategy wherein agents of the local government carefully maneuvered the relocation fund to compensate only certain residents handsomely, allowing these residents to convey through word of mouth their satisfaction, creating a domino effect of these shrewd residents who ultimately undermined the neighborhood’s collective bargaining power from the inside. Both strategies made it necessary to keep tabs on the prospects of the other residents in your neighborhood, so many of the shared public spaces in the central alleyways – the mobile fruit stand, the corner store selling the state lottery, the long brick wall where locals brought their laundry to hang-dry – became convenient areas for neighbors to share what they knew (and what they wanted others to think they knew). I will return to this particular aspect of community organization in Chapter Four.

Often when I ran into any of my neighbors in the thoroughfare alleyway, I would have to engage with them about the broadly framed question, “what are we going to do when we have to move out?” or specifically as, “how much do you think the government is going to give us considering how expensive this area is?” Questions such as these not only reflect the concern for Tranquil Light’s derelict condition in a city in a state of renewal, but also the idea that a familial home is central to the Chinese sense of personhood (Cohen 1976; Wolf 1968). When I first moved into my pavilion room in the summer of 2013, the construction of a new metro stop was in progress at a site once occupied by a traditional-looking neighborhood similar to Tranquil Light. The residents of this neighborhood were relocated in 2010 in the name of eminent domain, or the compulsory expropriation of private property for public use nominally in the name of public benefit with the compensation not set by the market but by the government or its agents. Anticipation about what may happen to Tranquil Light had been high owing to the numerous precedents and statistics showing the rise in property prices, especially the areas linked directly to the metro system. Although the old residents in Tranquil Light did not particularly form a formal or informal association to act
collectively to present their opinions regarding some of the major changes around the area, such as
the building of the new metro stop, the old residents were aware of both the value of the site, as well
as its importance to the building of the city’s image as a global city.

As mentioned above, however, we could understand the sense of being at the urban center, as in the
case of Tranquil Light, not only from a historical perspective but also from a practical one:
geographical centrality. Since the 1980s, Shanghai had been China’s largest city, and as the central
government designated it a supreme first-tier city – along with Beijing and the two southern
economic centers of Guangzhou and Shenzhen – there has been no sign that the city would be
hanging over this title to other contenders any time soon. As China’s economic center which
contributes the largest portion of the nation’s GDP, the sense of belonging and prestige, to many
residents, is defined by the proximity of their homes to the center of the handful of financial and
commercial districts – the aforementioned “upper quarter.” Tranquil Light is located right by the
busy retail and business streets in the part of Shanghai once dubbed the “Fifth Avenue of China,”
and is supported by both extensive networks of mobility on the ground, as well as the Shanghai
Metro, the world’s most extensive metro system as of 2013, underneath it. I will return to the
discussion of the notion of prestige and home ownership in Chapter Seven.

Globalization and the Heritage Industry

As a regular visitor of Shanghai for the last decade, I had heard about Tranquil Light from many of
my colleagues, friends, and informants. In fact, I had been aware of it ever since I first visited
Shanghai in 2006, but since I did not have the opportunity to spend time conducting any
ethnographic field research until almost six years later, I did not actually arrive at Tranquil Light until
the summer of 2011. More than half a dozen of my colleagues with whom I discussed my plan to conduct my field research in Shanghai mentioned Tranquil Light. “It’s nice but it’s not like Xintiandi or Tianzifang,” said my colleague in an architecture school.

The two places that he mentioned above – Xintiandi or Tianzifang – have always been, at least to the local Shanghainese, since the 1990s when Shanghai’s urban development began, exemplars of successful efforts to re-adapt old buildings for commercial purposes. In both places, the characteristics of the buildings were quite similar to the uniform row houses of Tranquil Light, including wall-bearing masonry structure (i.e. a nostalgic brick building envelope with an expressive brick line), three-story height, perpendicular orientations to alleyway corridors, and – most importantly – absolutely uniform aesthetics so as to give the impression of a traditional Shanghainese community. The curator of Asian Art at Princeton Art Museum and expert on Shanghai’s architectural history, Cary C. Liu, (2014: 134) summarizes:

Xintiandi, [a former lilong house] transformed into a lifestyle center with upscale housing along with shops, restaurants, cafés, and bars, has been called a historical redevelopment project. Highly successful, it has become a prototype for historical redevelopment in other Chinese cities. Almost the entire project area, however, is new construction, incorporating only some architectural elements from the original historical structures – architectural elements transplanted through time. Developed by the Hong Kong–based Shui On Group and designed by the American architect Benjamin Wood, Xintiandi retains a semblance of Shanghai’s past.

Whereas Xintiandi was rebuilt from the ground up and repurposed as a high-end retail district using the cliché of an old historic Shanghainese neighborhood, Tianzifang had gone through a series of both external (by the government) and internal (by the residents themselves) changes before 2007 when it became one of the “hippest” districts for commercial art and handicrafts. Listed in almost all guidebooks to Shanghai, these two neighborhoods were must visit destinations for those who wanted to see how the city might have looked in its colonial heyday. The rather interesting fact here,
however, was that most local Shanghainese residents I met during my early visits to Shanghai were insistent that I visit both Xintiandi and Tianzifang immediately. “If you want to see the ‘real Shanghai,’ you would have to go there,” said Mr. Zhang, who was one of my first informants in 2011. As I have written elsewhere (Non 2012) it was ironic that a native Shanghainese was telling me, a researcher conducting research on historic architecture, to pay a visit to neighborhoods that were rebuilt and adapted to look old for commercial purposes, let alone how they used the term “real” (zhende) to describe them. For many of those who have studied China, it might be easy to see this as a form of expressing the mianzì – or “face value” – principles or standards of social norms that have always been part and parcel to social interactions within the Chinese society (Ho 1976; Hu 1944; Hwang 1987).

In Shanghai, well-known preservation projects are mostly commercial. Xintiandi is known to many as the Chinese counterpart to Quincy Market in Boston, and the same architect designed both projects. Whereas the idea of the famous project in Boston is well known for its success in revitalizing a rundown urban area through the extensive use of its civic history, the project in Shanghai is well known for its “newness” in the sense that it reshaped the extremely commonplace into a form of urban architecture with only a nod to the same. This is indicated by its status as a metro stop as early as the 1990s, lobbied for well in advance of the area’s success by its developer, a Hong Kong real estate tycoon who has familial ties to Shanghai. Before this, the area was simply another typical lilong neighborhood whose architectural style, though seen as rather impressive today after an intensive and costly makeover, was originally considered commonplace.

It is no surprise that, since most residents of Shanghai were familiar with the lilong, no small number of academics and scholars advocated its preservation (Ruan and Sun 2001). Most local
professionals before the architect of the Xintiandi project did not see this architectural typology as having any potential for retail, let alone a high-end commercial, project, especially when juxtaposing it against the high rises that were being introduced to Shanghai as a symbol of the new era of economic development. Shanghai in the 1990s, as many scholars have observed, was a city that was coming out of a time capsule (e.g., Bergère 2009; Johnston and Er 1993; Wasserstrom 2009). Nearly every building looked the same as it had before the communist takeover in 1949, with any buildings constructed after that time featuring the minimal and economical aesthetics associated with the USSR. It is clear, then, why the new high-rise buildings were extremely seductive to the government, developers, and local citizens alike, even if they might not be considered “new” by Western sensibilities. What is surprising is that the architect did not get the idea for the traditional vernacular aesthetic of Xintiandi from his Chinese counterparts. His inspiration came from the lane life in the middle-sized towns in the mountains around Siena. He never even visited Shanghai before the design began, and because of seismic requirements in the city, constructed the development completely from the ground up, with little to no acknowledgment or regard for the existing buildings on the site.

There is, then, nothing genuinely Shanghainese about Xintiandi – not even its concept of an intimate social world in small lanes crisscrossing the city’s morphological fabric. The structures are also new, and in no way related to any historical “preservation.” In fact, if asked, the local residents would say that Xintiandi is special because it is new, and it represents the history of Shanghai in a perfectly reconstructed form that the locals themselves are more comfortable “claiming” as a representation of their unique urban culture. I often felt that this was what my Shanghainese informants meant when they suggested I should visit this place. The novelty of Xintiandi was then all about the newness of the approach to building a retail mall. Despite the fact the project is nothing new to the
locals, Xintiandi attracts foreign visitors (and possibly even more out of town domestic tourists from other parts of China) because it represents something old and, perhaps, also “authentic,” in a neat package which is also the narrative that locals find agreeable.

While on the surface, the resident’s narrative gives the sense that they were “shamed” into undervaluing what they have, I would rather see it as their means of translating their place into the global-state narrative. The enactment of this sense of “lack” has political ramifications in helping the residents to gain the upper hand in the compensation business. The residents understand, in fact, the more they can encourage the government to see them as submissive to the development program, the more likely they would get what they want, which could also include a better compensation package from the government-led relocation process. In other words, there are indications that the original residents are motivated by the information shared between old and new neighbors to reenact past ways of life, presenting their conformity to the local government’s efforts. The majority of them are second-generation Shanghai-born residents who speak both, the local dialect *Shanghainese* (or the Shanghainese dialect) as well as Mandarin Chinese. Many of them are also from other parts of China; mostly from the south such as Jiangsu, Zhejiang, and Guangdong provinces owing to the close geographical proximity and cultural familiarity. This presentation of the past has political potential, as residents themselves became implicated in the state’s projects of “heritage traditionalism,” which I will further discuss in Chapter Four. On the other hand, incoming residents who rent renovated spaces are enticed by globally circulating romanticist preconceptions of traditional Chinese neighborhood life.

Most residents living around the area knew that Xintiandi had been completely rebuilt. So, how most of my informants would rather want me to think of something recently built to look old, as
“authentic” (didao), is telling. Built forms are powerful in how they have the potential to influence these residents’ perception of the familiar. The direct importance of Xintiandi is that there has been speculation that it is “the future of Tranquil Light,” according to an informant. Residents believed that eventually they would be relocated to other - bigger and more modern – housing units and that Tranquil Light would be turned into a high-end retail district like Xintiandi, owing to its central location, convenient access to public transportation, and its obvious “historical” architectural style. Stories regarding historic preservation are often about how the authorities “heritage-ize” a building without any concern for the residents living in them; thus, creating resistance on the part of the residents who would like their ways of life to also be respected alongside the prominent edifices in which they live. Consequently, there are protests in many historic cities around the globe regarding the way their municipal governments commercialize the history of the ordinary citizens without allowing the residents to have a say in such processes that affect their lives, such as the influx of tourists and the commercialization of local products, places, and traditions, to name a few. n Shanghai, what I have observed presents a similar story but through a different optic: it was a story of residents of a rather young former treaty port city who not only did not object to the “heritage-ization” of their ordinary houses, but also spoke up in support of the local government in building highly commercial projects utilizing the past as an asset. All of this was done to promote the residents’ own interests in making their lives better, which I discuss in Chapter Five. Pragmatism in the mindsets of the Shanghainese residents was at the center of the way they presented their histories vis-à-vis the city in the global era.

Social Change in a Traditional Neighborhood

The first foreseeable issue with the total gentrification of Tranquil Light is that it will be preserved as
a single historic neighborhood in the middle of the surrounding high-rise buildings. The remaining residents, who are mostly elderly, were already finding such encroachment to be daunting when I was living with them. One after another, street corner wet markets disappeared and were replaced by the “City Super” type of élite supermarkets catering to high-end consumers and expatriates. Many of the remaining residents, who were mostly elderly, found these changes to be alienating, as they were used to buying their groceries at street markets instead of in the supermarkets, where ingredients for cooking such as meat, vegetables, oil, and fruit would cost many times more than they would in the wet markets or stalls in the nearby alleyways that had been removed. The same distancing also applied to the residents’ social life, as their neighbors from nearby communities with whom they used to converse on a regular basis had moved out, and the network of cross-community neighbors was replaced by an isolating individualized way of life. A 72-year-old female informant who had lived in Tranquil Light since 1955 reminisced to me:

Most of us who moved here in the 1950s went to the same school. Because of that, we still call each other “classmate” (tongxue) even though we’re no longer students (laughing). Most of us also worked in the same work unit (danwei). We studied, lived, worked, and got married in the area around the neighborhood. For three decades [1950s-1980s], all the women in the neighborhood would gather every Wednesday to clean the lanes and alleyways. We would chat while mopping the floor, sharing news, jokes, and, of course, gossip. We still lived together until the late 1990s when many tongxue began to move out, and only came back during special holidays or when they had to come and collect the rent from whoever was renting their room. Consequently, there are fewer and fewer people to talk to, as the younger people are so busy with their modern lifestyles.

As a result, many residents, even those who had lived in preserved neighborhoods like Tranquil Light for their entire life like this 72-year-old informant, eventually gave in and moved out, as there was no longer much sense of sociocultural belonging nor economic feasibility (e.g., affordable food) for them in a place that is simply forced to look old without any social meaning.
Another issue is that the government seems to be interested in only revamping the facades of the edifices but not the living conditions of the residents as a collective, which would help them feel at ease in dealing with the rapid physical and social change around them. For instance, an admirable amount of the investment was made in renovating Tranquil Light to its original 1930s condition as part of the “Better City, Better Life” campaign leading up to the World Expo in 2010. At the time of my research, Tranquil Light looked clean and organized, with new pavement, iron gates, brickwork, and so on. The living conditions of the residents, however, remained the same. Some residents had spent their own money to upgrade their homes – the very small rooms that were given to them 20-30 years ago, but not everyone had the money. And while some residents might want to stay on in the community, they might also be tempted to follow previous residents who made good money by renting out their rooms. For others unable to benefit from the process, either because of their personal family situation or the undesirable condition of their homes, they became increasingly antagonistic over the perceived unfairness. These developments were possibly dividing the community while also intensifying tensions among old residents, as well as between them and the newcomers, which I discuss in Chapter Six. Previously, everyone in my community knew each other, but with the influx of renters over the past ten years, residents may only know the neighbors in their own branch lane. “Because people are moving in and out very rapidly, most people here are now strangers to us,” said an informant, who was also a respected senior citizen in the community.

There was only so much that a neighborhood that looked old could do to attract the attention of the locals who were pacing hastily on the busy sidewalks. Having said that, the non-locals, especially foreign visitors, often spotted it primarily because of the stark contrast between the old brick façades of the 198 houses and the glittering reflective façades of the high-rise offices, hotels, and shopping malls behind which the houses were tucked, as well as the window displays where hundreds of
global brands exhibiting their luxurious goods for the upper middle-class citizens that dominated the pedestrian-scape of the area. Mr. Zhang did not suggest that I visit Tranquil Light, although he did say that if I “walk up north about a mile, I would get to a street on which many of the old neighborhoods have yet to be torn down.” Since most of the roads in Shanghai were not oriented north-south or east-west, the mental map vis-à-vis Shanghai’s geography was a critical piece of knowledge to acquire intrinsic to the long-term resident’s mental process, and is especially important for those who would hope to live there on a long-term basis. The area where Mr. Zhang lived was in the south of the main east-west spine of the city, which from the mid-19th century to the late 1940s was the border between the French Concession and the International Settlement. “Going north” for Mr. Zhang meant simply to cross this four-lane road, plus the elevated superhighway above, which was the east-west lifeline of Shanghai’s traffic to the area that was once the economic hotbed of the Far East, where the mesmerizing waterfront known as the Bund was located. That said, like most of the retirees in the city, Mr. Zhang no longer had the need to travel outside his neighborhood; he could therefore only remember so much about places outside of his immediate locality, although he did make an admirable effort to inquire from his neighbors for me, resulting in a list of interesting neighborhoods that he believed were ideal field sites for my research. That said, he still insisted, “You have to go to Xintiandi to see the real Shanghai.”

12 Mr. Zhang also shared with me: “Shanghainese residents who were born in the early 20th century may even know this highway by the name of a small canal – Yangjingbang – before it was filled up and turned into the road that still maintained the crooked shape of the ancient waterway.” He was born in the early 1940s but knew this particular historical fact from his father who was a keen reader of Shanghai’s history. “Not many Shanghainese themselves know about this,” he said with a proud smile.
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Chapter Two:
Traditionalism as a Way of Life

My last name is Hu. I was born here in Shanghai in 1944. When I was in elementary school I lived on a road where there was a well at the entrance to a traditional *liang* alleyway neighborhood. Growing up, I remember throwing a coin into this well.

Mr. Hu, whom I called Teacher Hu (*Hu Laoshi*) out of my respect for his knowledge of Shanghai,\(^\text{13}\) was my first informant in Tranquil Light. Through our common acquaintance, we got to know each other in the summer of 2012 when I was searching the city looking for a site for my research on the gentrification of inner city Shanghai. Speaking Mandarin Chinese with a heavy Shanghainese accent, the ebullient and eloquent Teacher Hu never shied away from expressing his views on anything whether it be political or otherwise – it was for this reason that he and I got along with each other so well. I had been a regular visitor to Tranquil Light, which was then “his” neighborhood ever since that summer until a year later when I moved there, making Tranquil Light also “my” neighborhood as well in the fall of 2013. In fact, I probably would not have been able to move in so effortlessly.

\(^{13}\) This might be the reason why people still called him teacher although he might not have been a teacher at all. That said, as noted by the anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011) after the 1980s, the term “teacher” (*laoshi*) has become a generic term of respect, replacing the term “comrade” (*tonzhi*) used in the high communist period (1949 – 1976). According to Kipnis, the term “teacher” can also be used to address people one does not recognize, especially when asking for assistance from a stranger (the *de facto* reason why I call him Teacher Hu).
were it not for his skill as a local real estate agent in finding me a room there. By the time we met, Teacher Hu had helped many non-Shanghainese find rooms to rent in the neighborhood, which made him the obvious go-to person in the neighborhood for my search. He would charge an agent’s fee (around 11-20% of the monthly rent) every time he was successful in connecting a neighbor who had a room to rent out to clients who were usually either local Shanghainese seeking to move closer to the city, non-Shanghainese (waidiren) workers from other provinces or foreigners finding a place to work, study, and live in Shanghai. When we first met, Teacher Hu neither used a cellphone nor had access to a computer. A small-screen with a bulky cathode ray tube (CRT) back color television was his main source of information, and was also the most technologically advanced electrical appliance he possessed. Thus, for more than a year we communicated with each other through physical letters (as described in Non 2013). Throughout this chapter, words in blockquotes are Teacher Hu’s in a series of letters that he exchanged with me, whereas texts in quotations are his verbal exchanges with me.

Ever since it was designated by the central government to serve as the “head of the dragon” in the early 1990s, Shanghai has been a city in flux. To accommodate skyrocketing population growth and exponential economic activity, Shanghai’s urban structure has been constantly shaped by a specific pattern of urbanization (Li 2009; Logan 2008; Yusuf, et al. 1997). Like many big cities, land in the city was reclaimed from the original residents and resold by the local government to real estate developers. The broadly defined “public good” is usually the main argument for the local government’s use of eminent domain to reclaim valuable lands for higher income residents or businesses. Stories of residents fighting against the government to maintain their right to receive adequate compensation are not new. Teacher Hu’s story in fighting against such efforts to relocate him from Tranquil Light was no exception: “I wouldn’t be able to imagine my wife and myself being
anywhere but here,” Teacher Hu said when I asked him about their imagination of the future. Looking into Teacher Hu’s unusually expressive and sad eyes when hearing him say that he would not be able to imagine life anywhere else but in Tranquil Light, I could not help but feel moved by this anticipated loss. The Teacher Hu I knew always smiled and laughed. His heavy pounding on my shoulder every time we saw each other always reminded me of his vitality. He had always called a small and narrow row house, half of which he and his wife rented out for extra income, home. “In a couple of years, if not fewer,” said Teacher Hu, “the government will turn our houses into high-end shops just like the others.” Teacher Hu and his wife were not naïve, as he well knew their destiny from many of the old neighbors who had moved out from their 80-year-old neighborhood in the inner city to apartments in the suburbs. The situation he described is highly possible given that a new metro station and a shopping complex were in the process of construction right outside the walls of the community. In recent years, the residents had been less fearful of forced eviction, which for a decade after the designation of Shanghai as the “head of the dragon” was a common practice by the local government. As a standard way to make a profit from the existing land, the local government of Shanghai was also known for its brutality (see Gechlik 2005; Hsing 2010; Wu 2013). Nonetheless, it was often the case that the local government would make a decision about which part of the city to develop, and the residents could only accept it (Shao 2013). This lack of agency, one may call, was pervasive throughout in Teacher Hu’s words. “Perhaps, I’ll join them in the suburbs,” he said. But still, his deeply sad eyes told me that there was something about this place he called “home” that nothing else could replace. There seemed to be a discrepancy between the quantitative goal of the state and the qualitative needs of the residents in their basic access to dwellings in the city (Harvey 2008; Zhang 2010b).

In this chapter, I will show how the different notions of “tradition” have different roles to play in
the lives of different people through the stories of three residents in Tranquil Light neighborhood: Teacher Hu, Rob, and Little Huang. Their lives – the original, the incoming, and the floating resident – are snapshots of housing situations in urban Shanghai today. I show that even in the same neighborhood, the sense of place and meaning of home are defined by completely different factors. The question that I seek to answer in this chapter is: How do we understand the sense of place, and the meaning of home, in a city aspiring to become global?

The Home of Teacher and Mrs. Hu

Before 1949, my father was a well-known entrepreneur running a chemical factory, which almost went bankrupt during the Sino-Japanese War [1937 – 1945]. It’s the CCP that saved his company by investing in it turning it into a state-sponsored enterprise, as the party saw its potential to improve people’s lives. Our family used to own an entire unit [of a three-stories] of a lilong house, but later the CCP asked my father to let other families live in the front and back rooms on the first floor, as well as one of the rooms on the second-floor. Since the CCP had saved his factory, my father welcomed families of other comrades in need of help. After 1949, we weren’t well off. My mother and my older sister worked in a fabric factory outside of Shanghai, and my two younger sisters worked in a production unit on this alleyway.

A house played a central role for the vanishing traditional Chinese family (Cohen 1976; Knapp 1999; Wolf 1968). Not only was it physically important as a shelter for the multi-generational members of a family, but also symbolic as it represented the power of the leader of the household, who provided for the members in harmony. The spatial arrangement of the house represented the “inherent” hierarchy of a traditional Chinese family. For instance, the head of the family (usually the oldest male) occupied the largest room at the most private part of the house (usually on the upper floor if the house had more than one story), whereas the other members and the wives that were married into the family stayed on the lower level. “Older sons were given preference over younger sons,” said Teacher Hu as he remembered quite well what it was like when his parents were still alive. Unlike a traditional Chinese courtyard house, a lilong house was narrow and small but was still
spatially organized in a clear hierarchical division between the space for the head of the house and the rest of the household. As a son, he used to sleep with his parents on the second floor of the house. His father’s younger brothers and their relatives who came to Shanghai to find jobs stayed on the third floor. At one time, there were more than a dozen people in his house, which was originally built for half that number (three bedrooms for six people).

“Life was not convenient as there was no bathroom inside the house,” said Teacher Hu as he reminisced about the difficulties he faced when he lived in the original house that belonged to his family. The way most of the traditional lilong houses was constructed did not include an indoor plumbing system; thus, before the pipes were installed in the late 1970s, everyone had to go to a communal well to get water or buy it from the seller who would go door-to-door to deliver water. In terms of sewage, residents used a chamber pot for their night soil, which would be collected in the morning by private tricycles crisscrossing the lanes for this personal waste, which would be turned into organic agricultural fertilizer (Lu 1999). After the CCP took over the city from the Nationalists, the neighborhood where Teacher Hu’s family lived was transformed into part of a large work unit, or a place of employment to which the socialist workers were bound to for life, which in

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14 This part of the history of the lilong particular resonates with me. When I was a child in the 1980s, my most favorite television series was *The Bund (Shanghai Tan)*, a Hong Kong period drama television series first broadcast on Hong Kong’s TVB Jade in 1980. It was one of many television series that were also broadcasted in Thailand where I grew up. Arguably the most famous popular story about Shanghai, *The Bund* features a Cinderella story: The protagonist Ding Li (played by Ray Liu) was an uneducated migrant who at the beginning of the story worked as a night soil collector before he eventually had the entire city under his feet; all of which led to his eventual downfall at the end of the story. As a member of the lowest-low class in the city of sin, the negligible night soil collector Ding Li would travel to different lilong neighborhoods with a tricycle, and a mask covering his nose. Thanks to his hard work and incessant attempts to elevate his living standard and social status, Ding Li eventually joined a gang and become of the most influential person in Shanghai – dubbed "Shanghai Godfather.” In many occasions, I had presented *The Bund* as my first (and obviously childish) impression of Shanghai that eventually played a pivotal role in getting me to Shanghai for the first time in 2006.
turn provided them with housing, child care, schools, clinics, shops, and other services. He moved to Tranquil Light in 1964 with his wife, as he joined a work unit in the area specializing in measurement (and quality control for industrial equipment; zheliang) and he retired as the head of its measurement unit. A 4 x 5 meter bedroom, not the spacious one on the third floor, was given to the couple along with a small elongated allotment space on the first floor of the building that was previous a garage of the original tenant in the 1930s. Before Teacher Hu and his wife moved in, this “room” had previously been used as a corridor leading to a stairwell communally used by the residents in the same unit.

In the early 1980s, Teacher Hu was sent by his work unit to one of the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to help set up a handful of factories needed to fuel its newly established labor intensive, export economy. He returned only a few years after because of chronic health problems. His wife was also no longer employed because her work unit was dissolved. Their daughter was born a few years before Teacher Hu left Shanghai for the Southeast of China. When he returned, the family found themselves in a difficult situation, as the small monthly pension given to them by the local government was barely enough to support the couple let alone their teenage daughter. The couple needed extra income to support the family. Thus, Teacher and Mrs. Hu turned the elongated allotment space on the first floor – the five-foot-wide frontage and about 20-foot-deep – into a small grocery shop, selling all kinds of items but mainly cigarettes, liquor, and confectionery. When I met him for the first time in 2012, he had been running his small shop for more than twenty years.

As modern 24-7 convenient stores are ubiquitous in Shanghai, the couple did not make much money from their local grocery store business. Teacher Hu made most of his income from working as a local realtor. Nonetheless, it was precisely this business that gave them, according to Teacher
Hu, “something to look forward to in the morning.” Having spent time sitting on a small wooden stool in front of the shop that he provided for people to come sit, drink tea, play cards, and smoke with him (although he no longer smoked because of his chronic illness), I felt that the shop was more a venue for conversation than anything else. In fact, many elderly residents I spoke to called his shop a “platform” (pingtai) to engage in all kinds of conversation, from local politics in the district to collective reminiscence, and gossip about their neighbors and new residents. People did not really come to buy anything, but to talk, share, and chat with Teacher Hu and his wife about politics, law, reminiscing about all kinds of nostalgic stories (usually about Mao’s China). That said, Teacher Hu had benefitted from making his place known as a pingtai – it drew people to the space that would become an informal space for him to meet with his potential clients. Most of the new residents who had gotten their rooms in Tranquil Light through Teacher Hu told me that they had gotten to know Teacher Hu as they were wandering through the thoroughfare of the neighborhood where he would ask them whether or not they were looking for a place to rent. As the late afternoon arrived, children would bring their homework to the shop and gather around a small knee-height folding desk that Teacher Hu kept right by the entrance of the shop to give the children a communal place to do their homework. This could also have been a factor for his being called “Teacher.”

Heritage Traditionalism

The most difficult time in my life began after I returned to Shanghai. Although we had the house [meaning two rooms: the bedroom on the third floor and the small room on the ground floor] we didn’t have jobs. I had to start my own business, as my health no longer permitted me to work in the factory. Uneducated, I was not on par with anyone doing business then [in the 1990s] and didn’t have any ambitious goals. All I wanted was to support my family. In retrospect, I didn’t understand [business] at all and only earned very little, but I worked very hard, no matter how unclean the conditions or how physically drained I was. Occasionally, I also made money on the side by repairing broken machines using the skills I learned from the factory. Eventually, my wife and I decided to open a grocery store.
The era after the death of Mao Zedong was a period of experimentation, ranging from the highly imbalanced “let some people get rich first” economic agenda to the one-child-policy family planning program. Older residents like Teacher and Mrs. Hu had only modest pensions from the government and had to take care of themselves. This treatment of retirees was increasingly the case after the market had replaced the state in the provision of basic social infrastructures such as housing and employment (Solinger 1999). While the economic reform program had dismantled the social safety net, a much-needed source of support for the elderly who could no longer work in factories, the one-child-policy also disrupted traditional family relations, as the children becomes the focus of the entire family’s attention especially on where to invest in terms of human resources (Fong 2004). Teacher Hu recalled how, when he was young, he and all of his siblings were close to their parents and grandparents as they were all living under the same roof taking care of the each other.

Figure 13: A scene in a branch lane similar to that of Teacher Hu where senior residents have set up a table for other to join in and engage in conversations or communal activities. Photograph: author.
Though the couple's house and shop were both very small and dilapidated, the ownership of both upheld their sense of dignity. This was because their social life revolved around the house and the shop. Every morning, I saw people, young and old, walking by Teacher and Mrs. Hu’s house and greeting them while they were watering their plants in front of the house. Teacher Hu usually invited everyone to sit down with him for tea, basically so that he could have someone to chat with. With around a hundred residents living in the branch lane, that part of the neighborhood was small enough for all residents to know each other. Walking from a typical hectic commercial street of Shanghai where everyone was a stranger to each other into Teacher Hu’s neighborhood where everyone was a neighbor, I felt as though I was in a completely different Shanghai. There is a critical point to be made here about this spatial sense of the past.

Rhetorically-speaking, one might say that when in the neighborhood, one could feel as if one was “going back in time,” moving away from the chaos of modern life into the local communal world where everyone knows and helps each other. This type of romanticization is, in fact, a common attitude among historians of Shanghai, which deliberately overlooks many other issues such as conflicts, violence, and the health hazards resulting from living in an unsafe environment with a rundown structure. Historians, architects, and planners – the outsiders – often paint the picture of a romantic urban place as a result of the nature of their archival research methods that seem to accentuate certain aspects of the past (e.g., Estève and Cheval 2010; Liang 2008; Warr 2007). This particular emphasis on a selected portion of the past, or what the native Shanghainese anthropologist Tianshu Pan (2005) calls “Shanghai nostalgia,” is a doubled-edge sword, as this sentimental longing only handpicks aspects of the past that come in handy for the local government’s efforts to stress its cultural capital to make Shanghai a global city (Wai 2006; Wu and He 2005). As a result, the government made a few preservation programs that only focus on the
preservation of the physical structure of “romantic neighborhoods” without concern for the residents living in them. In fact, the use of Shanghai nostalgia usually results in “state-led gentrification” of the neighborhood, or a process whereby the local government initiates plans to relocate the existing residents of a residential neighborhood to make use of the historic structures mostly for commercial purposes and mixed-use programs yielding high profit margins (He 2007; Iossifova 2009; Wang and Lau 2009). Thus, I had always found rosy historical accounts questionable if not misleading and thought that the discourse of nostalgic sentiment did more harm than good to the original residents living in the neighborhood.

Teacher Hu emphasized this romantic past, especially when speaking about the future of his neighborhood. “There is no place like this…we maintain the tradition of community,” he said to provide a stark contrast between his neighborhood and the typical communities living in high-rise towers. For more than a decade, he always wore the same clothes. Although he had a washing machine, he often washed his and his wife’s clothes by hand. “I have a feeling that the machine can only do so much,” Teacher Hu said. He always got up early to water his plants in front of the house, sat in front of his shop talking to his friends and neighbors during the day, assuming the roles of “local historian” and real estate agent helping those in need to find rooms to rent in the neighborhood from late afternoon to the early evening. That is, both of these factors probably play a role in how the community recognized him as a respectable figure in the neighborhood. Once the sun had set, he would be sitting outside his house; sometimes working on a “mini project” such as building a wooden chair on demand or fixing small electrical appliances for his friends and neighbors; sometimes he would reminisce about the good old days to anyone who walked by. He had never wanted to change this daily routine and, up until the time that this research was conducted, did not want to learn about any forms of technology. In addition to his color CRT
television set that was in his bedroom on the third floor, he only had a tiny AM/FM radio on which he listened to traditional/classical Chinese music every morning when he and his wife were down at the shop on street level. While one could see the Teacher as an old man who was living his life in the strict accordance with the traditional way of life, his way of life could also be understood as a survival strategy. Teacher and Mrs. Hu were not the only ones reenacting the routine of the past as a statement in support of the importance of their existence.

Figure 14: Another scene in a branch lane similar to that of Teacher Hu where senior residents have set up a small grocery shop to sell household items as well as for other to join in and engage in conversations or communal activities. Photograph: author.
There are many ways to “perform” a place, but in the case of Tranquil Light, we might say that it was this traditionalistic place-promotion that defined the character of the neighborhood. In urban China, although there was neither an official neighborhood nor homeowner association with actual political or financial power to instigate change, the informal gatherings of group of senior residents is what played an important role in building personal relations among the residents and between the state at the local level and members of the community (Read 2003; Tsai 2007). In fact, the discourse of maintaining traditional ways of life had supported the state’s policy on urban conservation thus far. Nevertheless, there was also reason to see the performance of traditionalism as a way in which one could strengthen his or her opportunity when an option to relocate was on the table. One of the most senior members of the famous mahjong circle in Tranquil Light told me:

It could have been a rumor that some residents gained an advantage in negotiating for monetary compensation from the relocation authority by “playing the sympathy and victim card,” to which a “coherent story” about the attachment to the place that was about to be torn down was central.

Each of these residents was, therefore, given a rather enviable package, ranging from market-based monetary compensation to a new home three to four times the size of the old home in the suburbs connected to the city by metro. The “playing victim” strategy had proven to be more useful to many residents than resistance, such as protest, or, more famously, the “nail household” (dingzihu) in which the homeowner refused to relocate to make way for new construction although the surrounding areas had already been cleared for the project (Erie 2012; Hess 2010; Shin 2013).

In other words, these daily enactments of the unchanging past/present have political potential. They represent the ways in which residents themselves become implicated in the state’s projects of that I would like to call “heritage traditionalism.” According to the anthropologist Theodore C. Bestor
(1989), “traditionalism,” in this sense, is a collective discourse of the present in support of the past that particular members of an urban community use to create meanings vis-à-vis social forms around which people organize their lives. For instance, in the neighborhood of Miyamoto-cho located in the lower quarter of Tokyo, where Bestor studied the social organization of an ordinary urban neighborhood in the 1980s, older members of the neighborhood used the past as a tool for the present. Rituals and certain idealized forms of traditional events and exchanges were maintained by the group of people, who used them strategically to position the neighborhood in the context of the city’s fast-paced urbanization. What could be thought of a form of traditionalism was Teacher Hu’s resistance to modern technology and commitment to selling small items, although a handful of high-end hypermodern shopping malls were just right around the corner from his little shop. Teacher Hu’s conscious attempt to assimilate the way of life by which he had lived for five decades in Tranquil Light was a part of a collective effort in the neighborhood to create a particular sense of meanings for themselves, as well as a form of subversive power. In contrast to Miyamoto-cho residents did not try to harken back to historical rituals or events, rather the residents in Tranquil Light used history as a way of claiming the importance of their neighborhoods as “heritage.”

Performing a Place as a Way of Life

Our Tranquil Light Neighborhood was once a very decent place. Celebrities and famous public figures used to live here, such as the founding father of Chinese theater arts Mr. Zhang, the scholar of modern Chinese education Mr. Lin, and the calligrapher Mr. You, just to name a few...During its prime [in the 1930s-1950s], there were many famous stores, such as the famous café at building 5. Shanghai’s most well-known auto repair shop was located in building 25. There was a famous local dry cleaner by the name of “Hollywood Dry Cleaner” in building right outside the north gate. There were respected travel agencies in buildings 1, 37, and 67. Most importantly, there were many high-end tailors, such as those that were in buildings 38 and 54 – the most famous of all, “Lao Wang Tailor,” lived in

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15 Etymologically, the idea of traditionalism is not really about having a tradition as in having a belief – as the suffix “ism,” which owes its roots to its original Greek meaning “to imitate” suggests – but as in assimilating a long-established custom, or belief that has been passed on in a particular way.
building 38. I don’t want to brag but that’s where my wife and I got our wedding clothes made!

After 1949, only a few of them got to stay. Yet, there were still famous people living here. For instance, there was a very famous soccer coach, who used to be just a kid playing soccer in the alleyways (nongtang), breaking his neighbors’ windows! In retrospect, there are memories from the good old days that still linger in my mind, which, every time I think about them, bring me a lot of joy. It was an era during which no one cared about each other’s family background, which is why that person could later become a famous soccer player and coach regardless of his meager childhood life. I have lived here for about 50 years, and I could satisfy all my daily needs without going anywhere else, which remained true after the founding of PRC in 1949.

As the sociologist Louis Wirth (1938) notes in his classic essay in urban sociology, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” on the way in which the personal familial relations are replaced by mediated transactions in large cities, we can likewise understand this aspect of distinctive urban practice as “traditionalism as a way of life.” Teacher Hu and his wife could well have known about the benefits of performing, by combining Bestor’s and Wirth’s concepts that I would like to call, “traditionalism as a way of life.” While the residents want to play up the “protect their historically important neighborhood” card (since it not only means the protection of their way of life but also their survival), however, they also had to tolerate the ever-worsening conditions of a century-old building.

While on the one hand, the discourse of traditionalism helped to maintain the ways of life of the older residents such as Teacher and Mrs. Hu, and to re-affirm the “cultural importance” of the neighborhood; on the other hand, it was this discourse that backfired on them because they had to live in the “traditionally dilapidated” conditions. Anything new they brought into the neighborhood, including amenities for the convenience of life, would provide an excuse for the local government to come in and re-evaluate their ability to live in a historical neighborhood.

Like Teacher Hu, many retired old residents in the neighborhood and a few middle age residents were also important actors in this process of maintaining “traditional” ways of life. Every day from 3
to 5 in the afternoon, for instance, two-dozen old residents often got together. What seemed on the surface to be an ordinary hang out for old neighbors was a session to share with each other ideas regarding the “collective narratives” about the history of neighborhood primarily to tell the relocation authority. Through a network of frequent mahjong players (dama), observers who hung out at a particular lane, the residents consistently shared what they knew about the neighborhood. Since the primary influxes of residents during the liberation after 1949 and the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, many residents were not familiar with the historical narrative (i.e., “why is this neighborhood historically important?”), let alone each other's stories. A 60-year-old informant who moved into the neighborhood in the mid-1970s, for example, shared with me that she had a small notebook in which she would write down stories, narratives and urban legends associated with Tranquil Light Neighborhood whenever she heard them from her neighbors during the mahjong gatherings. When she knew that I often traveled to the Shanghai Municipal Archives to conduct research, she would invite me to sit down on an old wooden chair in front of her house to ask me whether or not I had found anything “historical” (lishi) about the neighborhood that she could learn. It was ironic that it was the informant who wanted to learn about her neighborhood from me, rather than the other way around. This particular informant had moved in during the time when “Many of the prominent Shanghainese families were forced to move away during the Cultural Revolution,” she said. The history of this particular period of sociopolitical movement and turmoil was one of the topics about which none of my informants who had lived through it wanted to talk about. “Stories – and gossip – spread faster than anything; so, we’ve learned that if we could show proof of how much we love our home we’ll get a better compensation package,” she said. There were cases where the residents who were unfairly forced to move out during the Cultural Revolution had been given their rooms back after the dust settled in the late 1970s after the death of Mao Zedong and the capturing of those responsible for the turmoil. This
same resident shared with me a rumor that she also claimed “everyone knew about it [and that’s why we do what we do]”:

Mr. Li, who lived in the lilong neighborhood north of Tranquil Light by Suzhou Creek, was given his room back eventually. Like many of his neighbors, he got kicked out during the Cultural Revolution and was able to return only in the 1990s when he could prove that the lilong house was his before the Cultural Revolution. Now that lilong neighborhood has been razed to make way for another big residential and commercial development complex. Guess what? The local government offered him an 80-square meter (about 861 square feet) apartment in the suburbs – and one million yuan in cash. His room in the lilong was smaller than mine! Just because he could prove that he was more sentimentally rooted to the place he could get so much money! According to one estimate, he has received about 2.65 million yuan (about US$300,000)!

This story was not all exaggeration, although the algorithm that the local government used to calculate how much a family should receive also included the number of residents possessing Shanghainese household registration as well as the actual floor space of the unit. This informant, like many of her tongxue, was eager to fill in the gaps. As she wanted me to share with her what I had learned about Tranquil Light from the Municipal Archives, she eventually opened up to me that she did not know much about the neighborhood although she had lived there for more than three decades. “I was too young to know what was going on when my parents told me that they would be moving into a better neighborhood in the upper corner of Shanghai,” she said. Nonetheless, she would have been in her 20s then – which was not “that” young – and it could have been the case that her parents did not want her to know how they had managed to take advantage of the situation to benefit the family. Teacher Hu mentioned in a letter to me once that housing reshuffling in the 1960s – 1970s was chaotic (luan) – “people accusing each other of things that nobody was even sure whether really happened; but the accused were usually punished, and had their assets taken away,” he said. This informant did imply that many people who had moved in during that time “have some dark histories that they would want to die with them.”
This informant, not surprisingly, had a reason to be insecure. Unlike most of her mahjong playing neighbors who moved in with their parents in the early 1950s and had spent their entire life there, she moved into the neighborhood in the 1970s during the Cultural Revolution. What this case shows is the residents themselves had a keen understanding of the limit of their political participation and realized that the more they could encourage the government to see them as accommodating to the development program that the authorities were seeking to execute, the more they could receive from the relocation process. By equipping themselves with a seemingly benign historic preservation narrative that the municipal government had no obvious way to reject, they could get much more from the relocation process than from engaging in, what my informants liked to call, “pointless fights” (mei yisi de chongtu) that could only lend the local authorities even more legitimacy to crackdown using the residents’ unwillingness to comply as justification. In other words, there were indications that the original residents (that is, the residents who lived in the neighborhood before the economic reforms in the early 1980s) were inclined to reenact and valorize past ways of life by performing their conformity to the historic preservation movement in Shanghai. This enactment of an unchanging past had political potential, as the old residents themselves became implicated in the state’s projects of heritage traditionalism, while incoming residents who rented renovated spaces were enticed by the globally circulated romanticized preconceptions of traditional Chinese neighborhood life.

Rob: Traditionalism as Cultural Capital

It was Rob, a 28-year-old US expatriate who I met through a former colleague of mine in Shanghai that introduced me to Teacher Hu. Rob and Teacher Hu got to know each other from the first day Rob moved into Tranquil Light. “This neighborhood is small…we know right away when someone
is moving in,” said Teacher Hu. Both Rob and Teacher Hu were living in the same branch lane and saw each other on a regular basis since the frontage of Teacher Hu’s shop was opposite to the door leading to Rob’s room, which was on the top floor of the building. Rob had a bachelor’s degree from a college in the US, and moved to Shanghai in 2010 right before the Shanghai Expo’. Like many educated US citizens who speak “Standard US English,” he began his life in Shanghai by teaching English to school children in the business district that was within walking distance from his lilong apartment, earning enough to rent a rather spacious apartment about four times the size of Teacher and Mrs. Hu’s. Rob was attracted to the lilong neighborhood thanks to the historical accounts he had read about Shanghai.

It was, in Rob’s own words, the “connection with the past” that made him decide to rent a room in a renovated lilong house that the original residents revamped to specifically rent out to foreigners in this neighborhood, instead of a typical apartment in a high-rise condominium. Unlike Teacher Hu’s apartment which was dense, packed and dark because of the solid walls on both sides of the house that were put up to divide it up into space for extra renters, Rob’s apartment was bright, clean, and voluminous – renovated to be more “modern.” Unlike Teacher Hu’s house that looked like it was frozen in time for more than half a century, Rob’s apartment was equipped with high-speed Internet, an air-conditioner, and a large flat screen TV. Rob enjoyed living there, to the point where “I live in an old lilong house in Tranquil Light” became his first line when introducing himself to a new friend, colleague, or business collaborator. His hobby of collecting antique furniture was well known among his clients. While he bought most of the furniture himself from his neighbors who were selling what they saw as old and valueless, many of his furniture pieces were given to him as gifts by his friend who was, according to Rob, “a self-proclaimed interior designer [meaning that he does not have a degree in interior design] who is specializing in the ‘1930s art deco’ style.” Implicit
in his proclamation of living in a lilong apartment, Rob, nonetheless, never openly accepted that it was this “symbolic value” (known among his friends colloquially as “coolness”) of the place that was most important to him, along with its central location which made it convenient for him to walk or bike to work. He mentioned that he was about to speak to his landlord (who, by the way, had moved to the suburbs to live with her children) about extending his lease to stay there for as long as “he would be living in Shanghai.” Rob enjoyed both the privacy he had in this top floor apartment and all the attention from the children and other residents who wanted to speak to a “white foreigner” (laowai or bairen). In fact, Rob was not the only foreigner in Tranquil Light. There were several foreigners living in the other lanes. When I asked Teacher Hu what he thought about Rob’s romantic attitude toward his neighborhood, he replied, “see…even foreigners want to live here!”

At any given time, there would be 10-15 apartments ranging from 3,500 – 8,000 yuan per month (US$500 – US$700) available “exclusively for foreigners” to rent. These rooms were renovated by the original residents (e.g., Rob’s landlord) who themselves had moved somewhere else usually to live with their children’s families. Apart from Teacher Hu, there was another senior local resident who was also a well-known local real estate agent whose job was to show interested renters the rooms. When I asked him why these rooms were “exclusively for foreigners,” he replied with a chuckle: “No Chinese would want to live in an old house like this…besides, for 3,000 yuan, they could live in a decent high-rise apartment!” While there was some truth in the statement, it could also be the case that 3,000 yuan would not get one so far given the housing market in Shanghai which, despite the overall decline of the economy, did not seem to lose its steam (Shepard 2016c).

Although Rob did complain that there was no hot water or the water pressure was too low when he needed it and that the toilet clogged up from time to time, as there was only so much infrastructural
improvement that could be done to an almost a century-old house, he was content with his living conditions and had no intention of moving elsewhere. When I asked Rob whether he knew that he could live in a modern high-rise apartment for the premium price he paid for his lilong apartment, he replied, “of course I know…but this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience…I am going to have a lot of stories to tell after these years in Shanghai.” After only a couple years of teaching English as Second Language for living, he quit his teaching job to set up his own private “comprehensive” spatial design business. By “comprehensive,” he meant that he would provide all from of service ranging from interior to landscape design. He would offer any services as demanded by his clients. One of his clients, a Chinese businesswoman in the imported wine business, shared with me, “Robert’s selling point is undoubtedly his Western design sensibility, which is in high demand among both the high-end local Chinese clients, and foreign companies – it’s the kind of sensibility that is appealing to Chinese clients as highly international, that no Chinese designers could ever reach.” Rob was interested in design, and in the 16 months during which we were neighbors in Tranquil Light, I always saw a stack of books and catalogs on designs on his coffee table. His new job, as a designer, had gotten him paid more than double of what he used to earn as an English teacher. To keep up with the demand, he needed to perpetuate his reputation as a “classy Western designer.” In fact, after he had changed his job from teaching to designing spaces to suit clients with Western taste, according to him:

[Since I became a designer] It’s more important than ever that my clients know that I have “a good taste.” Can you imagine if they find out that I live in a normal boring condominium and not an authentic lilong house? They’d probably stop giving me projects, as they’d think that I am just another foreigner. Living in a lilong house in Shanghai is like Anderson Cooper living in a multimillion-dollar historic apartment in downtown Manhattan.

Here we see another form of traditionalism – as a form of capital that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” (first published in English in 1986). Extending Karl Marx’s idea of capital (1990[1867]) beyond the economic and into the more symbolic realm of culture, Bourdieu
refers to this particular concept of capital as the collection of symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, credentials, and material belongings, which a person acquires through his or her deliberate attempts to sort after them, by becoming a member of a particular social class. In his particular remark above, Rob was sharing a similar form of cultural capital with a well-known celebrity, which in turn helped him to formulate a sense of collective identity – an identity of people whom he believed to possess good taste. Among the three forms of cultural capital that Bourdieu has outlined – embodied, objectified, and institutionalized – Rob’s traditionalism as a way of life was closest to the objectified form of cultural capital, as he deliberately claimed membership “in this club” as such, by renting a room in a historic neighborhood. In other words, he was attracted by the “façade” of a perceived authentic Shanghai life, which he believed to be a way of increasing his credibility among the upper middle class who would be hiring him (similar to the authenticity discourse and practice in Grazian 2003).
Figure 15: A room of an expatriate living in a renovate lilong to house similar to that of Rob’s. This room was not Rob’s but represented a similar style and taste to his. Photograph: Ryan Carter.

Having a trivial role in the community development of Tranquil Light’s neighborhood was the neighborhood committee, the lowest level of governance in charge of civil affairs, overseeing and enforcing micro-level policies such as family planning, mobile population management, crime prevention and census administration, in the scale of a neighborhood. The neighborhood committee did not have the authority to orchestrate the marketization of the neighborhood in this way. It was the residents themselves who having made careful observations of other gentrified lilong neighborhoods in the city and then adopted similar strategies to attract the target customers, facilitated this marketization. Annette, one of the first foreigners who lived in the neighborhood from 2005 – 2009, shared with me that she was introduced to this community by a Shanghainese
friend who was looking for someone to rent out her room, as she was moving in with her husband. Back then the rent was not high since the condition of the room was almost hazardous, and there was a rumor that the neighborhood might be torn down to make way for high-rise buildings. In the early 2000s, the condition of most of the houses in Tranquil Light was rundown as a result of the lack of structural maintenance (as it was structurally impossible because of the age of the buildings). The ambiguity of property development in the central business district allowed foreigners like Rob and Annette to enter Tranquil Light. “Everyone knows that the neighborhood will be torn down, but no one knows exactly when. It’s extremely difficult to speculate,” said one of the old residents. For the owner’s part, since she did not know when she would be asked to move out, the best strategy for her was to try to make as much money as possible while she still legally possessed the house, which benefitted the renters who were not only not asked for high rent, but also did not need to provide much proof of their income, status, let alone a guarantor to be trusted as a renter. Although the foreign residents were operating on a small budget, they would still be willing to pay higher rent to the old resident landlords, than the local “cut-throat” Shanghainese or migrants who Teacher Hu mentioned in Chapter 4. Hence, the old residents were much more welcoming toward these newcomers who brought with them much more “gentrified” ways of life (Hamnett 1991) – “precisely because they boosted rents,” said Teacher Hu, compared to their old neighbors, who were mostly retirees.

By the mid-2000s, it was already quite fashionable for an expatriate to live in an old-styled Chinese house. The aptest explanation lies in the notion of what Herzfeld (2004) calls “the global hierarchy of value,” or the idea that there is a top-down structure of different values, in which Eurocentric values, especially the notion of antiquity, are at the top. In other words, the residents operating entrepreneurial businesses and foreign residents themselves were “romanticizing” the past – since
they had never lived and therefore experienced the hardship of living in a house without adequate infrastructure – perpetuating a specific perception of the traditional houses in the global hierarchy of value. Some of these foreign renters also contributed to picturesque perceptions of lilong architectural heritage through media, literature, artwork, as well as in scholarly works. For ordinary Chinese residents who had lived in the traditional alleyway-houses for generations – and therefore knew more than the foreigners about the problems – it was the high-rise apartments that they wish to escape to from the dilapidated lilong. In addition, contrary to the foreigners’ perceptions, the local residents saw the high-rise buildings as symbols of the Eurocentric presence of western modernity. This notion was particularly useful when thinking about how high-rise apartment buildings have become the symbol of an emerging global city in the recent years, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5.

Apart from refurbishing the room herself, Annette also had to adjust her way of life to fit in with that of the residents of the community. For instance, she had to learn to live with a thin wall through which she could hear the TV program being watched next door, with a “quasi-shared” bathroom (meaning it was her bathroom but anyone in the building could also use it), and so on. But after making several adjustments, she found herself living in her “dream apartment.” The success of her story went viral in social media among expatriates, which led to an exponential interest in the neighborhood. Since Tranquil Light was a historical edifice, it also received direct benefits from the “Better City, Better Life” city beautification campaign by the local government to prepare the city for the Shanghai Expo in 2010. During the years preceding the event, Tranquil Light basically received a series of free face-lifts and refurbishments from the local government, so that it would look presentable to the record 73 million visitors traveling to Shanghai during the course of six months from April to October of 2010. The neighborhood also benefited from the presence of the
foreigners, as Teacher Hu often implied, since their presence reinforced the original residents’ claim about the importance of the neighborhood to both the outsiders and the local government. Moreover, the local government also operated a dual-track evaluation of lilong houses: while the original residents had to live in the houses in their original condition owing to their lack of financial means, the foreigners were allowed to modify their apartments in accordance with their tastes and needs. The sense of place for Rob was the sense of being part of the tradition, like most of the “people engaging in value-added entrepreneurship” who were using the heritage gimmick of the lilong houses as their selling point, which I will turn to in Chapter Six.

**Little Huang: “Traditionally, Everyone was Equally Poor.”**

Finally, there was also Little Huang (Xiao Huang), a 22-year-old fresh graduate from a college in Shanghai who, by the time we got to know each other in the fall of 2013, just started her full-time job at a private capital management company. Her main job was to call prospective clients to convince them to open investment portfolios under her management. Little Huang was not originally from Shanghai but from a nearby province. Through Teacher Hu who was her real estate agent when she moved in about six months before we met, she had been renting a tingzijian in Tranquil Light that was about three-fourths the size of Teacher Hu’s bedroom. This room, though small, basically had everything that she needed, including a study desk, a wooden box in which she stored belongings, and a bed. Because Little Huang still relied on her parents’ financial support, she had to be economical with her living expenses. Unlike Rob who lived in Tranquil Light because he wanted to, Little Huang lived there because it was her only choice: it was the only affordable place in the city within walking distance to her workplace, which would allow her to save money. Like many college graduates in China today, Little Huang aspired to become successful in life, thus she was
keen to learn English and we got to know each other through my offer to help her practice English.

Because Little Huang’s tingzijian was so small and only had a tiny window, it was usually dark. I felt as though I was walking into a cave whenever I walked into her room. The small desk that was attached to the wall was a place where Little Huang did everything from studying to eating dinner, to watching television shows online. Everything else was kept in a small plastic closet next to the desk. Little Huang turned a bunk space supported by a doubled-cross wooden lintel into a personal storage space, where she kept all of her books (mainly in the self-help genre), packs of instant noodles, energy drinks, and cosmetics. Visiting Little Huang’s room showed me an entirely different living experience and meaning of home. Teacher Hu’s place may have been small and dark, but at least he had the shop that was completely open to the lane downstairs where he basically did everything else except sleep. Although Teacher Hu had to come downstairs every morning to empty his urine collector, since there was no bathroom on his floor and he was too old to walk down to the first floor every time he needed to use the bathroom, I could still imagine myself living in his place. I, however, could not imagine myself in Little Huang’s room. There was a window but she barely opened it because of the noise and mosquitos in the summer, and the cold wind in the winter, therefore there was lack of sunlight as well as ventilation, leading to poor indoor air quality in her room.

“What choice do I have – none,” said Little Huang. “But, it’s o.k., traditionally, everyone was equally poor, right? So why shy away from it?” I sensed that there was more to the story despite the strong moral position that Little Huang showed:

You just have to get used to it...I had a room a bit bigger than this size at my house in my hometown, but there were a couple of windows opening to a small park, which was nice. This room was the only one that I could afford. I’d tell people that I have a room in downtown Shanghai! (laughing)...but no, I wouldn’t bring my loved ones here...but I admit
it is not that bad. It’s close to the university [she was still in her last semester of college while interning at the company] and everything. As I had already graduated I could no longer live in university housing, and this place is the cheapest I could get in the city. I could live in the suburbs and sit on the train for an hour to get to the city, but why would I do that? It’s not convenient, but I don’t have money. Here, at least I am in the heart of the city. People don’t need to know that I am living here. They only need to know that I work in the city! Trust me, if you live here for a month you’ll get used to it just like me!

Characterized as migrant workers seeking temporary employment on a temporary basis, the liudong renkou (literally “floating population”) have become an integral source of cheap labor since China’s “opening up/coming out” period in the early 1980’s, despite the unwillingness of the local governing bodies to recognize them as legitimate (if temporary) residents (Zhang 2001). The legacy of the high-socialist era household registration system, or hukou, labels each citizen either as rural or urban, tying all citizens to their birthplaces if they want the benefits of healthcare and education (this is a topic that had been extensively studied, see Chan 2009; Cheng and Selden 1994; Whyte 2010). Little Huang was from another part of China; therefore, her hukou was not that of Shanghai’s. So, in Shanghai, Little Huang did not get treated the same way as the local Shanghainese. With her bachelor’s degree from a university in Shanghai, she may have possessed more symbolic capital than a construction worker, domestic helper, or factory employee, who, like her, also do not possess hukou; however the lack of such status automatically rendered them the liudong renkou in Shanghai. Nevertheless, since Little Huang had a more stable contracted job, an “outsider” (waidiren) may be a more nuanced label (as often the term liudong renkou also implies the lack of job security, see Solinger 1999). It may be the case that Little Huang could eventually change her hukou through, what she called, “a highly complicated points-based system” after at least five years residing in Shanghai and having a stable white-collar job. At present, however, without a hukou from the city of Shanghai, her status was similar to that of the ten million floating population, in the sense that she was not permitted to purchase a property or a car, and had limited access to public services. Additionally, China’s post-1980s economic reform program shifted the role of supplying welfare
housing from the state to private developers – ultimately providing the liudong renkou limited access to public housing, and consequently pushing them to the outskirts of the city.

Here I shed light on the construction of the liudong renkou as a sociocultural category, and to provide an account of the special challenges faced by this class of worker in China. For a member of the liudong renkou such as Little Huang, a sense of home was all about basic needs. Little Huang neither wanted to engage in any of the neighborhood activities, nor help promote heritage traditionalism to the outsiders because, in her own words, “it doesn’t matter…I’ll move when I find a cheaper place…there is no home for me in this city.” Little Huang spent about 16 to 20 hours a day outside the room. Apart from working part-time, Little Huang hung out at the office or elsewhere in the city. “I only come back to sleep…you know, you see my room…it’s just a hole…it’s not the kind of space you want to be in very much (laughing).” In her situation, the way in which the concept of home analytically works for my ethnography is rooted in the financial and socio-economic constraints that a member of the liudong renkou confronts. As with the tens of millions of liudong renkou in Shanghai (China Daily 2014) who are originally from other parts of China traveling to the big city by themselves with the goal of sending money home, a house is merely a space that accommodates the physical being of a person. I got to know Little Huang quite well through many interviews and interactions. On the one hand, Little Huang almost always referred to her own background in another city where “everybody was poor” (dajia dou hen qiong), and that was the so-called “tradition” to her. On the other hand, from what her mother, whom I met when she came up to Shanghai to help her move out, told me, Little Huang’s life was not that bad when she was a child. When I asked her about the condition of poverty that she always referred to, her mother could not really make sense of it:

Maybe it’s something that Little Huang’s father encountered when he was sent to the countryside, but that’s not what Little Huang experienced directly. Little Huang was born in
the early 1990s when the family was much better financially already. So, no, Little Huang never experienced the traditional form of poverty that she may have described to you.

And that was the story: Little Huang in fact told me that she had not really lived through such conditions of poverty that she referred to directly, but she thought that this “imagined past” would make sense, and could help to take the pressure of having to maintain “face” (mianzi), given her status as a non-citizen in Shanghai. I was interested in her story not because it helps to paint a realistic picture of straitened living circumstances, but also the way in which an aspect of the past – whether real or imagined – was used as a coping mechanism to deal with the present.

The twist here was that even though I did not think I could live in Little Huang’s place, I ended up renting her tingzijian after she had moved out, as she eventually found a place across town which she could afford costing just a little bit more than what she used to pay for the room on the stairwell. Little Huang’s family put in the initial down payment for her, now a graduate with a master’s degree in finance with a job at a securities company, to pay the mortgage. Little Huang’s room would later become where I would stay for more than a year to conduct my ethnographic research. Little Huang was right: as I will describe in detail in the next chapter, “it only took me a month to get used to it.”

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have shown that economic reforms have altered the social foundation of this urban neighborhood. Unlike both Teacher Hu and Rob, Little Huang did not have any choice but to accept the home that her economic status allowed her to afford. Although all the houses looked the same in Tranquil Light, it was a highly class-oriented neighborhood. While older residents were
living in the older parts of the lilong houses often at the ground level, foreigners who paid premium rents lived in the renovated higher floors. A non-Shanghainese waidiren rented a space in a room “that was pretty much a store room” – by this I mean a room that was divided several times to house up to four times the number of original residents designated to occupy that room. For instance, Little Huang was living in a portion of a room that was intended to be a storage room.

This situation illustrates how the discourse of history is often put to the service of sentimentalism – evoking a yearning for the past (Herzfeld 2004), as the notion of “significant architectural heritage” becomes a political tool in the city of Shanghai with the implication that it represents the benign efforts of the state to preserve the history of the city for both residents and visitors. The preservation of the lilong façade symbolizes the efforts of ostensibly caring local authorities to maintain a dialogue between Shanghai’s past and present. This preservation process overlooks many problems, ranging from macro-planning problems such as inadequate housing units for the working class and migrants to urban infrastructural issues such as mounting spatial congestion, as well as safety and health hazards. Armed with this discourse of historic preservation, the local government utilizes the lilong in its city branding strategies (UNDESA 2012), especially through gentrification and marketization, which I discuss in the next Chapter.

In previous studies of lilong communities, many scholars seem to focus superficially on the architecture of the lilong houses and neighborhoods. In my ethnography, I still think that the architecture of the lilong houses and neighborhoods matters – either because the residents have to perform the traditional way of life, which goes with the heritage façade of the architecture, to enhance their participation in the hope to obtain more benefit through sympathetic compensation in the case of Teach Hu; or cope with the dilapidated conditions as was the case with Little Huang;
and, because the architecture itself symbolizes the romance of Shanghai neighborhood life as it does for Rob. In the current socio-political context of China, the residents’ struggle and resistance against the local government, whose goal is to maximize profits from existing land and real estate, defines the resident’s individual sense of home. For the local residents, to maintain their right to dwell in the houses, they have adopted survival, monitoring, and negotiating techniques, which include forming a neighborhood association, initiating campaigns to inform the public about the importance of their neighborhoods, and utilizing the image of a successfully gentrified neighborhood to “appear supportive” of the state’s global city discourse. Residents express their resistance by various means, utilizing all available channels of information. For instance, in the case of Tranquil Light, some neighborhood residents rent out spaces to foreigners and use their presence to attempt to make claims for the neighborhoods’ cultural capital.

In this chapter, I have shown the lives of three different groups of residents: the original, the incoming, and the transient resident, whose senses of home are defined by completely different factors. On the one hand, we see Teacher Hu, who was not “living in the past.” In fact, his practices can only be understood within a highly contemporary framework, in which enacting or embodying “the past” has value in contemporary Chinese economic and globalized structures. In this sense, his embodiment and reenactment of the past were methods for him to obtain cultural capital. On the other hand, Rob was drawn to the idea of heritage traditionalism because of the “cultural capital” value he associated with historical artifacts, and by way of his preconceptions of traditional Chinese neighborhood life. The two examples together work well because while Teacher Hu’s refusal to incorporate the modern way of life to assure the sense of traditionalism was a survival strategy, Rob’s traditionalism represents the ways in which embodying the “past” can be a financial boon to a community. Little Huang’s story may be the odd one out here, but her story sheds light on the other
side of the concept of “tradition” (chuantong), as she was not in a position to attain cultural capital in the ways that Teacher Hu or Rob were able to do. Absent from Little Huang were her Shanghai household registration and the economic capital that would allow her to exchange it for cultural capital, in the objectified state of a “heritage lilong house.” In the global system undergirded by the global hierarchy of value whereby cultural capital can be traded for economic gains by objectifying architectural artifacts, in this case, the lilong houses are both survival and commercial strategies for a neighborhood that existed in the space between the global and traditional worlds like Tranquil Light.
Chapter Three: 
A Sad Trope

Shanghai summers are often extremely hot. I was not certain if it was because the three summers that I had spent in Shanghai were among the hottest in its history – hitting 100ºF for ten days straight between the last two weeks of July and August of 2013 – or simply because the room in which I lived was never meant for human residence, but there were many times when the heat was enough for me to question my method of research in the lilong. Sometimes it was only the “dignity factor” brought about by the occasional praise (usually with a deep sense of surprise) from my anthropology colleagues that kept me going. “You’re doing real ethnography,” they said to me when they learned about what I was doing. As mentioned in the Chapter One, I rented a small pavilion room (tingzijian) – that was originally designed to be a storage room in the neighborhood where I conducted my research and lived there for almost two years out of the three years that I was a resident of Shanghai working on my doctoral dissertation. An elderly neighbor told me that the room was called a pavilion room because unlike other rooms such as the “reception hall” (ketang), “courtyard” (tianjing), the pavilion room literally had no specific function from which to derive a name (UNDESA 2012). A pavilion room was designed to make use of the otherwise “leftover space” in the back of the house attached to the staircase, which was the only vertical corridor providing access to the upper floors of the building. Being located in the back of the house meant
that a pavilion room would face the undesirable north with limited access to the direct sunlight enjoyed by all other “more important” rooms facing south. This spatial strategy had proven to be effective in using up the unused space. The real estate developers of the lilong houses, therefore, had deliberately been building pavilion rooms in the back of almost every lilong houses since the late 19th century.

As mentioned in the introduction, it was my fascination with the lilong houses that originally led me to Shanghai. In this chapter, I paint an ethnographic picture of the life of a typical low-income person in a lilong house as such. As a means of counter-arguing the romantic sentiments written by many about the lilong, I intended to experience firsthand the patterns, rhythms, and ways of life in a typical lilong neighborhood.

**Tingzijian, or a Pavilion Room**

Living in a small space and giving up my privacy are two things I loathe – and yet here I am, all set to tell the story of my experience in tingzijian, or a pavilion room. Because the tingzijian was meant to be a storage space, or an extra space for whatever purpose the owner might deem appropriate, there was usually only one window to the outside, and it was for this reason that it was always so hot in the summer. *In Shanghai Modern: The Flowering of a New Urban Culture in China* – arguably the most accurate account of the city’s urban culture – the historian Leo Ou-Fan Lee (Liang 2008) describes tingzijian as “a small room just above the kitchen and facing the back alley, situated between the first and second stories…while fashioning a half-inflated and half parodied self-image of their bohemian existence.” While it was known as a place that some famous Chinese revolutionary writers in the early 20th century did not mind living in because the rent was cheap (and in fact many of them
produced wonderful works in such conditions, see Lu 1999), I had to admit that in the summer the room often felt like a sauna. It was both hot and humid and therefore made it hard for me to believe that any great writers could, with their brushes and ink, bare the heat let alone compose anything. It made me think that perhaps giant literary figures like Lu Xun or Mao Dun either did not write in the “romantic tingzijian,” as they would like to claim (1999b: 34), or it must have been the experience of the harsh condition of the room itself that gave them their epiphanies regarding, what later Mao Zedong (Li 2015b; Lu 1999) would call, “the paradox of capitalism” – the rich lived on the front side facing south with excess and gluttony, making money by renting a pavilion “hole” to the poor, including these writers. In fact, there is a genre of revolutionary writings named after this special room – the authors were collectively known as the “pavilion room literati” (tingzijian wen ren). In Mao Zedong’s own words, he describes a tingzijian, as:

[Tingzijian is] a small room inside Shanghainese alleyway architecture [i.e., lilong]. It was located in the middle of the staircase in the back of a house. Because it was located in the dark and narrow room, the rent was usually low. It was the only place that writers, artists, intellectuals, and lower-level government officials could afford to live their modest lives during the revolutionary era (1978).

Because the unique row structure of the lilong houses places the front of one row against the back of the next, those who lived in the tingzijian, which was at the back of one house, could look across the lane and see the front of the next house. Since tingzijian are on the second floor, the “pavilion room literati” described by Mao could observe the lives of middle class Chinese on a daily basis. Scenes across the lane seen by the pavilion room literati described by the native Shanghainese artist He Youzhi (Mao 1942) include an opium-addicted middle-class businessman, an unfaithful middle-aged man cheating on his wife with multiple mistresses (ernai), a group of men and women gambling their money away on a mahjong table, and so on. All of these scenes, portrayed in the writings of the pavilion room literati, were the negative consequences of capitalism. These depictions were common scenes in the so-called “golden years” of Shanghai during the first three decades of the 20th century.
It was evident in the writings of many writers who used to live in the pavilion rooms that they drew their ideas, inspirations, and narratives for their works from their rich lived experiences in the pavilion rooms.

Figure 16: A photo of myself in my tingzijian in Tranquil Light in the summer of 2014 – almost a year after I had moved in. Photo credit: Sue Anne Tay

With only the one window, the 80-square-foot enclosed space feels as though it was a walk-in closet. In my case, the width of the room was exactly my height, or about 5’10”, so when I slept on the bed that was placed sideways against the wide side of the room I had to orient myself diagonally on the bed so that my head and my feet would not touch the walls on both sides. When this storage room was turned into a bedroom for a family of four in the 1960s, the wooden-framed bed and studs were made especially for this strange width since the standard length for beds is 6’4”. The bed was about
half a meter (about 20 inches) above the floor on four steel posts. I learned from my landlord afterward that he had raised the bed as a spatial arrangement to make use of the space underneath the bed to store things that were seasonal (such as winter clothes) or things that he did not immediately need. In the summer of 2013, when I first moved into the room, I found a black and white cathode ray tube (CRT) television, four folding chairs, a small folding chair with backrest, a small folding table the perfect size of playing Mahjong, and a bunch of electrical wires under the bed; none of which the landlord did not allow me to discard, saying, “I don’t know when I may need them, so I might as well keep them.” The length of this customized bed frame was exactly the width of the room; hence, every time I wanted to change the sheets or collect the dust underneath the bed, I had to lift this whole wooden frame weighing around 10 kilograms (about 22-pound) or more, and place it against the wall since there was no space on the side.  

The 92-year-old landlord, whom I call in Mandarin Chinese fangdong, from whom I rented the room made my life much worse by making no effort to maintain the room at all. He lived elsewhere and only came to the room every six months to collect the rent. The former tenant, Little Huang (Xiao Huang), did warn me before I was about to move in: “the laotou (old man) wouldn’t lift a finger to do anything; in fact, if anything is broken or missing, he would ask you to pay for it whether or not it was your fault.” Teacher Hu, whose life’s story we have visited in Chapter Two, was the person who connected me with this landlord. Although he did not say much about the 92-year-old landlord

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16 In fact, on the day that I moved in, the bedframe fell on my left toe, resulting in a serious injury that would immobilize me for almost half a year. “You’re lucky – you’re this close to having a bone fracture,” said the emergency room doctor who treated me. That said, the “unexpectedly positive” side of this accident was that I was not able to walk up and down the stairs (let alone leave my neighborhood) conveniently; hence, for more than three months after the accident I had been conducting my “incidentally rich” participant observation in the neighborhood. During this period, not only did I get to know most of my informants because I was basically “there” all the time, but I was also provided with the opportunity to get to know, at a personal level, those who were curious about my injury.
when I first moved into the tingzijian – which I suspected might have had to do with him thinking
that knowing it could affect my decision to rent the room – he later revealed the following to me:

This landlord is my friend, but I more or less look up to him because he’s indeed a friend of
my father’s (laoba de pengyou). Both my father and he were senior engineers at the Shanghai
Institute of Organic Chemistry, Chinese Academy of Science [founded in 1950 as one of the
first 15 institutes established by the Chinese Academic of Sciences]. This Institute had a
good reputation. Growing up in Tranquil Light, we all looked up to him. He was one of the
few scientists who graduated from the prestigious Suchow University. At 91, he’s still strong
but seems out of time (bushangxingshi). As you can see, there are cracks all over the walls and
dust everywhere. The old parquet flooring is also falling apart. Guess what? He told me that
it ‘should have been replaced at least a decade ago,’ but when I asked him why he won’t
replace for the tenant he responded: ‘why would I do it, I do not live here anymore and just
rent the place out to other people.’ He is not a bad guy, but all those years during the
Cultural Revolution, I believe, did some damage to his mind. He appears stubborn, snobbish
(bian de bu tong ren jing), unreasonable (gezhi de bu jiang dao). Please understand him from
a historic perspective. If you have any problems with the room, do not confront him with
those problems. Just come to me.

The landlord was right: the one-by-four-inch parquet tiles had shrunk over the course of almost a
century of overuse, leaving noticeable gaps wherever two tiles were supposed to meet to cover the
roughly leveled reinforced concrete slab below. These gaps were about one-tenth of an inch wide,
and about the same in depth. Although these gaps were not large enough for a finger to fall in
between, they were perfect for the dust to set in. Both the width and the depth of the gap simply
made it impossible to clean without an industrial-grade vacuum cleaner, which neither the landlord
nor I had the luxury of possessing. In April and July of 2013, I developed an ear infection, which my
doctor attributed to the unsanitary conditions of the place where I slept. Rainy days were no better
than hot days, either. First, the roof would leak when there was heavy rain. Second, when leaves
clogged the exterior gutter, rainwater would leak into the building through the cracks between the
exterior wall’s bricks, demonstrating that the repainting process in 2009 to welcome visitors to a
beautified city ready to host a world exposition was little more than window dressing. The leaks and
humidity eventually caused the interior paint to peel from the walls. Bit by bit, as I documented the
process throughout my 16-month stay, the interior wall closest to the gutter outside turned from
white to its original yellow. To make matters worse, the paint flakes became dust upon contacting with the ground, which only served to make the hot days unbearable all over again. As my neighbor once said, “That was the reason why it’s always going to be dusty no matter how much you mop your room.” While the heat was bearable in the morning, once the sun was directly at the top of the roof, I had no choice but to leave my door completely open to get cross ventilation – it was basic science: the breeze would otherwise not get into the room with only a way in and no way out. The door was designed to open outward to the staircase so that the swing would not encroach upon the interior space of the room that was already small. This condition was potentially dangerous, as I had to make sure that no one was in the stairwell before I opened my door. In one instance, I almost knocked my neighbor Mr. Liang over because he was hanging the clothes in the stairwell when I swung the door open toward him, as I did not know that he was there.

The Elementary Form of the Tingzijian Life

Because of the inherent danger of opening a door outward into a stairwell, I would have preferred that the door to the pavilion room open inward, and often that would be how an opening in a western-styled house such as the lilong was designed. The obvious benefit of keeping the circulation clear is that in the case of emergency (e.g., fire), nothing would obstruct the escape path. The landlord, in fact, told me that originally the door did indeed open inward into the pavilion room. In the 1960s, he realized that it was “such a waste of space,” when he realized he could simply reverse the side of the hinges and open the door toward the stair flight instead. “It’s extremely easy. I didn’t have to do anything to adjust the doorframe, and, suddenly [with proud voice] I gained one extra square meter!” said my 92-year-old landlord. A square meter (about 9 square feet) might not sound as though it was a lot of space to be proud of gaining, but for his family, like many in Shanghai who
lived in the squalid conditions during the high communist era (Murphey 1974), a square meter meant more room to breathe, so that, in his words, “you don’t have to put your legs on top of each other when you sleep because there’s nowhere else to put them.” During the first two decades of that era, the local government relied almost completely on reusing the existing structures once occupied by the middle class and foreigners to accommodate the influx of workers (Wu 1999). In the neighborhood, residents recalled how their families were allocated rooms in the then empty row houses based on need (i.e., the number of family members) and the nature of their jobs (i.e., proximity to the work unit). This process has been well documented by scholars, novelists, and even film, television, and documentary makers (Wu 2001c) who have been making their enterprise the retelling of nostalgic stories about the drastic changes in the social fabric of the city. As many critics have also pointed out, this Shanghai nostalgia is itself an industry (e.g., Li 2015b; Shu 2011; Wang 2010). In the case of one of my neighbors who lived one floor above me, he and his family of four were removed from their spacious room in which they previously lived just a few lanes down as it was deemed “too big” for them. The government who confiscated their room and asked the entire family to move into a room no more than half of the size of their original room. They were made to move to their current home, which was about half the size of their original, and shared with another lower-income family. Although an average space for a person in a house like that of my landlord’s was eight square meters (approx. 80-square-foot) citywide at the time, there were only two square meters (about 20-square-feet) for him and members of his family (Non 2010b; Farrer 2010; Ren 2014b; Swislocki 2009; Zhang 2000). It was upon learning this information that I realized that my landlord’s wish to gain that extra one square meter so that his children would not have to “put their legs on top of each other” was not an exaggeration.
After the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976) was over, the low-income family moved out, leaving my landlord’s family to finally “live like a family again.” My neighbor Mr. Liang recalled:

Sharing personal space with another family was difficult, but sharing public (gongyong) amenities, such as bathrooms, kitchens, and corridors, was a completely different thing. In the bathroom, how would you know that your new neighbors wouldn’t be using your soaps, or your laundry detergent when you weren’t home? If the communal corridor became filthy, who would you blame? We had to start locking our door because people started stealing things from each other. During the time when nobody trusted anyone, like the Cultural Revolution, this sense of distrust was more intense than ever.

There was also another reason why I wanted to reverse the door back to its original opening direction – inward. When opening the door outward into the space on the stairwell, it would cover
about two-thirds of the window on the stair flight, my primary means of cross-ventilation. Opened half way, the door would allow any breeze to get inside my room. Opened all the way, the door would cover the window from which the breeze came. Any condition, however, was better than nothing, so I often left my door open for the ventilation – even at the expense of my privacy. When my room got hot (growing up in the tropics, my threshold was around 30 degree Celsius or 86 degrees Fahrenheit) or, I took off my shirt, and only wore my shorts in the room. When it got extremely hot, I would leave the room – still without wearing my shirt – to go down to the alleyway to cool myself down, as there was always a breeze down in the lane. For some reason, I felt fine to be seen shirtless in the lane by complete strangers but felt rather strange when I would be seen in my own room by neighbors using stairs. This sentiment was not just mine but shared by all my neighbors in the lane including Mr. Liang. These neighbors would not mind being seen shirtless in the hot summer, as they would be doing just about every daily activity out in the lane where there was a breeze; however, they would not be so happy when being seen shirtless in their rooms. Resonating with my own feeling, in fact, was these neighbors justification for yelling at me when I looked inside their rooms seeing them shirtless: “My room is the only private space that I have, so there’s that feeling of embarrassment to be seen like that in my own private space,” a neighbor shared with me.

Almost every few minutes, someone would be using the stairwell into which my door was open. Because of the old wooden structure of the stairs, the floor would make a sound every time there was someone on it. I would first hear the echoing footsteps, and then see a body or two emerging from the shadow of the stairs into the light coming through the window in the stairwell. My tingzijian was located in the back of the second floor of a three-story plus attic house, so everyone walking up and down the stairs would have to pass my room. In the summer, when my door was
almost always open if I was inside of the room, these people had no other choice but to see me in my room. These technically were “neighbors” of mine since we lived in the same building, and shared the same water bill. Sometimes an old neighbor from the third floor would stand in the stair flight facing toward my room and spend a good amount of time looking at me while I was typing my field notes, or reading inside my room. I suspected that it may have been because my room was not tidy (although, compared to other neighbors I had visited, my room was considered organized), but it could be that the old neighbor did not know what to make of me. Older neighbors did not have the same modesty; in fact, Mr. and Mrs. Liang, my closest neighbors who lived down the corridor right next to our shared bathroom never closed their doors except when they went to sleep. Every time I went to the bathroom, whether I liked it or not, I would see into their room. Most of the time, at least one of them would be on the bed sleeping, and the other would be sitting in front of the television. Since the chair was facing the television and not facing the door, I would only see their backs (and the legs that were on the bed), which also meant that they did not see me walking past their door to the bathroom. They, however, probably heard my footsteps since, like the stairs and stairwell, the corridor, just as my room, was made of the original old parquet tiles.

What’s to Share; and, More Importantly, What’s Not to Share

The five neighbors on my floor and I shared a single bathroom, containing a stained bathtub (originally a metal white paint-coated bathtub from the 1930s), small sink, washing machine (a private machine that belonged to the Liangs, which only they could use), and three water boilers (reshuiji) installed on top of the bathtub. It was confusing to me when I first saw them, as I did not know which one to use, and my landlord did not tell me that the electricity bill was to be collected individually (which had been the case since the 1980s; and was different from the collectively paid
water bill. Each tenant would need a water boiler so that no one was using any one else’s electricity. Learning the hard way, I first used a water boiler that was not mine, and, was scolded by the Liangs who could hear the unique sound of their machine rumbling through the thin wall that separated their room from the bathroom. Both of them waited for me to come out of the bathroom to scold me for “stealing” their electricity. As there were three water boilers, and because the bathroom was shared, I assumed that they all belonged to everyone. So, I first tried the one closest to me when standing up inside the bathtub to shower, and the one next to it, and then later decided to use the one that worked better, which, apparently, was the Liangs’, which their daughter had bought for them as a gift only a few years ago. The Liangs’ water boiler was far superior to the other two – it was better installed, bigger, faster heating the water (based on the only one time that I used it because I did not know that it was theirs). My water boiler was the worst performing one and was probably considered decent only up until the latter half of the 1990s.
Since the bathroom was located far away from my room, I would be the last person to use it. In the winter, like most of my neighbors, we could get away with not showering every day. This option, however, was not possible for me in the hot and humid summer. When the Liangs, for instance, heard my footsteps coming through the corridor to use the bathroom, they would step out of their room, which was right next door to the bathroom, to use it. I found this “coincidence” to be annoying at first. After a month, I had to ask them whether it was intentional that the Liangs, both in their mid-80s, would have to use the bathroom whenever I also needed to. “It’s because of your footsteps themselves that sometimes reminds us that we also needed to use the bathroom,” said
Mrs. Liang who was the more vocal of the two. As mentioned, my 92-year-old landlord maintained nothing; hence, my hot water boiler had not been maintained for at least five years, and took about thirty minutes to produce hot water, so I always had to plan carefully when I would like to use the bathroom. Often the case was that by the time my water was ready to use, the bathroom would be occupied by my neighbors, which meant I would have to restart the boiler all over again, as the machine came with an electric cut-off safety feature.

I was not sure whether or not I should have been happy when I learned that the misery of using a shared bathroom was common to nearly the entire neighborhood. Most of the time, the bathroom door would be open if no one was using it, and I could see that from the stair flight in front of my room. From time to time, however, the wind would push the bathroom door closed. And since there was no lock on the bathroom door (done intentionally by the Liangs, who felt safer knowing that if they fell or hurt themselves in the bathroom they could be helped), I had no way to know if the room was occupied other than by placing my ear on the door. This was made all the more difficult if the old washing machine was running and therefore making a loud noise. At one point I did, in fact, walk in on one of my neighbors using the toilet – an incident for which I repeatedly apologized, even going so far as to purchase a basket of fruits as a way of making amends. It was not unusual in any case to wait several hours to use the shower owing to the high number of users. Mrs. Liang, in particular, treated the bathroom as her living room, in which she would chop vegetables, cut open a whole chicken bought from a local street market, do her laundry, clean dishes, and sometimes sit there watching the people and cars on the street, as the window in the bathroom was right above the lively road in front of the neighborhood. Mrs. Liang told me that she did not like to chop vegetables and meat in the bathroom at first because it was rather small, but since there was only one faucet on the entire floor – in the bathroom – she had gradually got used to it. The ad
hoc kitchen in the hallway only had a gas stove, so to confine the process involving the use of water (i.e., wet process) of preparing ingredients to a single space it worked better for her to chop in the bathroom and cook in the kitchen. To be sure, there was a kitchen on every floor. This kitchen was a repurposed space from what was once an interior corridor. The same people who shared the bathroom also shared the kitchen area, and although I had my own stove owing to the electricity billing, the space was often too cramped and crowded to do any substantial cooking.

**Sad Tropes in The Tropic**

For obvious reasons, living with my informants has provided me with a window into the physical hardship that I would otherwise have had to imagine when arguing about the practicality of life in a piece of heritage architecture. The title of this chapter was an acknowledgement of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* (1961) whose English translation, “a sad tropic,” is exactly how I would like to recall my experience living in the field: I “felt sad” living in a room that held for me the sense of being in the tropics. The heat and the unhygienic conditions may have gotten me hospitalized – twice. What was worse, however, was the constant psychological concern as a result of being watched by both my neighbors and the local government for being a stranger, “doing some kind of social research” *(zhuo shehui yanjiu)*, in Mrs. Liang’s words when asked by another neighbor about how much she knew me. The constant attention that I did not need, while sometimes benefiting me in the process of becoming a member of my informants’ community, often distressed me as well. Not having a private space to wash up and prepare food was bearable when compared to not having private space to process my own emotions after a full day of spending time with the residents whose language and body gestures I would forever be in the state of learning to understand.
At first, the sound of loud voices shouting in Shanghainese dialect sounded to me like a meaningless cacophony. When I began to understand what they meant, I also began to feel the need to re-orient myself to the direction, suggestion, or whatever forms of expectation were expressed verbally, in which I was engaged. My informants may never have thought that I completely understood them all the time, but my body gestures in responding to sounds that were no longer just a series auditory discordances must have in some way carried to them the message that I understood them. For instance, the five-foot-wide interior corridor that connected the stairwell (and therefore my room) to the bathroom (and therefore the Liangs’ room) had three incandescent light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. This corridor was sandwiched by a flat wall on one side and a wall with a small window above the cooktop on the other. When I first arrived and noticed the hanging light bulbs, I did not think about them in any other way except the practicality of such corridor to need ample artificial lighting to be well lit enough for cooking, especially when most of my neighbors were old and did not see well. I, instead, found out the hard way that there were three light bulbs because each of them belonged to the tenants of a different room – and that using another neighbor’s electricity was considered a major offense that usually prompted a thorough scolding. When I mistakenly turned on the Liangs’ light in the corridor when I first moved in, they were not upset when the expression on my face was completely blank since I was only able to comprehend the standard Mandarin Chinese and only some basic Shanghainese dialect. Judging by how they laughed and patted my right shoulder afterward, I felt that they might even found it to be comical that I did not understand them.

Later, after I learned some basic words, I was able to communicate with my neighbors about the basic rules and etiquette of living in a place where I considered myself a newbie: I would nod whenever I felt that I had understood the message. After I had begun to understand what they said,
the Liangs suddenly became much more critical of my participation in their daily life. They became less tolerant when I mistakenly turned on their light, an easy mistake to make, as the switch was located right above mine on the same socket. This happened at least a couple of dozen times during my two years there. Mrs. Liang, in particular, through loud verbal complaints to me in front of my room, would give me a lesson regarding the damage I caused by using her electricity every time I mistakenly turned on their switch. Whenever she did not feel that I played the role of a good neighbor, she would bang on the door loudly, often in the morning, and wait for me to open the door to scold me, for matters including leaving my clean toilet paper roll in the shared bathroom (which took up the space they wanted to claim as theirs), leaving the bathroom floor wet after shower, and so on. In a few instances when I was able to escape without seeing her, she wrote a note on the back of a piece of a recycled Chinese-style tear-off calendar, and then posted it on my door, expressing her concerns about whatever she was not happy about regarding my behavior. I often left it where it was because I did not always understand Mrs. Liang’s cursive handwriting. By leaving it on the door, I could ask her what she had written for me when she would come down to the stairs to hang her clothes or water her plants. The note, however, would always disappear the next morning, and it was not until later that I found out that it was Mr. Liang who took it off my door. Mr. Liang would tell me with an apologetic tone how much he had felt embarrassed by what his wife had done to me. The cost of turning on a light bulb, even for the whole day, was negligible; so I did not bother complaining when it happened to me. The Liangs also thought so when I was just a foreign researcher who only understood a bit of what was going on around him. In most cases, asking the informants to repeat what I did not fully understand was not possible; so, for months, I found myself in my room, with the door open toward the stairway, trying to extract the meanings of those words that I felt meant something critical to my role in the community. Other than the shared space, and shared responsibility to one another in making sure that no one was being taken
advantage of, the life of each resident was rather independent. In the building, although I always greeted everyone that I passed, I rarely felt any reciprocity. Not only did they never initiate a greeting, they also did not return my greeting. The tension among the neighbors may be understood as a consequence of the increasing sense of distrust in the recent years owing to the rise of temporary residents in the neighborhood in the recent years. There were also personal reasons why my neighbors would no longer welcome new residents. My upstairs neighbors, for example, had a relative with a mental disorder living with them. Because mental illness is still stigmatized (1961), these upstairs neighbors not only did not want anyone to know about their relative but also did not want to discuss what they thought of as an embarrassing matter, which would be impossible in such dense living conditions as the lilong. What seemed to be the common concerns across all old residents, however, were the temporary residents, especially the migrants with whom every one of my old resident neighbors had had unpleasant experiences. For example, the Liangs were known to complain at times about the previous tenant in my room, Little Huang, who “never took the trash out; never cared for the cleanliness of the common area; often used others’ electricity,” only to admit at other times that Little Huang was really not that horrific as a neighbor. “She’s like many young waidiren (non-Shanghainese) residing in Shanghai, but she wasn’t that bad,” said Mr. Liang. Little Huang, as in the nickname “Little (xiao) Wang” when I spoke to her on the day she was moving out and I was moving into the room, told me that she believed that her relationship with the Liangs was pleasant:

I didn’t really have a chance to see them [the Liangs] much anyway since I often worked overtime, and they would be asleep already when I came back from work around 9pm. It was only in the morning, when I was going out to work, that I would see them because I had to use the bathroom, which meant that I would have to walk through the common kitchen in which Mr. Liang, a “proud Shanghainese man” [who are said to be culturally and stereotypically obedient to Shanghainese women (the cultural belief is known locally as ma da sao)] was responsible for cooking would be making breakfast. My relationship with him was good. We always greeted each other. I did not see Ayi [an honorific noun referring to Ms. Liang] that much.
These temporary residents, myself included, simply paid rent, and moved in and out of the neighborhood, and it was felt by the long-term residents that they did not feel the same sense of responsibility in protecting the safety of the community that the old residents did. As the urbanist Jane Jacobs (Yang, et al. 2007) points out, in cities, direct interpersonal social relations are not only still relevant, but should also be understood as part and parcel to the livability of urban residents. The mobility of residency was restricted by both the household registration, and the universal absence of financial means to move elsewhere (often for a larger space once families expanded). With this in mind, the residents could only afford to be resentful toward one another for so long.

“We fought, but eventually, one of us had to give in…since nobody was going anywhere,” a 70-year-old informant who had lived in Tranquil Light since 1962 shared with me. What his attitude on the pragmatism in dealing with conflicts reveals how these residents still needed to look out for one another. During my time there, I encountered several scenes of conflict. It seemed to be the case that if the two parties involved in the matter were both original residents, they would just “let it out” at one another, and rather straightforwardly (e.g., through cursing, scolding, and finger pointing), and then they would go back to being neighbors. When one of the parties was a temporary resident, however, these direct interpersonal relations were to be mediated (1961) through other agentive means, such as the law, regulations, and urban social norms, making the conflict seem much less straightforward: the treatment of the social relations as legal and commercially oriented, short-term, and evasive only reinforced the prevailing sense of distrust. “Sometimes it’s a good thing, as we can avoid fist fights and physical violence, but sometimes it just drags (making you feel like perhaps it would better to have a fist fight and get over it)...I have a friend who has been involved in a lawsuit for many years, who share with me, “I just want to pay, apologize, and get over it but I can no longer do that at this point. It's too late,” while we happened to be witnessing a fist fight between two men in their 40s in the lane one day.
Conclusion

As cold as it was in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where I had spent years as a graduate student in two of its higher educational institutions before embarking on my fieldwork abroad, Shanghai’s winter did not treat me any better as there was neither a central heating system, nor an individual heating unit, in my room in Tranquil Light. Some of the neighbors had electric mobile heating units in their rooms, but they rarely used them since a large amount of electricity was required from a single outlet to generate heat, potentially risking a blown fuse for the entire floor. When it got really cold, I would find myself wearing between four to five layers of both undergarments and winter jackets. With about one or two layers of socks, and at least a thick pair of gloves – when staying inside the room – I felt that I was not in control of my own body: picking up a pen was difficult enough, let alone writing, especially when every time I exhaled I could see the thick condensation of my own breadth.

I have always been impressed by the early ethnographic writings of modern anthropologists, especially Bronislaw Malinowski (in a classic sociological sense as described by Wirth 1938) and Claude Lévi-Strauss, particularly in *Tristes Tropiques* (1961 [1922]). Shown in their writings is what the critic Susan Sontag (1961) ironically sees as a “heroic role” in their anthropological search for social facts during their time as ethnographers in remote areas. That said, for good reason, I never thought that I would want to replicate their intrepid experiences. For one, my research did not take place on a rural island or remote part of the world, far away from the oversight of a nation-state; for another, I did not think it was necessary to be, or more precisely, to portray oneself in the anthropologist’s own writing, as “heroic” – have anthropologists ever been so? Although I agree with many that anthropologists should be “engaged” (1966), I have come to appreciate the discussion on
anthropology’s history, especially in its struggle to define its ethical and moral roles for those people who they study.

Did I have any other choices, say, to live elsewhere and could I still have gathered the same set of data that I wanted? The answer, to me then, was yes indeed. I felt that given the central location of the neighborhood, and my original research objective and its nature, I could have understood the relations between the heritage architecture and the community residing within, by simply living in an area close by, and traveling to the field site to conduct my research. Depending on how close or far away from the neighborhood, I could easily walk or take advantage of the remarkable public transportation system in Shanghai. Logistically speaking, in fact, that plan would have been better both for me, and the local university with which I was affiliated throughout my three-year research stay. As I neither possessed permanent residency nor the much-desired household registration in Shanghai, legitimate residence in a contested area in the city such as my neighborhood also invited close scrutiny by the neighborhood committee. In fact, about a month after I arrived in Shanghai, there was widespread news about how the local government had decided to crackdown on “sojourning foreigners,” ranging from those who did not have a resident permit to those who did not possess a registered license of residency with the local police station, and so on. Many were fined heavily, and some were even deported. In many areas where the local government suspected that the law was violated, such as the misuse of buildings, the crackdown was much more intense and severe. In fact, one of my acquaintances, a US student taking a gap year after graduation, whom I came to know through one of my informants, was fined and later deported for both overstaying, and residing in a local apartment rented to him by a local resident without proper registration with the authorities (in his case, both the police and the neighborhood committee). “I’d just stay at a university dorm if I were you – the local government never trusts foreigners,” he shared with me before he left. His
story was one of many that flooded the Internet in the summer and fall of 2013, before the news about the intensity of pollution in Shanghai eventually, and sadly, overshadowed it in October.

So, what made me so determined to go the extra mile? Dealing with the issue of legality and the state’s surveillance was already rather severe in an authoritarian state such as China, the hardship of living under the conditions of the building as described earlier was probably what surprised most people, including myself. The truth is: my sad trope in Tranquil Light was not entirely planned. It happened to be the case that there was an event that triggered a stricter control of physical access to Tranquil Light, which I will discuss in detail in Chapter Six. That event had to do with the sense of distrust of some neighbors toward the commercial activities in the neighborhood that had been taking place before my arrival. This sense of distrust eventually led to the close door policy that the local district government decided to impose. As this event happened at the time that I had decided to begin my fieldwork, I had no other choices but to try to rent a room in the neighborhood in order to obtain the registration form of a temporary residence (jingwai renyuan lingbi zhushu dengjidan) – the document that would make me an official resident of Tranquil Light who would be allowed to obtain a key fob from the neighborhood committee to enter the two gates of the neighborhood. Although I could get away with not having the key fob by following the residents who had it into the neighborhood, just like there were a few temporary residents who could get into the neighborhood without that key, it would make no sense for me, an ethnographer, anyway to want to pursue my ethnographic research at the place to which I had no physical access. What made my decision to live there easier was the support I had received from my key informants, Teacher Hu, who happened to be a well-known local realtor there. As I will discuss in detail in Chapter Four, it was almost too easy to be true for me to get a room that I was able to afford in Tranquil Light. In other words, I was fortunate that my research was facilitated by the combination of the need to have
access to the community and the serendipity of knowing someone who was inside the network of the old residents who has rooms to rent out and willing to help me.

The space in which I lived was by no means convenient or desirable. The rundown and heavy use of the common spaces shared by three families of six residents such as the kitchen, bathroom, as well as staircase and stair flight, did not make it easier for me. I often had to walk to the public toilet in a mall across the street because there was often someone using the bathroom when I needed to use it. The corridor was also small, so was the staircase -- from time to time I would be worried what would happen in the case of fire since the interior of the building was made of wood. I eventually got used to the difficulties in sharing these shared spaces and realized that there were meaningful to the community bond. To me, it was not until one morning the Liangs and I happened to be cooking together in the corridor where both of our gas stoves were located. (I didn’t usually have time for breakfast, often buying a piece of bread from a nearby bakery – but that day I was in the mood for a stovetop espresso and soup). In the cramped, shared kitchen, there was not anything else to do but to stand. It was too small to fit a chair, so both my old neighbors and I stood together, waiting for our food to be cooked. What else could one do in that situation if not strike up a conversation? That was how we eventually – and perhaps spatially and forcefully – got to communicate with each other. In addition, located next to the staircase, the kitchen would welcome any neighbors walking up or downstairs. Whenever two people started talking, the congenial sound of conversation often attracted nearby neighbors to join in. Some were just curious about what we were saying, some were lonely or did not have anything else to do, and some just wanted to be seen. Over time, we would learn more about each other, and became more trusting of and helpful to each other.
My “anthropologist presence” represents some sense of the internationalization of Shanghai. On the positive side, new residents like myself and some 20 foreigners and more than 50 young entrepreneurs living there, brought to the community some sense of diversity, as well as income, to locals, contrary to what many may think. For many old residents, newcomers bring contemporary forms of livelihood. Some become friends with their older neighbors, helping children in the community learn English, for example. With the decline of the “iron rice bowl” safety net, older locals also benefit from much-needed extra income by renting out their spaces. My landlord, for instance, always booked an appointment with his doctor on the Thursday of the first week of the month — right after he came to collect my rent, which he needed to pay his medical bills. The young “gentries” – to use a political economy term – also made the old locals more aware of the time and place in which Shanghai was. Many shared with me that they felt as though they had to make a conscious effort to change personal behaviors, such as spitting on the street, using loud voices, and not keeping the front of their houses clean so as not to embarrass themselves in front of their new neighbors. There were, of course, negative impacts, such as the decline of trust among neighbors. With a more diverse community, there were more strangers and passers-by in the neighborhood. Some of these strangers did not understand the local lifestyle and disturbed the peace by drinking ferociously at night and being too noisy, preventing the locals (mostly retirees) from sleeping. Also, some neighbors might be financially better off than others because they were able to rent out their places at a higher price. Those who did not enjoy the same benefits were often jealous. Making matters worse, some tenants become landlords themselves, thereby deceiving the old residents and subletting their spaces for large sums and pocketing the difference.
Chapter Four:
Street Corner Society and
the Anthropology of Displacement

At the corner of the first lane on the north gate of Tranquil Light, there was a small standalone kiosk. Although its technical role was selling and distributing lottery tickets on-demand to the residents, this kiosk’s other function was the community’s meeting place. Because of its location, sandwiched by two rows of three-story buildings on both sides, there was shade most of the day, in addition to a large umbrella right by the kiosk under which there was always an old bamboo chair for guests to sit on. When the sun was no longer as strong, as many as a dozen people would gather around the kiosk, conversing with each other in voices so loud and, at times, passionate that whenever I heard them, I would know almost immediately that the time was around 4pm. In addition to the kiosk being a gathering place, it was also the place where old neighbors who no longer lived in the neighborhood met.

This particular scene did not strike me as interesting for my research during the first few weeks of my time visiting in Tranquil Light. It was only after I had established contact with a dozen of my interviewees, all of whom told me to meet “at the kiosk” by the north gate whenever we planned to meet up, that I realized the role that this particular place played in the social organization and the
relations among old and new neighbors, as well as old and new residents. I soon realized that the convenience of using the kiosk as a meeting place had to do with both its proximity to the north gate, connected to the main road, and the local lottery salespersons in the kiosk who, as I later found out, served as informal connectors, mediators, and gatekeepers for the community. Both old neighbors and residents initially came into contact with the salespersons on a professional basis; yet, once contact was established, the amount of time they would spend and the depth of interaction they would engage with each other increased. The two salespersons who worked there (on a rotating basis) were themselves retirees who received pension checks from the local government. “I don’t really make money at all selling lottery tickets, the profit margin is almost nothing…but this job gives me something to do, and I enjoy meeting my old friends here,” said the salespersons to whom I was closer.

Not only was she a friendly person, but she served as an agent of the neighborhood committee. She was the ultimate examplar of the “eyes on the street” in serving as the unofficial local reporter of any suspicious activities, or unfamiliar visitors seen in the neighborhood (Jacobs 1961). Because she knew all the residents, old and new, she was the local database, from whom even the official agents such as neighborhood committee and the State Administration for Industry and Commerce or Gongshangsuo which I will return to detail in the next chapter, would seek data. In fact, I owed my residency in the neighborhood to these two lottery salespersons. Starting from the first time that I met with them, they unofficially registered not only my name but also my basic information into their informal network of old and new neighbors. After they knew that I was interested in renting a cheap room in the neighborhood, they began to ask around for a room to rent on my behalf. As it was more likely for an old neighbor who no longer lived there to have a room to rent out to me, I benefited from their special access to this particular network. A week after I was known to the
lottery salesperson, they told me that there were a couple of rooms that I might be interested in renting:

We’ve asked around for you! Good news: There’re a couple of people who might have a room for you, but knowing your student budget I think you’d probably be more interested in the small room. An old neighbor dropped by yesterday and told me that a tenant of a room for which he serves as an agent (zhongjie) is thinking of moving out before her contract terminates in November.

Although I was not surprised that this agent was the famous Teacher Hu (as all roads about the matters in the neighborhood seem to lead back to him), I was surprised by how efficient the salespersons were not only in asking the right people about my needs, but also in connecting me with that person. These two lottery salespersons utilized their network, screened out the people who they did not think would have what I needed, and only provided the crucial information and contact that eventually got me precisely what I was asking for. “So, I told him that there’s a taiguo liuxuesheng (a study abroad student from Thailand) who might be interested in taking the room; are you interested? I could put you in touch with this agent,” she said. Given that there was an incident concerning the local government’s crackdown on unlicensed businesses in Tranquil Light only a week before (details of which I will also return in the next chapter), and that many foreigners were complaining that their lives were under scrutiny by the officers from the City Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau, this information about the possibility of getting a room came as a relief to me. In addition, Teacher Hu told me afterward that he also had not known that the tenant for whom he served as an agent was thinking of leaving – he would not have had a clue had one of two lottery salespersons who regularly spoke to that tenant not told him. So it was these lottery salespersons who served, in this case, as information seekers, messengers, and providers – all this happened because of the prime location of this street corner society, the access to both the networks of old and new neighbors thanks to their long-term residency, the unexpectedly socializing nature of
their job, and their interest in making their lives more meaningful despite their routine job selling lottery tickets, facilitating the flow of information in Tranquil Light.

Figure 19: The lottery stall, a.k.a. street corner society of the Tranquil Light. Photograph: author

After I moved in, it was these two lottery ticket salespersons who mentioned to Mr. Bo, a temporary employee of the neighborhood committee, that I had just become their new neighbor. After I was
spotted moving in, it took Mr. Bo two days to be notified of my arrival through Mr. Liang, my 82-year-old neighbor who occasionally spent time under the lottery ticket kiosk umbrella. Mr. Bo did not gather at the north gate as often as others, but still he received the news rather swiftly from Mr. Liang. At 6am the next day, Mr. Bo came knocking on my door asking me to provide him with my legal information, and to register as a “new resident” in the neighborhood. Mr. Bo’s responsibility also extended beyond keeping track of the head count of residents, but also to serve as an eye for the family planning policy (jihuashengyu), also known as the one-child policy (dashengzhi). His next question to me was, “Are you married, or do you have a girlfriend? If so, is she Chinese? Where is she from? How old is she?” I found out later on after talking to the medical doctor at the community clinic, Dr. Xi, that the reason for Mr. Bo’s rather strange inquisitiveness about my private life had to do with his job of keeping track of how many women in the neighborhood were in “the domain for which the family policy could be helpful” (jihuashengyu you bangzhu de lingyu). That is to say, although Mr. Bo did not put it quite bluntly, the question he was most interested in knowing was, “While living here, will you be in a relationship with a fertile woman?” Experiencing the surveillance system of the state in action, I could not help, but completely suspend my disbelief at Dr. Xi’s claim that she, with the help of the neighborhood committee, had been rigorously keeping records of the population of fertile women living in the neighborhood. Not only did she keep a record, as written in her job description as a doctor for this particular community, but the record was fairly accurate. This record was made public to the community in the form of a colored printed poster, as a way to raise awareness of the importance of population control, and family planning, as well as to display the clinic’s success in keeping track of what the state deemed to be crucial information. As the anthropologist Everett Zhang (2011) observes, contemporary China is experiencing a new phase of what he calls “sexual revolution,” in which the rapid economic development of Chinese society has drastically changed (and in some ways desensitized) not only
perceptions, but also practice and public display of its citizenry regarding the forms of engagement in, and consequences of sexual activity. In fact, in accordance with the family planning policy, residents had access to free condoms (along with other forms of contraceptives such as the morning after pills) since the neighborhood committee had the responsibility of distributing them.

Yet, leaving a box of condoms randomly on the street would be the least efficient way of distributing them given both theft and the heat that could possibly deteriorate the quality of the latex condoms. As such, condom distribution boxes were often located, where else but at the lottery ticket kiosk. There was often someone there to make sure that no one vandalized the box, to check if the box needed to be filled. Mr. Bo was the one to be called to fill it up with the stock he had back at the neighborhood committee office. According to the two salespersons at the kiosk, putting the box there was an effective way of “impose some sense of shame” onto the residents who were either too young or taking too many condoms from the box. There were five closed-circuit cameras right above the kiosk pointing in five different directions around the north gate since it was the location where theft, vandalism, fights (usually between the neighbors themselves) took place; so, this “sense of shame” was not only enforced by the presence of these passive cameras, but also the presence of the active human beings. In other words, there was a convergence of official and local and social

17 One of the achievements of which I was proud as a good resident of the neighborhood was to make a suggestion to the neighborhood committee that the location of the box – on the wall on the south side of the building which was located right across the branching lane from the kiosk – was not good for the condoms. As my room was also right there, I had experienced the exposure to the direct sunlight, which was good for me, but I was not sure if that which was good for the latex condoms since prolonged exposure to heat could potentially damage them. So, I made an effort to suggest it to the neighborhood committee via Mr. Bo. At the beginning I had thought to myself given the experience I had had with them that there was “no way they would take not only a waidiren but also waiguoren like myself that seriously”; yet, about a week afterward the box was moved from one side of the wall to the opposite side. Nobody, not even Mr. Bo himself, had ever talked to me about the reason for moving the box, and I could only speculate that it was because of my suggestion.
surveillance at work. While the closed-circuit cameras and neighborhood committee's staff were there for control, the neighbors were there to serve in the role of human surveillance to provide an unintimidating sense of safety. The feeling and sense of living in a street corner society could not be clearer.

Because of the location and the dynamic relations between the neighbors mentioned above, it was perhaps not surprising that the Party Secretary (shuju) of the neighborhood, Mr. Zhang, as well as the temporary staff of the neighborhood committee (with the exception of Mr. Bo who was also known in the neighborhood committee's circle as “Lazy Bo” or Bolanzi) visited the kiosk regularly to acquire relevant information about the new residents in the neighborhood. “Party Secretary Zhang” (Zhang shuju) himself was not a particularly social person, and he himself did not like to buy lottery tickets, so his relationship with the kiosk was entirely professional. He spent little time conversing with anyone gathered there except the salespersons, from whom he would from time to time extract new information. Owing to the enticing symbolic quality of this “corner,” I was reminded of a classic ethnographic sociological study Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum (1943), in which the sociologist William Foot Whyte, through his immersed living experience with the locals, details the patterns of interaction among the neighbors in a district populated by Italian immigrants in Boston. His depiction of the scene of the gathering was similar to this lottery kiosk at Tranquil Light in many ways, including the use of the corner as a gathering point, unfamiliar local language, and the familiar faces who played an important role in sustaining a dynamic and vibrant “neighborhood-like” scene in the middle of a megalopolis of more than twenty-four million residents. The kiosk was not only observable from a distance, but also conveniently located. As such, those buying lottery tickets were more likely to be making an “impulse” purchase, as opposed to seeking out the kiosk directly for that purpose.
Apart from being in the right place, the organizational capacity of this little kiosk also lay in its main commercial activity. Selling and buying lottery tickets, contrary to my initial impression, was not a grab-and-go type of economic transaction. There were different types of lottery tickets, and individual buyers had their personal preferences, depending on what they were looking to do that day, and in that particular moment. The shortest transaction took about two minutes – this was for lottery tickets that were printed out from the machine. The buyers could choose the numbers that they wanted. The longest transaction could take up to ten minutes because special these tickets involved the manual labor on the buyers’ part to scratch the tickets to reveal the numbers. Although three minutes would be the shortest amount of time, buyers often spent much more time than that. “Who would just scratch off the concealer and go? They’d chat with us while scratching it, and we would talk about all kinds of things,” said one of the salespersons. According to her, “since gambling is not permitted here in China, and excitement seems to be what is missing from the life of many, my customers really take the time to enjoy this very minor excitement,” she said. In addition, what makes this corner kiosk similar to Boston’s street corner society is its role in organizing social relations, events, and surveillance.

A regular visitor to Teacher Hu’s “platform” Auntie Yan (Yan A-Yi; the name by which she asked me to call her), for instance, always stopped at the kiosk to talk to the lottery ticket salespersons, both long time friends of hers, before walking down the main lane to get to her house just right outside the south gate. Similar to Mrs. Hsu, Auntie Yan also at one time lived in Tranquil Light. “It’s still vivid in my mind how we women in the neighborhood – little girls, adults, and old women alike – had the task of cleaning the lanes every Thursday,” said Ms. Yan. She decided to trade her room in the neighborhood for a larger space after she gave birth to a daughter in the late 1970s. “My
husband and I knew that this small room wouldn’t be enough for the three of us,” Ms. Yan shared with me, and then continued, “so, we talked to the head of our work unit to help us find someone who would like to trade the space with us.” Trading spaces between residents were possible then, as the process was seen by the local government as the only possible way to keep up with the natural expansion of families given the austerity of the centrally-planned economic regime of the PRC at the time (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2009b). It did not take them long to find someone, as the location of Tranquil Light, and the prestige with which it was associated, tempted many of her “comrades,” especially those who were single or did not have children. The kiosk was also where Auntie Yan visited with her old neighbors and got to the office of the street management bureau – known as *jiedao* – to take part in various activities that they regularly organized for retirees such as dancing and learning foreign languages. As was the case on many occasions, I had gotten the opportunity to meet with her at the kiosk as well as shadow her and her old neighbors all the way to the *jiedao*, where I found that these old neighbors also used the kiosk as a space to organize their activities and to plan their classes. Sometimes they left the handbook of local services and activities (*renmin fuwu jiedao shouce*) at the *jiedao* where spaces similar to classrooms were ample (probably, because the building was built to be a school building before it was converted into a space for governmental functions) and where there were many classes and activities offered, such as group singing and basic English classes from local volunteers. Most of the old neighbors were just there “for fun” (*jiu shi lai wan yi wan*). Only Auntie Yan was more determined than anyone else to learn English, as she wanted to go visit and perhaps eventually live abroad with her daughter who was, then, living abroad in an English-speaking country, in a few years’ time.
Displacement from an Anthropological Perspective

In the past two decades, Shanghai has been urbanizing at a breakneck pace. During the first stage with the goal of modernization its infrastructure through export-led economic development, and in the current stage aiming at expanding the base for domestic consumption (Yusuf and Saich 2008). The urbanization of Shanghai has been developing almost by the book. According to most classic urban political economy theories, as a process, the urbanization of Shanghai began in the existing urban centers abundant with socioeconomic and cultural infrastructure (Fainstein 1994). Unlike the first four Special Economic Zones (SEZs) along the east coast, Shanghai was a political jungle rife with internal politics; hence, it was not given the green light for a similar program of economic growth until the early 1990s when China’s leader Deng Xiaoping chose Shanghai to be the “head of the dragon,” serving as the engine of the country’s commercial renaissance (Bergère 2009; Foster, et al. 1998; Macpherson 1994).

Spearheading the inner-city urbanization process was the highly profitable paid transfer of land use rights from the local government to the hands of private developers (Zhu 2002). In Shanghai Gone: Domicide and Defiance in a Chinese Megacity, the historian Qin Shao (2013) has documented the Shanghai Municipal Government’s violation of the basic human right to shelter through both extra-legal means such as forced eviction (qiangzhi chaiqian), as well as legal means such as eminent domain under the pretense of reclaiming the land for public use, only to let it revert subsequently to commercial use once the original residents had moved out. According to the old residents whom I interviewed, Shao’s accounts are accurate particularly during the 1990s, when the urban residents did not have such easy access to information via the Internet and were not provided any legal support. These personal accounts resonate with the finding from the New York-based international non-
profit organization Human Rights Watch (2004). As Shao observes, the root of many demonstrations and protests in current years has been the inadequacy of compensation, which has led many residents who could not afford new homes to take up residence with or to plead other forms of financial support from their own families (many scholars have also documented similar phenomena in urban areas elsewhere, also see Allen, et al. 2005; Li 2005). Recently becoming more common is the practice of using “big national events” to legitimate urban renewal (Handelman 1998). The underlying idea is to use the influence of western values to create “official master narratives” for the developing city (Scott 1998). While officials sometimes employ such narratives to support the use of eminent domain in highly dubious projects, the process of “spatial cleansing” (Herzfeld 2006) of the existing urban fabric through the construction of the image of national events cannot be more evident.

For instance, a sidebar to the glamorous story of Shanghai’s World Expo’10 success involves disputes and protests from residents whose houses were torn down, as they were located from the planned site of the Expo. To create a physical representation of the official master narratives, the local government was determined to treat the site of the event as a tabula rasa – so that the Grand Projects master plan could grandiosely stretch across both sides of the Huangpu River (Shin 2012; Waldmeir 2013). Hundreds of five to six-story walk-up buildings that had existed on the site had only been constructed no earlier than 1980 and were thus in relatively good condition. In the famous story of a local resident that made headlines before the Expo and was quickly suppressed, the local government began coercing and threatening his family for up to six years before the demolition. In

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18 This story became famous, argues Xin Zhang and Richard Baum (2004), as a result of the collective discontent among urban citizens who had felt that the system that the Chinese Community Party had put in place only benefited those who had connections with high-ranking officials and not the ordinary citizens. In the particular story of the Chongqing nail house, where
the end, without the family’s consent, on December 29, 2005, the Pudong New District authorities demolished the resident’s house when no one was home. Ruthless, cruel, and inhumane were probably the shared sentiments of many towards this incident, as many young Chinese writers, bloggers, and filmmakers have tried to portray this story through films to garner public attention (notably in the Chopstick Brothers’ Winner and Chen Kaige’s 100 Flowers Hidden Deep). In 2010, this resident wrote an open letter to the United Nations Secretary-General pointing out to him what he called “the hidden Shanghai Expo.” He argued that the authorities did not mention the eviction of the residents of the 18,000 bulldozed homes in preparation for the soon-to-be the most visited World Expo in the history of the event (Xinhua News Agency 2010). This kind of action has had a direct impact on the everyday life of the city’s residents, who have to give up their “embodiment of social knowledge” for the global hierarchy of value about which they have no say (Herzfeld 2004). It seeks to “renew” at the expense of the existing “old.” In this sense, as the geographer Neil Smith (2006: 204-208) has observed, the extent to which the term “urban renewal” has anything to do with the positive aspect of the term “renewal,” or the extension of the usability of the urban space, is dubious (Smith simply calls it “a new euphemism”). In China, local governments use gentrification to promote economic growth and urban development by maximizing the benefits from the existing land supply at the cost of large-scale replacement of housing for lower income residents. This particular process of renovation to conform to middle-class tastes, as argued by many geographers, is a global phenomenon, and is occurring in places such as Central London (Hamnett 2003).

citizens reached over the temporary walls of the construction site to snap photos of the nail house and then spread them all over the Internet in matters of hours. As a result, netizens collectively criticized the incident and the central government decided to dismiss the party officials in charge of this project and compensated the resident of nail house.

19 As reported with the headline “Shanghai World Expo wins worldwide applause," by the Chinese owned Xinhua news agency, there were 73 million visitors from 246 countries participating in the event.
Having said that, the most recent quantitative findings present a different picture. According to the geographers Si-Ming Li and Yu-Ling Song’s systematic survey research of 1,200 displaced families in Shanghai (2009), the majority of the relocated residents did not voice their discontent. In general, the local government had made a series of systematic changes in the land reclamation process, which, according to the aforementioned research was much fairer than in the 1990s (with the exception of the Expo’10 case above). The dilapidated physical conditions and the limited private space per resident were the two main factors that helped the local government make a case for relocation, as residents were more likely to move to a new locality rather than receive proper monetary compensation for their property (also see Hsing 2010; Rithmire 2013). As shown in the anthropologist Deborah Pellow’s (1993b) study of the living condition of Shanghainese in the late 1980s, Shanghai’s housing problem was rooted in the paradox between the cultural ideal of patrilineal extended family, and aspirations for adequate physical wellbeing. Pellow, in particular, focuses on the question of sexuality: How did the residents cope with the lack of privacy for the most basic human reproductive activity? Under the pretext of limited housing stock, newly-wed couples often had little choice other than to remain in their parents’ home, resulting in the further subdivision of already tight spaces, an “intensely congested condition” with which, according to Pellow, the residents had little option but to “cope.” Many of the generation of Shanghainese residents born in the 1980s and 1990s have experienced this intensity. One of my interviewees, Jue, for instance, shared with me how she “slept right next to her parents in a lilong house until I was twelve,” when they were asked to relocate, and she finally had her own room. Giving birth to Jue right around the time when the one-child policy was beginning to be rigidly enforced (Wang, et al. 2010), Jue’s parents told her that they could have remained in their original home, but moved voluntarily to provide better living conditions for her, their only daughter. “It was a totally different world,” said Jue. “It was not until I went to college [in the early 2000s] that I realized that, in fact, I
had never seen my parents engage in a romantic gesture or activity – they never kissed, or hugged each other in front of me, let alone made love – they must have scheduled those activities to avoid my presence.” Jue’s parents’ and grandparents’ generations, each member of the family had their own space, if not room; thus, a moderate sense of privacy (Pellow 1993a). What Jue said, indeed, has some truth in it. In the film *Shi Men Road*, a cinematic portrayal of a similar story by a native Shanghainese film director and professor at Shanghai University Haolun Shu (2011), the female protagonist agonizes over how her coming of age is being accompanied by the trauma of witnessing the sounds and vibrations of her parents lovemaking because of the tight living conditions in her family home. During our interview, the director himself also told me that the film was based both on long-term research with Shanghainese residents, and his own childhood memories. “These are very common to many of us who were born before the reform and opening up (gaige kaifang),” said Professor Shu. Some of my relocated interviewees, who moved away during early 1990s when the relocation process began to gain momentum, also shared with me that they not only did not resist but also welcomed these changes because they “could not envision anything worse than what they had to cope on a daily basis in their old houses.” The local government, targeting an increase in gross domestic product by way of leasing land rights, took advantage of these sentiments, claiming roughly one hundred square kilometers of inner-city urban space throughout the 1990s, and relocating these residents in newly built suburbs and satellites. In other words, going hand-in-hand with the rapid urbanization was also the swift and systematic expansion of new suburbs or new towns (Li 2015a; Liu 2014).

Although it may seem as though this suburbanization process was unprecedented, it was not new to Shanghai. During the first decade after the CCP took control of the city’s economic activity, the urban policy of the city focused primarily on the building of new satellite towns around the existing
inner city to accommodate the planned expansion of heavy industries (Pan 2006). The pivotal moment for the macro planning of the city came with the release of the Outline of the Master Plan in 1959, proposed immediately after the transferring of counties to Shanghai from neighboring Jiangsu Province, and providing ample undeveloped land for Shanghai to expand its industrial base in accordance with the Outline.\(^{20}\) The second phase of urban expansion of Shanghai came in 2001 with the decentralization process, in which the proposal to create nine new town centers in the suburbs – with 4 towns to be created from scratch – was put forward by the municipal government (den Hartog 2010). With major efforts by the local authority to push forward the idea of new towns in the late 1990s, a few key economic functions were identified to serve as special magnet features – tourism, industry, and education – around which the residential areas could be built, and serve as the basis for development. The nine new towns grew 69\% between 2000 and 2010. The population of these suburban areas also grew from 9.5 million in 2000 to 16.0 million in 2010 (Cox 2011).

During my very first visit to Shanghai in the summer of 2006, I took part in a series of Sino-US cooperative joint meetings with local planners, as a delegate from a US education institution whose goal was to brainstorm ideas, and “learn from our Chinese counterparts.” The main discussion that most of the US delegates were interested in was resident displacement (see Wu 2004b), which, not to everyone’s surprise, was not even on the table of the local planners with whom we met at length. One of the preconceptions that we had regarding China’s rapid urbanization was that a large number of residents must have been, or were being, displaced, at a rapid pace, and with, in mind, the understanding of the cultural roles of space and place, as well as human rights, we were curious to

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\(^{20}\) This early CCP expansion covers both the existing undeveloped areas in Shanghai, namely Wusong, Yunzaobang, Pengpu, Taopu, Beixinjing, Caohejing, Changqiao, Zhoujiadu, Donggou and Gaoqiao, as well as the new satellite towns bordering and previously belonged to Jiangsu Province, namely Minghang, Wujing, Jiading, Anting, Songjiang, Beiyangqiao, Qingpu, Tangkou, Nanqiano, Zhoupu, Chuansha, Zhujing, Fengjing, Fengcheng, Nanhui, Chongming and Baozheng.
know how our “Chinese counterparts” were dealing with it (Lim 2006). As opposed to our impression that displaced residents were those forced to leave their familiar localities, their close-knit circles of social life, and their people, “the residents are so far pleased with the relocation process,” said one of the planners in a meeting during which we discussed the planning model of the Shanghai municipal government. Raised by the local planners was the issue that US planners “tended to think of the Chinese society in the US terms.” Because this was my first encounter with cultural differences, this quotation to me, has always been vivid although it was made almost a decade ago. The same planner then went on to tell us the statistics regarding investment in building infrastructure in the suburbs to which the urban residents were being relocated, and eventually invited us to visit one of them if our time permitted. Unfortunately, we had to stick to our program, including heading north by overnight train to Beijing (as the high-speed train that would connect the two cities in five hours did not begin its service until 2008) to continue discussing city planning ideas with the counterparts in the capital city, and therefore did not have the opportunity to see with our own eyes how the relocated residents were living.

As mentioned in this dissertation’s introduction, after that first visit I have returned to Shanghai at least once a year over the next seven years (2006-2013), but as my role had changed to a graduate student conducting research I no longer had the opportunity to pose questions directly to those responsible for laying the groundwork for socio-economic development in the physical sense. During the past three years in the field, I attended more than two dozen conferences, meetings, and forums organized by government agencies that were responsible for the physical transformation of the city, such as the PRC Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, Shanghai Planning and Land Resources Administration Bureau, Leading Group Office of Shanghai Master Plan, Urban Planning Society of China, and the College of Architecture and Urban Planning at Shanghai’s Tongji
University. These organized, high profile events, despite their resourcefulness at the policy and propaganda levels, did not provide me with adequate qualitative data let alone information understanding the effect of urban transformation on the residents. This lack of access to formal channels was not completely counterproductive, as it led me to explore other less formal means of information gathering, with my first idea being a comparative study of the urban and suburban way of life. With the goal of better understanding whether or not the relocation process was all about transferring access rights to the city from the poor to the middle class, I embarked on series of short-term visits both to the remaining low-rise urban neighborhoods targeted for demolition, and those newer housing projects in the suburbs that the planners had once urged us to visit and experience first-hand. That said, as a short-term researcher there was only so much I could experience first-hand until my intense experience living in Tranquil Light discussed in the earlier chapters. Given Shanghai’s rather unusual history of housing provision, especially the confiscation of private housing and re-distribution to workers, it was not that surprising to me to find out that the living condition of urban residents in the confiscated structures was far from adequate. In addition, the uncertainty of national politics resulting in the re-shuffling of housing tenancy also disrupted the formation of place attachment. Teacher Hu, for instance, said that his family was moved twice (once he claimed because his father's comrade stabbed him in the back) before they eventually settled in Tranquil Light. “Because we moved quite a bit, I didn’t feel or have loyalty to any place in particular,” he said. This was also the case for his neighbors. Although some of the close ones knew each other, most of them only “knew of” (zhidao) each other insofar as they would occasionally run into each other in the lane, but were not even acquaintances (renshi de pengyou). I was under the wrong impression that everyone who used to live in a neighborhood in the scale of Tranquil Light must have known each other.
Ethnography in and Outside of the Immediate Field Site

The turning point in my fieldwork that had me interested in the role that relocation and displacement had played in the urban social change of Shanghai came when I began to meet, on a daily basis, “old neighbors” (línjū) of my interviewees who regularly returned to the neighborhood to see their friends and family, play cards, buy food, walk their dogs, and otherwise spend time there. Unlike the “old residents” who still lived in the community, the “old neighbors” had taken advantage of the relocation policies, and – similar to Jue’s family – had left voluntarily to provide better living conditions for their children.

There was always a group of a half dozen old neighbors gathering around the kiosk at the north gate of the neighborhood, many of whom I had the opportunity to converse with since that particular spot was right below the pavilion room that I lived in during my fieldwork. Almost every day I heard their rather repetitive and patterned conversations. Without any particular activity in mind, these old neighbors simply returned here as a retirement pastime. They conversed and chatted about the local economies and politics – especially about housing prices – and gossiped about the state of affairs of their children and grandchildren (particularly if they had unmarried daughters or granddaughters approaching the age of becoming “leftover,” see Gutmann 2015), and their health. While observing the rest of the neighborhood, I took part in the conversation as much as I could, eventually questioning the entire standpoint of my ethnographic inquiry when I realized that I was learning from the old neighbors more than from the old residents when it came to the history and structure of Tranquil Light. I found myself spending more time with the relocated residents since they seemed to be interested in sharing their nostalgic narratives with me. It seemed to me that I was no longer investigating the synchronic, as the diachronically oriented data from the old neighbors seemed to
dominate my ethnography. These old neighbors were there almost every day, and they were keen to share their stories.

“Having lived through the bad and the worst time,” an original resident shared with me, “I think of the younger people as those who don’t necessarily understand what it takes to survive.” I had made an effort to inquire further about in what age range did he meant by “younger people” and his answer “everyone under 40!” It was not a surprise that he did not have many friends who were considered “young” to him. His sense of etiquette made it difficult for the residents, both old and new, to share their actual thoughts on the topics brought up by these old residents in their presence.

Like my 92-year-old landlord, this original resident was one of the lao kele – literally translated as “colorful old men.” Always sharply dressed in a Western-styled outfit such as a suit, these older Shanghainese men grew up during the city’s golden age in the 1930s. Also, they can speak some English and are familiar with the coffee culture. “He is proud of his true Shanghainese heritage, so he would scold everyone who did not agree with his ideas – and ideals,” said one of the lottery salespeople at the kiosk. What this original resident meant, as I also learned from his neighbors who also shared with him the similar sentiment, was that local social values refer to the persistent demanding for respect from the younger residents. As many scholars have observed, the decline in the cultural obligation to respect the elderly owes its origin to the one-child policy and the modern service sector economy. While the former puts the child at the center of the attention of the entire extended family, the latter, through waged labor, diminishes the need to rely on family connections and estates to establish one’s career (Hesketh, et al. 2005; Ng; Tam and Neysmith 2006).

Nonetheless, this change in the attitude toward the elderly among the younger Chinese does not directly imply that there is also a decline in the younger generation’s respect for their family elders, such as their own parents and grandparents. As many scholars have also observed, the children are
relying on the support of the parents when they reach marriageable age to afford a home, which in some way strengthens the parental authority on the child’s life – a crucial discussion which I will return to in detail in Chapter 7 (Chen and Silverstein 2000; Lee and Xiao 1998; Li and Shin 2013; Zhang 2004b). So, there were these lao kele gentlemen hanging out in the neighborhood mingling with a selective group of people with whom they felt comfortable conversing for these very reasons. The other group consisted of old neighbors who only returned to see their own parents or friends. One of these old neighbors, for instance, was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Liang who lived down the corridor from me. Mr. and Mrs. Liang’s daughter grew up in the room in which her parents were living when they were my neighbors, and only moved out about two decades ago when she married her work unit colleague.

Because of her parents’ old age, she came back to visit almost every other weekend, sometimes bringing along her teenage son, whom the Liangs were always delighted to see. In contemporary China, Shanghai has long been a city where one would like to live when getting old, as its citizens boast both the country’s longest life expectancy (Shanghai Daily 2014), as well as the best pension and medical systems for elderly care (Peng 2011). That said, although these two systems are good in general, there are discrepancies in terms of efficiency of delivery, which varied from district to district (also see Zhang and Kanbur 2005); hence, the Liangs were still content with living in the neighborhood although they could have moved elsewhere. Thus, I often bumped into the Liangs on Wednesday mornings on their way to the neighborhood’s community clinic, located right next to the neighborhood committee to have a young doctor from a nearby hospital read their blood pressure, and to receive their prescription medicines. I first encountered the Liangs’ daughter on the small staircase in front of my room, and at the time, I was not aware of her relationship with them. As the staircase was meant for private access to those living in my building, this woman in her mid-50s,
wearing sunshades indoors and a stylishly ornate traditional Shanghainese dress did not look like someone who would live in a squalid compound like ours. It was not until I learned later on that she was the daughter of the Liangs that we began to converse and that she began to share with me insights into social life in the lilong and her childhood memories of the place. Unlike the old neighbors who hung out in the lane, Mr. and Mrs. Liang’s daughter only came to see her parents, spending a few hours with them before heading home. I learned from Mr. and Mrs. Liang later that their daughter did not have many friends when she was living there two decades ago because she liked to spend her time studying in her room rather than playing in the lane like any other kids her age. The old neighbors down in the lane were a bit older than she was, being mostly in their 60s – 70s (i.e., the common retirement age in China). Mr. Liang told me, “she might come back more often after she’s retired…she will begin to think more about her own history in the neighborhood once she doesn’t have her day job to keep her busy, I believe.”

There was, however, gossip about the “only reason” why this daughter regularly came to visit her parents shared with me by one of the old neighbors: “She wants to inherit the place after her parents have passed.” This old neighbor, who seemed to be in a good relationship with the Liangs’ daughter, told me that:

The Liangs had had a difficult time with her before she eventually moved out. I don’t think Uncle and Auntie Liang would like to move anywhere since they have been here forever, although they complain from time to time that they feel out of place here now that most of their neighbors are elsewhere. There was one time when Uncle Liang had asked me if I knew anyone who would like to buy his place so that he and his wife could move out to the suburb for a bigger and newer apartment. But he didn’t seem to follow up. The reason for them not wanting to sell the house at the end? I think Uncle and Auntie Liang know that their daughter wants their place, and therefore it’s the only asset they possess that keeps his daughter coming back to visit them.

One can think of this as gossip. As the functionalist anthropologist Max Gluckman (1963) has argued, gossip are idioms of intimacy. Like idioms, which are groups of words established by usage
as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words, gossip is not to be read simply semantically (see also Dunbar 1996; White 2008). For Gluckman, the idiomatic quality of gossip creates ties of intimacy among those gossiping because the story, true or false, sounds as though it is something that interest the parties engaged in the unconstrained yet deliberate report about other people. The historian of Shanghai Jie Li in her detailed account and study of the lilong, in which she herself also once a resided, *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life* (2015) argues that gossip has become a norm in the lilong owing to the cultural genealogy of the city, and more importantly the spatial orientation of the lilong whereby residents see each other on a regular basis in the lane when they do chores, exercise, and simply hang out in the lanes. In this case, this piece of gossip about the daughter of the Liangs, which this old neighbor in no way could solicit with evidence, may not be an attack based on the gossiper's suspicion that she was a daughter who lacked filiality, but the gossiper's interest in establishing a tie with me based on her usual habit of small talk (*xiăo shuō*) as a way of forming an alliance with me, as she knew that I was in the lilong to study housing. “Alleyway residents enjoy such gossip because in other people’s pain and embarrassment they find catharsis or consolation for the unspeakable in their own lives,” Li (2015b: 134) writes. Mr. Liang, who still looked remarkably healthy in his 80s, always walked up and down the main lane in the neighborhood at least five times daily in addition to his walk to the market in the morning to buy ingredients for Mrs. Liang to prepare their meals. “It’s delightful to bump into old friends in the lane, and ‘share some news’…that’s another good reason to exercise by walking up and down the lane,” he said. Mrs. Liang, while waiting for Mr. Liang to come back from shopping, would usually be down in the lane talking with her neighbors. As Li (2015b) argues, gossip is a norm not only because of the spatial organization but also surveillance, as there was no privacy in the lilong. “People can see you from their windows… and people can hear you through the thin walls,” Mr. Liang said.
Figure 20: A view from the window on the stairway of my lilong, showing the neighbor-to-neighbor surveillance system in the neighborhood. Photograph: author

Information such as this has enabled me to put into perspective the process of urban social change vis-à-vis family expansion in this particular neighborhood. There were many old neighbors who provided me with similar ethnographic data. Contrary to my initial understanding that the relocation and displacement processes are unfair and therefore caused the low-income residents not only the distress and dissatisfaction but also social malaise (Wu 2004a), these old neighbours were by and large content with the better living conditions in often larger, newer, and much better equipped apartments in the suburbs, granted they could return to their former neighbourhood as often as they pleased by way of Shanghai’s state-of-the-art metro and bus systems (Xiao and Gu 2012). This satisfaction with relocation shows both the general picture of urban development and suburbanization in Shanghai and, more importantly, the distinctly “pragmatic attitude” of the
Shanghainese residents toward change, which I discuss in detail in Chapter Five (e.g., Bergère 2009; Chen 2007; Wong 1996).

Mrs. Hsu: “My Grandparents Bought The House”

Although their time in the neighborhood overlapped for more than two decades, a spokesman of the neighborhood such as Teacher Hu had no idea who Ms. Hsu was. As a moderately successful businesswoman in her own right, Ms. Hsu, 50, was in the neighborhood one afternoon looking into an opportunity to buy a room in Tranquil Light where she once lived. Although she later found out that it was not possible since she had given up her Chinese nationality to become a citizen of a country in North America, and therefore her household registration, she was still interested in an opportunity to rent a place nearby. “All my memories growing up in China are in and about this neighborhood,” she said. Moving to Shanghai from Hong Kong during the city’s golden age in the 1930s, Ms. Hsu’s grandparents arrived in the city, according to her, “full of hope to be successful in business in the Paris of the Orient.” Shanghai then was still economically prosperous although some signs of urban unrest were already apparent. Because Tranquil Light was in the then International Settlement under the jurisdiction of many foreign countries, these signs were not as obvious. In their house, the Hsus lived through the turmoil of World War II (1937 -1945) and the civil war (1945 – 1949), which, according to Ms. Hsu, “my parents said was not that bad for us since we always kept our heads low.”

During the last few months before the CCP took over Shanghai in 1949, many of her relatives fled to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, but as her grandparents had only recently invested the bulk of their savings into a home, they decided to stay behind. While most wealthy residents left
China because they distrusted the radical Marxist communist-socialist doctrine of the CCP, the Hsus instead kept an open mind. Ms. Hsu recalled how her grandparents later regretted it and thought that it “was probably not the best decision – if not the worst – that one could make back then” but, according to her, “I remember my grandfather was saying that there was a fear or something…perhaps the uncertainty of relocating elsewhere that compelled them to stay here in Shanghai…He was already attached to Shanghai.” That said, as argued by the historian Christopher Leighton (2010), capitalists were not being discriminated against at the onset of the PRC as many may think. The businesspeople who remained in the PRC after 1949 were, in fact, rewarded with state-sanctioned status as “good” representatives of their class, the so-called “red capitalists,” who had been participating in officially sponsored organizations such as the Democratic Construction Association and the All China Federation of Industry and Commerce (also see Cheng 1987). In the next two years, the government determined that the Hsus’ house was too big for their six-member family. After the CCP took full control of the city’s economic planning and program, the house was confiscated and redistributed to five families who moved into the house, taking the Hsus’ place.

Over the course of the next twenty years, the Hsus would move into a single room where three generations – Ms. Hsu being the youngest – would live together. In the 1970s, the Hsus moved a few times to successively smaller quarters as their work unit saw fit, both in Tranquil Light, and in a nearby neighborhood. Eventually, they were able to move back to Tranquil Light again during the Cultural Revolution. “Finally, it was the government that allocated a house to us. Although it wasn’t the one that we bought it was still in the same neighborhood full of memories for all of us,” she recalled. She remembered the stories about how you could hear everyone in the lane; how it was so hot in the summer that everyone had to come outside to the lane to cool down; how the space was so tight that when someone cooked something the smell spread so that everyone would also know what they were going to eat. Ms. Hsu spent the first twenty years of her life in the neighborhood
between early-1960s and the early 1990s before emigrating to North America as a political refugee, though she began occasional return trips to visit family once the government started to relax return policies in the early 2000s.

“Shanghainese citizens are familiar with the process of displacement,” Mrs. Hsu said. Throughout its short urban history starting from the mid-19th century, Shanghainese residents have been both voluntarily asked and involuntarily driven, by either the politically or economically powerful to move around whenever the parts of town in which they lived became more valuable in the eyes of those who saw benefits in terms of property market (Lu 1999). During the high communist era, while the housing policy was tied to the structure of the work unit (whoever one worked for was responsible for where you would live) there were a large number of exchanges and reshiftlings of houses, especially among workers whose families were expanding (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2009b; Ma 1981). The massive migration in the name of relocation policies to the so-called “new villages” in the suburbs of the city was never more obvious than with the socialist governmental policy in the 1950s. Mrs. Hsu told me that many of her good friends (whom she called tongxue or classmates) had been relocated to these new villages, and that she had found it difficult to remain in contact with them thereafter.

The new villages, also known in Chinese as xincun, were experimental housing projects built to improve the living conditions of the residents in the city (see Liang 2014). Modeled after worker housing in the Soviet Union (which during the first decade of the PRC was still the PRC’s main ally) these xincun projects were located on the periphery of the city, as the abundance of empty land provided opportunities to try different building and urban typologies. A large number of these xincun had been built in the decades after the 1950s to accommodate three million additional
residents, which was more than half of the original residents before the takeover by the CCP (Yu 2010). Absorbing the relocated residents mostly from the ramshackle, squatter settlements in the central city areas became the purpose of these new villages. Spaces were still tight, but they were much more organized. For instance, there was a clear division between the bedroom and the living room. The kitchen and bathroom, though sometimes shared by more than one unit (but typically for one family) was located at a location convenient to the shared parties with adequate access to ventilation and sunlight. “It was much better than the entire family of four being crammed into a small room, sharing the bathroom and kitchen with half a dozen of other people,” said an old neighbor who used to live there. With the work units in charge of the employment and housing of the residents and the absence of the market economy, the once highly fluctuating real estate market fell flat. The centrally-planned socialist economy played a critical role in re-shaping how residents recognized their statuses in relation to the place where they lived. Residents in these new villages who were relocated from the urban areas generally welcomed the relocation program.

With massive governmental investment in infrastructure to fuel rapid urbanization in the 1990s, high-rise apartment buildings began mushrooming across the landscape. These high-rise buildings almost immediately became another option for voluntary relocation for residents who could afford to do so (Bao 2000; Peng 1986). One of the new residents’ parents, for instance, as a result of having been the first to take the risk of investing in the new market economy, were among the first to benefit from the new system and were therefore able to use their earnings to purchase an apartment unit in one of the first private condominium-styled high-rise apartment buildings in Shanghai in the early 1980s. That said, although there is ample evidence of forced eviction, especially those that are

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21 These new villages are not to be confused with the New Towns (xincheng), the nine mega-districts masterminded by the municipal government to double the population of the city that began in the early 2000s.
far from being fair to the residents in terms of compensation packages (e.g., as narrated in detail in Shao 2013), there are also many stories regarding how the relocation process enabled the residents, mostly the elderly, to get access to a better quality of life (Zhang 2013)

Because Tranquil Light, by the time of this research, had yet to be of interest to developers perhaps owing to the combination of the preservation restrictions and the high market price that they would have to compensate the old residents should they wish to take the building from them, all of the original residents had been voluntarily moving themselves and their families elsewhere. For some of them, what made them decide to move was family expansion. This reason was similar to those who relocated twenty years earlier during the high socialist era.\(^{22}\) In other words, demand for larger space was the main pull factor. Most of these residents volunteered to relocate moved to bigger places. There were also some exceptions, such as a number of residents who sold or rented out their larger and more centrally-located places in the neighborhood as they needed money for various personal (e.g., supporting their children’s education) and health reasons; hence, these residents voluntarily moved into inferior places. Many “pragmatic” old neighbors made the decision to move out once they realized that the new place would give them and their family a much more comfortable life.

**Ms. Cheng: A Decade Of Difficulty**

Ms. Cheng was born in a hospital near Tranquil Light in the mid-1950s. Her parents worked at a local work unit, so they were offered a modest room there almost right after the CCP took over the city in May 1949. Ms. Cheng and her parents lived in the same room, which was originally a master

\(^{22}\) But with the involvement of the market (in determining the price of the property), as opposed to the work unit (in setting the rubric for the transferal of residential rights).
bedroom on the second floor, for almost forty years. When Ms. Cheng got married in the 1980s, there were two options: either her parents helped the newly-weds find a new place, or they would have to move out so that the newly wed couple could use the room as their marriage home (hunfang). Finding a new place was not difficult, but because of the government-controlled housing system at the time, there was no guarantee that it would be somewhere in the city, let alone in the “upper quarter.” Her parents, already in their 60s by this time, had a plan, as they had managed to secure a room through their pension scheme in a newly built apartment in one of the suburbs, to which many residents – especially those who had always lived in the city - would like to move. Ms. Cheng’s parents did have a choice, but they thought it would be better for them to move out to the suburbs, giving their only asset to their only daughter. Since Ms. Cheng moved in her parents rarely returned to the city. “Retirees like us don’t have anything to do in the city anymore,” Ms. Cheng told me what her mother said to her.

Before getting married, Ms. Cheng received her undergraduate education from a well-known university in Shanghai. Unlike her husband who did not go to a prestigious college, Ms. Cheng was able to get a decent job as an accountant at a well-regarded work unit. The unusual arrangement of her husband’s moving in with her rather than the other way around was the result of her superior socioeconomic status. That said, this superiority did not demarcate the differences between the rich and the poor as such in modern Shanghai, as in the early 1990s most of the workers were still being employed at state-owned work units rather than private corporations. Once she gave birth to her own son, her family needed more space, though it was not until her son turned ten that she decided to act on this. Until this time, her entire family slept in the same room, resulting in, as told by Ms. Cheng’s neighbor who was her confidant, “a lack of intimacy with her husband that was taking an increasing toll on her marriage.” This neighbor of Ms. Cheng’s mentioned how they would have a
conversation about this problem “almost every day, and at almost every opportunity that she had…it’s almost as though she’s obsessed, but at the same time, she was extremely stressful about the future with her husband.” Using a small amount of money that she had saved over the years, Ms. Cheng purchased for her son a tingzijian on the north side of the same house from another couple who – like her parents - had decided to retire to the suburbs. The three of them lived in this arrangement for a few years, until she decided to divorce her husband owing to his “chronic infidelity issues.” Divorce, while legal, was still considered a scandalous event, and the local gossip, compounded by her son’s increasingly apparent autism and consequential bullying by others, ultimately proved to be too much for her. So she decided to leave the neighborhood as well. In the 1990s, most of the new housing, both private and public alike, was built in the style of high-rise apartment buildings, with each floor having only a few apartments at least two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and a living room. This way of life would be totally different from anything Ms. Cheng and her son had experienced in the lilong where the staircase was shared by the whole building, the bathroom was shared by three families and the kitchen was located in the internal corridor of the building which, despite being technically hers, never made her feel that it really was because anyone could use it without her knowledge when she was not there. She did, in fact, suspect that was the case for many years because of her rising gas bills.

The new place to which she was to be relocated was quite far from her work unit – in fact, it was considered the middle of nowhere in the 1990s – and she had to take two buses to get to her work unit every day. Shanghai Metro, the world’s longest system at the time of this research (CityMetric 2015), only consisted of two lines when Ms. Cheng first moved out in the early 2000s, and only
connected north to south (Line 1), and east to west (Line 2).\textsuperscript{23} Even Metro Line 3 which extended southward to the suburbs a few years later would not reach anywhere close to her soon-to-be new home. Moreover, as school was important to her son, moving out to the suburbs would leave her two options: either to commute every day to drop her son off at a good school in the city to which he was still entitled to attend, or to move him to a school with a lesser reputation in the suburbs. Although either of these two scenarios would obviously be inconvenient for her and her son, she had deeply felt that leaving the neighborhood would give them a new beginning. So, she sold her place to a new resident, and with the money she had already saved, and some help also from her parents, she bought a new yet modest two bedroom 55 square meter (about 592 square feet) apartment in a suburb of Shanghai that was then southwest of the city proper. The personal circumstances of her leaving notwithstanding, she still visited her old neighborhood frequently, as her office was close by, and because many of her childhood friends still lived there. According to her, there were a number of neighbors who thought that she had made a mistake in moving to the suburb. “Why would anyone do that?” she quoted one of her tongxue. This was the time when the new economic regime was about to be launched in Shanghai, and many people were still unsure about what it would mean to a city like Shanghai that, in the previous four decades, had been frozen in time with only moderate infrastructure improvements. Mr. Ding, one of my key informant whose story I will return to in Chapter 7, for instance, constantly recalled his impression of hearing about the “stock market” for the first time: “I had no idea what it was…many of us were given bonds and we had no idea what they were.” In the case of Ms. Cheng, after years of difficulty in commuting to work and being separated from her circle of friends who all lived in the city, her patience paid off as

\textsuperscript{23} According to the data from the Shanghai Shentong Metro Group, a state-owned company founded in 2000 to operate railway and metro lines in Shanghai, the length of the system as of 2016 was 588 kilometers (365.4 miles). The system consists of 14 lines and 364 stations serving approximately 8.41 million riders daily. Source: http://www.shmetro.com/EnglishPage/EnglishPage.jsp
the municipal government of Shanghai announced that her area would be chosen as the site for the Shanghai Exposition in 2010, meaning that various metro lines and buses would pass through her area, more shopping malls, markets, schools, and hospitals would be built in the area, and, last but in no way least, the price of her property would increase manifold. Her prognostication was not far off target (see Waldmeir 2013): “The prospect of rising property price wouldn’t mean much to me personally, but it would mean a lot to my son, when I would have to sell this home for him to use the money to buy a new house somewhere else to live,” said she. In the mind of Ms. Cheng, she would prefer that her son stays close to her, or even with her, but she was also pragmatic about how living under the same roof with her son and daughter-in-law might not be ideal – given her experience of living in the lilong where privacy did not exist. “I would probably buy a cheap place far in the city to live by myself if my son prefers to live with his wife here,” she said.

Better Have a Bed in Puxi than to Have a House in Pudong

Mrs. Cheng’s decade of difficulty was nothing when compared to some of her neighbors who were not so lucky, especially those who were relocated to the east side of Huangpu River, or Pudong. Two of these neighbors were Mr. and Ms. Zheng who I got to know quite well through Ms. Cheng who introduced us. Mr. and Ms. Zheng did not return to Tranquil Light except on “special days” when they felt they would like to eat the dumplings and pastries (dian xin) that only the restaurant around the corner of the neighborhood did well. Mr. and Mrs. Zheng both worked for a public bus work unit (gong gong qiche danwei) for four decades until they retired only a few years ago. They were relocated to Pudong in the early 1990s when Pudong had yet to be urbanized. The landscape of the area was dominated by two-story row houses and five-story walk-up apartments that were built in the USSR style. In the minds of native Shanghainese who were born before the 1990s, living in
Puxi’s lower quarter (xiazhijiao) was already considered “underprivileged,” and living in Pudong was beyond squalor. Pudong had long been the city’s hub for heavy industry, both before and after the semi-colonial period (1842 – 1945).

Figure 21: A map of Shanghai Circa 1950 – 1954 showing the distribution of spatial occupation between the east and the west sides of Huangpu River. Source: Virtual Shanghai Project (Map ID: 371; Title: Shanghai shi jiedao xiangtu; Author: Zhongguo shi di tu bianzuan she)

With no convenient way to cross over to Pudong except by riding a slow boat, Shanghainese had considered its underdeveloped landscape the least favorable place to live until the early 1990s when the master plan for the entire east side of the Huangpu River was executed with the help of the massive influx of foreign-directed investment and foreign loans. The popular saying was “Better

24 I am using this term to denote the sense of irony. In the eleventh edition of the Economist Style Guide (2015: 153), the term is considered “not only just ugly jargon but also nonsense since privilege is a special favor or advantage it is by definition not something to which everyone is entitled,” so by using the term underprivileged I imply the right to privileges for all.
have a bed in Puxi (the west side of Huangpu River) than a house in Pudong.” Mr. and Ms. Zheng responded to this with laughter:

We would agree with them totally if this were in the 1990s when we first moved here. Nobody wanted to move over here even though the houses here were much, much, much cheaper than in the downtown area. True, there weren’t any buses or anything [they moved in the early 1990s and the first metro line opened in Shanghai in 1993 and only ran on the Puxi side]. Even then, we had to liquidate everything that both of us had, borrow money from our friends and relatives to buy a place here. Yes, people thought we were a brain damaged (nao bing) couple (laughter). No one wanted to move over here. Since our daughter was becoming a woman, we thought we should give her more space. We worked in the city, so every day we had to bike for an hour just to get to the pier (ma tou) and then get the bikes onto the boat to cross to the Puxi side – just to bike another hour to get to our work unit.

So, Mr. and Ms. Zheng’s story was not much different from that of Ms. Cheng. All three of them placed emphasis on the upbringing of their child. When I met Mr. and Mrs. Zheng in 2014, they had two four-bedroom apartments in Pudong – both of which were duplexes located on the top floor of a 32-story high-rise building within walking distance to Century Park (Shijie Gongyuan), considered Shanghai’s version of Central Park. In 2015, their daughter who got a master’s degree in the US and was working there. Mr. and Mrs. Zheng themselves traveled abroad every month. “We were smart to buy houses here when they were dirt cheap; now all we have to do is to rent them out and get passive income every month,” said the more vocal Mrs. Zheng. Each of the two apartments was about 200 square meters (about 2153 square feet) in size. They were also located within walking distance to a metro station, large supermarkets, schools, and Century Park, these two apartments were considered luxurious by middle-class standards. Living on the second floor of one of them, Mr. and Ms. Zheng rented out the lower floor of their apartment, and divided the other apartment into two units (each with two bedrooms) and rented them out to two tenants at the monthly rate of 8,000 yuan per room (about US$1,300). So, each month, they received 24,000 yuan (about US$4,000) on top of the pensions that they received from their work units. 8,000 yuan per month may be a large sum of money for an apartment (especially when fresh undergraduates from a
university in Shanghai would earn less than half of that), but according to Mr. and Ms. Zheng, “our rooms are always in high demand.” This amount of money was considered a large sum to receive on a monthly basis for a retired couple who did not have any expenses, especially given that the annual income per person nationwide was US$7,500. They often put these earnings into the stock market, and with inside news on which stocks to buy and sell, the couple was making a considerable income annually. The last time we spoke in the summer of 2015, they were planning to use the money that they had earned to buy two extra units in the suburbs of Minhang and Zhabei, both on the west side of the city. They explained that because Pudong is a thriving commercial center today, many large companies had their China headquarters there. Hence, (often foreign) employees of these companies received housing allowances to live nearby. Like Teacher Hu, they both agreed that they would prefer foreign rather than local tenants. Ms. Zheng recalled:

Foreigners are good. They pay on time. They don’t cook very much, and they are clean and honest. Chinese tenants? They cook so much – they’re noisy, messy, and what they cook makes the room smell. But the worst part is that they aren’t straightforward. They’d tell us that there would be only two people living in the apartment, but we’d find out from the neighbors that there’re six people in the room. At one time, we were renting one room to four white-collar workers who paid 2,000 yuan each, and it’s a disaster. We didn’t like that at all. It’s messy because they would have to turn the living room into another bedroom; the room wasn’t designed for that kind of modification…Once they left, we had to do so many things to return the room to its normal state for the prospective renter.

No one visiting downtown Pudong, the Lujiazui Central Business District (CBD), today would be able to resonate with the “Better have a bed in than to have a house in Pudong” discrimination, since the city looks as developed as any major global city (Sklair 2010; Walcott 2009). As of 2015, almost all 13 metro lines in the city have extensive networks in Pudong in addition to an extensive public bus network as well as many bridges connecting the two sides of the Huangpu River. Shanghainese born and raised in the 90s onwards would not feel the difference between having a house in Pudong or Puxi. That said many Shanghainese still regard Pudong as being far away and backward. In fact, every time a younger generation Shanghainese such as Ai (who grew up in the
80s-90s) had to go to Pudong for work, she would immediately express her dissatisfaction: “I don’t want to go to Pudong, so there’s no question about moving over there – no way for me.” responded Ai when asked whether she knew about the development of Pudong in the past twenty years, and how Lujiazui CBD was considered one of the world’s most visited financial districts today, she stood corrected, but resolute in her belief, “but Pudong is always Pudong.”


Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempt to develop an ethnographic perspective on displacement, providing a more nuanced picture of the overall process, as it is often presented, and to challenge the anthropological critic George Marcus’s proposal of so-called “multi-sited ethnography.” As in the previous chapters,
this chapter illustrates how residents were equipped with the knowledge to defend themselves against the possibility of abuse of power. This chapter provides an ethnographic explanation of how and why Shanghai has been able to urbanize at unprecedented speed with the help of its residents, who are widely known for their economic mindset thanks to the city’s history as the most prosperous treaty port in the Far East less than a century ago (Bergère 2009; Leighton 2010).

The big picture of China’s economic growth may point to optimistic projections. First and foremost, China will become increasingly urban in the decades to come (currently at 54.77% in 2015, see Xinhua News Agency 2015). Second, thanks to the nature of financial services and jobs that cities could offer, income per person is likely to continue to rise (currently at US$7,380 in 2014, see The World Bank 2015). Third, domestic consumption will continue to rise at the expense of the decline in manufacturing output, which from a long-term economic planning perspective, might not seem as bad as it may look since this particular reversal will facilitate the building of a stable consumer society (Sun 2015). Fourth, precisely because of the continuous building process, development in health, education, and social services will continue to grow. As more Chinese citizens are now living in urban areas than ever before, the defining characteristic of 21st century urban China is unquestionably that of the urban, owing to the major shift in the world economy towards a service-oriented economy, and the emergence of industries catering to the demands of contemporary consumerism. Still ringing true are the basic aspects of the urban suggested by classic urban sociological theories: population, density, heterogeneity, and complexity (Wirth 1938). Also still true is the major divide in the perceptions of what might constitute the conditions that the urban brings. Urban populations are faced with the challenges of how to deal with the fast, massive, and intense movement toward an arguably better quality of life, but also with an underlying deeply troubled sense of personhood. While technological advancement, innovation, and creativity are direct by-
products of urbanization, some undesirable consequences such as high divorce rates, widening income inequality, pollution-related health problems, and suicide, are acutely felt almost by urbanites (Frecklington 2014; Jing 2011; Kleinman, et al. 2011).

The sociologist and demographer Michael White (2015) argues that despite many negative externalities (such as environmental degradation, and social inequality) that cities seem to generate, there is still not enough evidence to push back against urbanization as the most effective human development process (also see Zhu, et al. 2015). According to statistics, life expectancy in urban areas is higher than in the non-urban areas. Especially in China, rural-to-urban migrants, despite their lack of formal urban citizenship (Solinger 1999), are more content with life in the urban areas than in the rural areas from whence they came to the city (White and Wu 2008; Wu 2011a). The benefits of cities in general have been documented by many, including the economist Edward Glaeser (2011) who observes that despite the environmental consequences of sprawling suburban life, the various changes in our current ways of life and the new patterns in how we interact with the environment are good for society as a whole (also see Mumford 1961). We must give the credit to the ample convenience in life brought about by the compactness of the urban environment, which, according to Glaeser, is the era-defining factor of our time: the 21st century.

In Shanghai, urbanization may at first bring hardship; yet, once the urbanization rate stabilized, the urban process to follow was almost automatic. Urbanization of the central spaces involving massive relocation is often followed by the urbanization of the relocated areas as the population density of such areas grew. A decade after she had moved to her new home – “the decade of difficulty,” she calls it – Ms. Cheng was the unwitting beneficiary of the Expo’ 2010 and the increasing infrastructure and economic advantages that came with it. The motto of this event was Chengshi Rang
Shenghuo Geng Mei Hao – literally meaning “City, Making Life Better,” yet with the slightly different official translation of “Better City, Better Life.” Ms. Cheng agreed that this event did make a helpful change to her life even if many people might argue that this grandiose event was little more than global posturing. It was, by all standards, too expensive – as some critics estimated that it had cost Shanghai more than Beijing’s Olympics in 2008 (The Guardian 2010). In the following decade, Ms. Cheng’s part of the city would be connected with the rest of Shanghai to four additional metro lines, numerous buses, elevated highways, and would soon also upgrade in terms of infrastructure to become a new town in its own right. Suddenly, a far-away room in the suburb became an apartment located at the nexus of the city’s new commercial zone. For instance, her neighbor who bought a room in a similar building next door sold at a price twenty times more than the amount for which he bought it. “Although this apartment is my only asset, I can make a lot of money out of it if I decide to do so,” she said. “My neighbors used to think of me as someone who wasn’t very smart when I decided to sell my old apartment and move out, but now they were all looking up to me while wanting to bang their heads against the wall for not having done precisely what I did,” Ms. Cheng shared with me her feeling almost twenty years after she left Tranquil Light, an urban neighborhood both restricted and confined by too many regulations and competitive self-interest to the point that no structural change could be made either by the government or by the residents themselves.

The second purpose of this chapter is to challenge the anthropological critic George Marcus’s proposal of the so-called “multi-sited ethnography” (1995), arguing that ethnography should identify “systemic” realities in “local” places, and multi-sited ethnography should therefore deliberately collapse the distinction between the local and the global, pursuing the study of the world system
directly on the ground. In a global city like Shanghai, it is impossible to conduct ethnographic research only in a traditional way – i.e., with an absolute well-defined boundary of a single field site. While I had benefited greatly from my long-term commitment to a particular site, conversing with the population who were not immediately related to me by my residency in the neighborhood has provided an effective way to understand the living condition of the residents who had moved out, as well as why and how they moved out. As much as an ethnographer might want to romanticize in terms of commitment, hard work, and complete attachment to the field site, the nature of fieldwork consists of two parts: the part where the ethnographer resides in the field site to do the research and the part where the ethnographer follows his or her interviewees beyond the site itself.

In a globalized place such as Shanghai, the basis of a multi-sited ethnography is a given; therefore, I would like to suggest that we should abandon the term altogether and instead argue for a field site that is treated as a node in a nexus, of which some other parts must be investigated to make sense of the node. That is, an anthropologist must make a claim for the distinctiveness of what we, in fact do: examining the local process vis-à-vis the increasing interconnectedness of all informants through the process of globalization. What this means is that it is important to note that the line between the field site and the outside is unrealistic. In my case, Tranquil Light was a gated community, but people used its thoroughfare as a shortcut all the time. So, a constant presence was the groups of people in motion – and these were people who carry ideas that extend over multiple locations.

25 In fact, the first person as far as I remember, who pointed out to me the need to conduct my research outside of my immediate field site, was the anthropologist and London School of Economics (LSE) Professor Stephan Feuchtwang. During the China Postgraduate Network (CPN) Annual Conference in 2011 at LSE where I presented the preliminary findings of my research which took place on July 1, 2011, Professor Feuchtwang posed a series of questions to me after I presented my paper “Housing, Heritage, and Community Experience: An Ethnography of Chinese Urbanization.” One of his questions was, “who would you be talking to if they no longer live in the area where you would like to conduct your research because the area has been bulldozed?” This was precisely the moment when I felt that I had found a direction in which to carry out my research.
Further, the residents of Tranquil Light themselves constantly engaged with those who lived elsewhere, on a daily basis. Observable on the surface was how the residents, on a daily basis, went outside of the neighborhood gates to buy their vegetables from local food stalls, to take a bus to visit doctors at multiple local hospitals located in the same district and walked or biked around the main streets as a form of exercise. Just as I did, some of my interviewees simply just “needed a break” from living in a close-knit community where everyone wanted to know what they were up to. The intensity of community life is no exaggeration.

Therefore, many of the residents’ beliefs and thoughts were constantly in the process of being shaped and reshaped, as a result of their conversations with the outsiders. For instance, Teacher Hu learned about technical terms such as middleclassification (zhongchanjiejihua), which I will discuss in detail in the next chapter, from a group of students from a local planning school who interviewed him for their term projects; and from that point on almost everyone having conversations with him would hear him mention the term at least once or twice if a topic about the future of Tranquil Light came up. Particularly in the present economic climate, the residents talked to one another to get the information necessary to gain the upper hand in property negotiations, either with the government, developer, potential renters, potential in-laws, and others. That is to say, the boundedness of Tranquil Light, therefore, is on one hand a useful tool for me, as an ethnographer, to define a preliminary area of my research, but on the other hand only makes sense as a conceptual fact when it comes to the understanding of how the larger social structure and relations operate. In addition, every time I traveled outside of the neighborhood, I came back with a set of questions for my interviewees; therefore, I myself was not only a carrier of external ideas that played a role in re-shaping the dynamic of the community, but also a source of external information since obviously my purpose in residing in the neighborhood was different from that of the residents. Most of my
interviewees – and all of those who were already above 60 years of age – knew exactly what I was talking about because for many of them they were introduced to their marriage partners through a process similar to what was happening in the physical space of their new homes elsewhere.
Chapter Five:
Aspects Of Change

Stories about gentrification often, if not always, involve narratives about how privileged residents, who, through their economic superiority, push out those who are economically inferior to them. Thus, as many scholars have pointed out, gentrification is often used in a negative way – nobody wants to be called a “gentrifier” since the implication of such title is that any actors involved in the process must have explicitly used the monetary advantage to deprive, often in an unfair manner, low-income residents of their natural rights, such as their right to a home, the city, and to have a say in the developmental process of the place to which they are attached. Having said that, gentrification is a phenomenon that is common to many large cities. The trend that seems to run throughout those cases involves just what I have described – the poor being overpowered by the rich – and the culprits are always the middle class who move into a low-income neighborhood that happens to be located in either a prime, or soon-to-be-prime location based on their speculation, and then gradually change its environment, characteristics, and eventually its reputation so as to attract like-minded middle classes to join them. Progressively, the demography of such a place would change in two ways: one is the so-called “network effect,” as a result of the perception of the place, often as cultured and safe, attracting a particular group of residents to want to move in and settle there; and, second, more importantly, an often drastic increase in the cost of living thanks to the way of life and
consumption patterns of the new, and economically superior residents who have driven the original residents away even if they would rather stay put either because they could not resist the temptation of being recipients of high rent or because they could no longer afford to be there given the exponential rise of the living cost. Thus, the single most important issue that scholars of gentrification have pointed out is the displacement of low-income communities by the rich outsiders, who may or may not have any knowledge of the place into which they are moving (Hamnett 1979; Smith 1996).

By and large, what this general picture of gentrification presents, is nothing but the economic inequality and structural discrimination by the economically superior middle-class against the working-class or low-income (including retired) residents. Although there are cases that the settlement of these new residents helps to rejuvenate areas, especially the industrial brownfields that are left empty after the departure of industry, those cases are largely considered to be exceptions in contemporary debates on gentrification since they do not involve the displacement of existing residents. That is to say, usually the so-called “classic gentrification” process involves individuals buying properties and improving them (Glass 1964). The second stage of the process involves a developer, or a coalition of developers, who drive out the original residents, and then replaces them with residents who are willing to pay more rent. Sooner or later, the neighborhood loses its original character because of the homogeneous demography – namely middle class – and therefore its diversity, and, eventually, the sense of belonging of its residents as a result of the homogeneity of the newcomers who may or may not know, care, or have the emotional attachment to the neighborhood. All in all, gentrification is about the influence of wealth and power. It is about how the rich overpower the poor, and about how the poor suffer because they do not have any leverage
against the rich. Scholars have pointed out how gentrification is an inevitable product of neoliberal capitalism (Butler 2007; Herzfeld 2010; Smith 2002).

What if the story of gentrification in Shanghai, though a similar result is borne out, namely the “middleclassification” of an urban neighborhood, is not necessary about how the rich bully the poor, but how the poor understand what the rich want – and, precisely through that knowledge – voluntarily relocate to obtain much higher economic compensation that they would otherwise never receive? That is to say, I am also intending to leave room for an open discussion about how the process should be termed – can we still call it gentrification? In this chapter, what I hope to do is to present an alternative way of understanding this process – I will continue to stick to the generic term gentrification for now – as an “anthropological process” (see also Non 2016) which, as I will show in this chapter, is largely different from a social critique of capitalism and I will, therefore, present additional evidence contributing to the growing discontent with mainly the human geographers whose “critiques of capitalism from above” (rather than from inside the community and through ethnography) do no justice to the reality of the situation. The key evidence I show in this chapter is that the middle-class residents are the ones who instigate such process and therefore profit off the rental income from their rooms to newcomers. This process takes place in an informal manner but with the understanding of the limits to political participation on the part of the residents. Such a process presents a much more nuanced way of understanding gentrification.

**Middleclassification**

It has been more than half a century since scholars have begun to pay attention to this particular phenomenon, and, as pointed out at the beginning, the negative connotation of the term, in various
occasions, does set the stage for different kinds of discussion. In my case, I am using the term because it is the closest semantic approximation of the term zhongchanjiezhua (lit. “middleclassification”) which my informants use in Mandarin Chinese. Theoretically, my justifications for using the term gentrification are threefold. First, in terms of the consequence of the process, the demographic change of the small and historic neighborhood in rapidly urbanized Shanghai that I studied fit the description of the term in the words of Ruth Glass (1964) the scholar who coined the term gentrification, namely the replacement of the old working class residents in their former working class enclave by the newly affluent and “culturally adept” residents. Early gentrifiers, such as the bohemians, artists (sometimes called “hipsters”) often value the diversity, including multi-class populations, of the neighborhood. Demographically, this replacement results not only in a drastic change in the average income of the residents in the neighborhood, a decline in the proportion of the working class residents, but also in the decrease in the average age of the residents, the increase in the average education level, and therefore the dramatic shrinkage in household size. Second, the market is driving the process, as monetary exchange value plays a major role in both the active replacement and the voluntary relocation of the old residents. Therefore, this process involves not only the active exchange of capital, but also dynamic speculation, such as the invention of new sets of criteria to determine the new market value – as opposed to the socialist use value of old structures, which are rebranded as “heritage” to increase their exchange value in the market. Together heritage and history are the elements that the original residents possess and that is precisely what entices the new residents to engage in the process which eventually provides both parties with the solution that benefits both – the poor get to relocate themselves to more comfortable housing, and the rich get to presume the ownership of what they think they are worthy of possessing. Finally, this process results in the physical change of the neighborhood, such as the arrival of coffee shops, small scale boutique clothing and jewelry stores, high-end teahouses, elite art
and craft schools; all of these are agents of new ideas regarding what is desirable and attractive in accordance with the taste of the new residents.

In Shanghai, housing reforms and the new land lease regime that began in the early 1990s enabled a large portion of the city’s residents to relocate from the dilapidated apartments that were mostly built either during the Treaty Port (1842 - 1942) or so-called “high socialist” (1949 – 1978) era that almost immediately followed, to the new, often high-rise, high-density apartments. The massive urbanization that followed for the next two decades, especially in the areas that are in today’s city center, has given a large number of residents, by and large, better physical living conditions. Some residents who were not lucky had to stay put in the old housing structures, basically waiting for the local government, usually in coalition with a real estate developer, to offer them a relocation package once the land on which they live becomes a target for redevelopment. In most cases, these residents still live in old, and mostly rundown apartments that are remnants of the past. In spite of having increased twofold from 1949, the average living space per person in these apartments is still relatively small – at 4 - 8 square meters (about 4.3 – 8.6 square feet) per person (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2009b; Pellow 1993a; Wu 1999). In many cases, the hazardous living conditions are a direct result of both the dated infrastructure and lack of proper maintenance. When these two factors combined with the occupation of the aged residents (most of whom are still using cooking methods with which they are familiar such as coal and gas stoves), it is not surprising that the fire hazard is near the top in urban areas in the city. These residents, though they would like to maintain social contact with their old neighbors with whom they have lived for decades, are more pragmatic not only when it comes to the ways in which they would like to spend the rest of their lives (mostly) as pensioners, but also what they would like to possess in terms of assets to pass on to their offspring. Thus, even if the residents do not wish to move, what eventually stops them from
staying put is the "pragmatic thought" that should they not move when they have the opportunity they would have just a small (and often rundown) room, instead of a new apartment to pass on to their children. The new apartment can also be resold should their children prefer to use the cash to invest elsewhere.

The tenants of the old apartments are those whose housing rights were provided and minimally maintained for them in the high-socialist era by their work unit. But once the housing reform began in the era of opening up and reform, the burden for housing maintenance has been transferred to the tenants themselves – in the name of market forces by creating housing markets within a centralized political and economic system (Peng 1987). While this form of privatization may sound as though an urban resident eventually gets to possess property, the real intention of the centralized government was to force tens of millions of urban residents to take the responsibility of maintaining, renovating, and sometimes completely overhauling their homes should they want to have better living conditions.

As legal scholars Kara L. Phillips and Amy L. Sommers (2006) put it, the issue also lies in the ambiguity of the housing law itself: as often, the only legal evidence that many residents who received their rights to live in the property confiscated from the original owners into the common pool during the first decade of the high socialist era is how they have occupied the property for “significant periods of time,” but whether or not this was enough time to claim their ownership depends largely on the decision of the local authorities such as the city’s district in the case of Tranquil Light. On top of the lack of funding to improve the houses on the part of both the tenants and the local authorities, the tenants are reluctant to use their savings to refurbish the now dilapidated historic housing, especially when there have been a number of cases involving the
government’s use of forced eviction and eminent domain for opaque purposes. Hence, it is not rare to see many old and dilapidated houses even in the prime business areas of Shanghai today. The physical decay and lack of adequate space for housing combined might explain how and why the residents themselves are active in the process of getting themselves compensated, and eventually relocated. With the rapid building of the new (usually high-rise) apartment typologies in the suburbs, the new apartments in which these tenants are often being relocated to are both more spacious and well-equipped with modern facilities such as hot water and air-conditioning systems. The expansive metro and public transportation system also facilitates these residents’ mobility; hence, as expressed by one of my informants, “it is a no brainer…I get a bigger, nicer, and more expensive apartment here (if I decide to sell it in the future), and if I miss the old neighborhood where I once lived, I can just take a bus there – I am a senior citizen now with a jinglaoka [senior citizen free bus pass]!”

Understanding this particular context allows us to understand the nuances of both the physical and social change in China’s largest city. On the surface, visitors to Shanghai often have the impression that Shanghai, like many big cities in China, is a city in flux, and such fluidity has to do with the state-led passing of the ownership of desirable urban spaces. Many scholars have made romanticizing remarks, such as the yearning for the lost “old and authentic Shanghai” (see detailed in Non 2012). Together with what Richard Ocejo (2014) terms “nostalgia narratives,” the interaction between the different generations of residents and gentrifiers only facilitates the reproduction of this notion of “lost romanticism,” of which the critique of “evil capitalism” is a direct by-product. In a way, history and Chinese aesthetics are the kind of conceptual relations often taken for granted. As Kay J. Anderson (1991) points out in her study of the conceptual connection between authenticity and immigrant Chinatowns in non-Chinese cities is what makes the “idea of Chinatown,” it is obvious, in my case, that the idea of a romantic historic Shanghainese neighborhood is a
simpleminded nostalgic construction that takes for granted the genealogy of the contestation, and
sometimes confrontations between the residents of a particular place whose physical lives and
wellbeing are at stake. In addition to justifying ethnography as the methodology of this research, the
purpose of this chapter is to call for more ethnographic studies of similar phenomena.

**Self-Gentrification**

When the social anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2016) writes about his recent findings from
decades-long research in small communities in Greece and Thailand – and especially the key finding
which he calls “self-gentrification” – he is talking precisely about the social change in which the
main actors in such a process, surprisingly, are not the rich, but the poor residents. Herzfeld
describes this process as “[the ways in which the middle-class communities] upgrade their economic
condition before the speed of real estate price inflation could overcome their own, more moderately
paced economic advance.” In his study of the coastal town of Rethemnos in Crete, the poor
residents understood the heritage tourism trend, and therefore, capitalized on the history and
ancestry of their homes in attracting the rich to want to rent out their places for the sake of attaining
the cultural capital. The poor, hence, relieve themselves from manual labor by succumbing to the
artificial demand of the capitalists who see the houses they possess as “heritage structures.” In his
case study, many artisanal workers gave up their jobs precisely because of the encroachment of more
comically viable businesses, namely tourism, which for both Greece and Thailand, were major parts
of their national economies. Eventually, in both communities he studied, the majority of the
residents became the middle-class Greeks and Thais who either would like to claim the possession
of their symbolic capital through their residency in a symbolically important place, or to use the
prime central space to benefit economically from burgeoning tourism.
In Shanghai, the location of the case study which I am about to present, the original residents who rent out their spaces to outsiders learned about the similar process, which they would eventually call “middle-classification” from local academics who had visited them to study the changes in Tranquil Light. More importantly, the reason that the term has been catching on is precisely because, in the words of my informant, “we love the middle-class…they bring us money!” Given the Marxist doctrine embedded in the inculcation process of its residents by the CCP, this remark may come as a surprise (it was surprising to me!) since the bourgeois are the enemies of the diligent working-class in the Marxist-Maoist doctrine.

The demographic of these renters or the so-called “outsiders” (wailairenshu) was a mix of white and blue-collar migrants from other cities (waidiren); foreign students and experts (including those who were on student or tourist visas, but were in fact working); business owners using the residential spaces as their offices, who were attracted to the neighborhood by its central location, as well as its architectural uniqueness. Central to the argument about an alternative form of (social change that bares similar results to what we often call) gentrification is, in fact, this particular “architectural uniqueness” of an old edifice, which did not seem to have the same appeal to the original residents as it had to renters from outside. Not only am I trying to unpack the notion of heritage and history as a selling point of an almost dilapidated structure in this chapter, but I am also seeking to understand the ways in which the locals mobilize their knowledge of this particular selling point to benefit themselves. There have been a few well-known precedents of gentrified neighborhoods in Shanghai. In fact, Tranquil Light could have conveniently been developed into a “commercial and artsy,” or high-end retail district like these other neighborhoods in Shanghai had the residents been offered the option to relocate elsewhere. Yet, up until the time that this research was concluded, the local government had yet to decide on any plans that would involve such processes owing to the
complicated legal and financial issues specific to the site. The residents themselves had to, therefore, rely on their own resources, which, in this case, were the heritage structures in which they had been given the right to reside. To understand the complex situation in which the residents are living, I also conducted several open-ended interviews with officials, planners, and architects who worked for the municipal government as well as for the private companies involved, usually as third-parties to whom the municipal government outsources their projects.

So, for almost two decades since the late 1990s when, along with 70 other lilong neighborhoods, Tranquil Light received recognition as a tangible urban heritage site, its demographic has changed from being fully occupied by the working class to, at its peak around 2008, 70% original residents and 30% “new residents”, or those who simply rented the rooms from the original residents. In this chapter, I will refer to the working class whose homes in Tranquil Light were provided for them in the early 1950s, and during the massive housing reshuffling process in the 1970s as “original residents.” Because of its location and the affordable rent, there was an influx of the so-called “creative entrepreneurs,” or, new residents “engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship,” who set up their shops and small enterprises in Tranquil Light Neighborhood during the three-year period preceding Shanghai’s World Expo in 2010. Being mostly pensioners themselves, the original residents were happy obtaining the extra income they could receive from these new residents. Since the original residents have been granted either the permanent rights to their rooms, or the right to pay the minimum (low compared to the market price and therefore symbolic) rent to the municipal government under the rent control program, the original residents often saw the renters as sources of extra income and therefore welcomed them. Since the concerns of these original residents were often either their medical care or the well-being of their offspring, the extra income from subletting their rooms was perceived as essential support, especially in the face of an inadequate health care
system and ruthless market-oriented competition for basic services. According to an interview I had with a local planner, the municipal government intentionally turned a blind eye to this informal operation – since both permanent residency and rent control were meant to support the basic needs of the residents, not for the residents to benefit from economically by leasing their rights to other capitalist actors. The primary reason for allowing this extralegal subletting was that the municipal government themselves also saw this channel through which the original residents made extra income as an acceptable ad hoc protocol, which, in effect, delegated the municipal government's financial burden in the social security of its senior residents, for which they are technically responsible, to the residents themselves.

The Rise of Outside Renters

When I arrived in Tranquil Light for my research in the summer of 2013, more than half of the rooms on the ground floor were shops catering to the tastes of the middle-class residents and visitors such as coffee shops and bars, milk tea and grab-and-go lunchbox kiosks, collectible and small independent clothing stores, and so on. Foreign and Chinese visitors alike flocked to Tranquil Light, especially during the weekends and holidays, and the number of these two types of visitors combined sometimes rose to 3,000, the population of the residents of Tranquil Light itself. As writers of a popular international contemporary design magazine dwell put it, what is attractive about these lilong houses and neighborhoods beyond its architectural style are “how, though intimate and neighborly, the lilong still afford residents the privacy and seclusion of living in one’s own multistory home” (Rose and Schaulin 2013). His privacy and seclusion did not seem to be the case for Tranquil Light, which was on the verge of becoming another commercial district. The impression of the neighborhood, as expressed by journalists and mainstream media was along the
same lines as that of the new retail districts of the time such as Tianzifang, one of the two lilong neighborhoods turned into retail districts mentioned in the Introduction (also see Chan 2014; Kong and Qian 2011; Li 2013; Yu 2009; Yung, et al. 2014; Zhou 2013). In fact, a famous travel blogger posted in 2012, “Given up on the crowded streets of Tianzifang and looking for something new? We show you the 10 best stores in Tranquil Light shopping paradise.” Since I did not know the history of the neighborhood, and that large cities in China such as Shanghai and Beijing both have neighborhoods full of “creative energy” of this sort, I was not aware of the drastic change that had only begun a few years before that summer that I arrived in Tranquil Light. The owners and employees of these shops constituted only about half of the 400 registered new residents of Tranquil Light Neighborhood. Most of these new residents rented about 87 rooms on the first floors of the buildings to operate their commercial businesses. Only a small number of the businesses that did not need to be on the first floor, such as offices, rented the much cheaper second floor of the buildings. The other half, the ones who were less present in Tranquil Light Neighborhood, were renting rooms on the second and third floors to the new residents as their studio rooms. The original residents (known to the renters as landlords) converted the kitchens, storage rooms, communal corridors, balconies, and almost all the spaces they could make use of in the buildings into commercial spaces and bedrooms to rent out to the new residents. Despite the municipal government’s regulation prohibiting such practices as some of them induce both health and public hazard, there were always local agents who would help the new residents find spaces to rent for a fee – including those that were smaller than 5 square meters, which was less than what regulations permitted for a single tenant (Liang 2014; Lu, et al. 2001; Wu 2013). Teacher Hu was one of these local agents through whose help I, too, also found a small room that was once used as a storage room for a single family rowhouses-styled apartment (see Chapter Four for more detail about the room).
What first grabbed my attention was a remark by one of my informants, Jack, a 26-year-old US man of European origin who also possessed a master’s degree in humanities, who had lived in Tranquil Light for two years when I first met him in the summer of 2013. “The only reason anyone would call this ‘gentrification’ is because of the presence of white people like us [referring to his US friends who also lived in Tranquil Light at the time],” Jack spoke to me with some anger, as his landlord was about to ask him to pay more rent once his current contract was over. What he meant by that was, as a timely rent-paying resident of Tranquil Light, he did not see himself as a gentrifier, who used the money to drive the original residents out of the neighborhood. “I am just a foreigner in my mid-twenties who wants to live in the middle of the city,” said Jack. In fact, as Jack spoke about his landlord: “a greedy man who always tried to tell us that we have done something wrong to get us to pay even more” – he was not sympathetic at all to the original residents, as his landlord, the only person with whom he had had an interaction in Tranquil Light Neighborhood, was the exemplar. “There were many of us – educated, white, and classy, foreigners in this neighborhood; and we are the ones who are clean, peaceful, responsible, and – guess what – care more about this neighborhood than anyone else,” he said. Only less than a week into living in Tranquil Light, this piece of information was the turning point of my research, as the public demographic data provided by the neighborhood committee did not go into the detail about the ethnicity of the renters. Suddenly, I realized that a handful of foreigners of European origin in the neighborhood were not just passers-by, but renters who actually rented a place, and lived as registered residents in Tranquil Light. According to Mr. Cai, a neighbor who was known in Tranquil Light Neighborhood as a local real estate agent (his motto: “want a room, come find Mr. Cai”):

Only a few years ago [around 2007], white foreigners (bairen) begun to ask me if there were any rooms for them here...I was puzzled, of course, why would foreigners want to live here in a rundown neighborhood? Then, some of them who could speak Chinese told me that Tranquil Light was, to them, very “unique and special” (tebie weiyi), and that they would like to live in a unique and special place.
There were multiple owners in a single structure, since originally the entire three floors of a row house in Tranquil Light belonged to just a single family, but were later subdivided to provide more space for more residents. So there could be up to three families crammed inside one floor: One in each of the original bedrooms, the study, and storage room (the latter two turned into bedrooms afterward). These residents shared the same kitchen and washing facilities. As this spatial arrangement was far from ideal for foreigners (who often, if not always, required that the room they rent include at least a private bathroom), the first batch of foreigners, according to Mr. Cai, not only spent their own money to refurbish the room to fit their basic needs and suit their tastes, but also encouraged the landlords to install additional amenities, such as gas stoves and private bathrooms by providing them with incentives, such as doubling the amount of the deposit (so that the landlords could use it to do the renovation), and signing a long-term lease (usually paying upfront) to guarantee the landlords a long-term, uninterrupted income.

**Globalization and the Global Hierarchy of Value of Heritage**

Many of the original residents preferred to rent out their rooms to foreigners rather than Chinese (local Shanghainese and those from other parts of China - waidiren, included). Similar to what Herzfeld (2009) found in Rome, the locals are considered not to be dependable renters. In Tranquil Light, the primary reason was that the foreigners usually paid the tenants more than what the Chinese residents would (that the original residents noted that foreigners were usually happy with the asking price without bargaining or haggling to the point of irritation), and that they, in Mr. Cai’s words, were “more straightforward” than Chinese tenants (implying that Chinese residents were usually “trickier” than foreigners, more likely to engage in activities like subletting a one-person room to share with two other people). That said, this was only a general picture, as many of my
Chinese informants (as well as ethnically Chinese informants, such as Chinese citizens with non-Chinese nationalities and Taiwanese, who were seen, quite conveniently, as Chinese by the landlords) who rented rooms in Tranquil Light had a reputation of being as straightforward, hygienic and friendly as the foreigners.

For instance, many residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship who ran the shops in the lanes also lived in Tranquil Light and they, according to Mr. Cai and two other popular local agents, would pay about the same as the foreigners. There were also foreigners who, according to the landlords, “partied all the time,” to the extent that the neighbors filed noise complaints to the police. Nevertheless, even when the same offer was made by potential foreign and Chinese tenants of equal socioeconomic status, the landlords would still prefer to sublet the place to the foreigners, as by doing so they would have more “stories” to share and brag to their fellow neighbors and the neighborhood committee about how important their houses were. “See, even the foreigners want to live here,” said one of the original resident who had been renting her best room on the second floor to a foreigner. “I don’t mind giving up the best room in the house that even has a small balcony and the best view facing the desirable south side [according to Chinese belief in the geomancy that the south is the best direction] of the lane to my renter; that’s because he’s a laowai (foreigner) – he pays his rent on time and is always friendly to us,” she gushed of her laowai renter before going on at length to complain about her previous Chinese tenant who never treated her in a manner close to how her current tenant did. That is to say, by renting their rooms to foreigners, the original residents could implicitly have access to much coveted symbolic capital.

Half a dozen of my informants were among the first group of foreigners to arrive in Tranquil Light. At its peak before a sudden crackdown on illegal commercial and non-commercial subletting took
place in the fall of 2013, foreigners and residents engaging in value-added entrepreneurship constituted about half of the roughly 400 renters in Tranquil Light. Given that the US economy was still doing considerably well, and that these foreigners also received housing remuneration from the transnational companies that they worked for in Shanghai, “the amount of money to be spent on refurbishing the house isn’t a problem,” said Anna, one of the first foreigners to move into Tranquil Light.

Charlie, a 24-year-old English-speaking renter, shared with me the reason why, before his arrival, not many foreigners had thought about living in such a prime location, and in such, in his word words, “a classy-looking and historically-looking house” like those in Tranquil Light Neighborhood:

The fact that we’ve gotten to know more about China through many sources of media did help, and now that we have a better grasp of Chinese [Charlie studied Chinese in college], we have been able to ‘bust’ a lot of myths about ‘living with the Chinese,’ and live with them with mutual respect.

According to my local Shanghainese informants, Charlie was right on two accounts: first, that there had been many interactions between the locals and foreigners thanks to the Olympics in Beijing, and, in Shanghai, the 2010 Shanghai Exposition; and second, the rise in Chinese-speaking foreign residents played a crucial role in bridging cultural gaps, allowing the foreign residents to think in Chinese terms at the comfort of their cultures of origin. The Chief Executive Officer of the world-renowned advertising agency J. W. Thompson’s, and a long-term resident of Shanghai Tom Doctoroff (2009) wrote:

Yes, lilong life, certainly not for everyone, has charm. But, with an open eye and mind, one can plumb the scene for insights on the fundamental motivations of Chinese people, even the structure of Chinese society…[T]his foreigner's experience in the Shanghai lanes has been more than satisfying. I am reminded – vividly, on a daily basis – that the Chinese, even those who have not benefited directly from the winds of economic reform, are noble. Their sense of community, not to mention an instinct of finding pleasure in the moment, suggests
the masses will march, head held high, towards the future. Despite inevitable setbacks and unpredictable twists and turns, the Chinese will adapt and, finally, thrive.

Since 2009 Doctoroff has deliberately opted out of living in a handful of glass high-rise apartments for expatriates, and bought a four-story low-rise lilong house in Shanghai, which he renovated into what The New York Times columnist Casey Hall (2014) calls “a modern authentic piece of old Shanghai lane house, with twists of tradition.” Charlie, a native of Manhattan, spoke proudly about his achievement in renovating his landlord’s 20-square-meter half-storage-half-bedroom into a compact-sized bedroom in which he would live for the next four years until he returns to the US: “Given the location – and more importantly, its historic appearance – Tranquil Light is equivalent to a neighborhood in Manhattan where you’d have to be ‘someone like Anderson Cooper’ to be able to afford the rent.” Charlie was obviously no Anderson Cooper: His income as a manager of a local English-language school where he was teaching Chinese students was less than US$4,000 per month, but how he could live right in the center of China’s largest city, and have stories to tell about his way of life in, what he called, “an authentic alleyway-house of Shanghai” represents how both globalization of culture and ideology of consumerism work. As the sociologist Leslie Sklair (1995 [1991]) suggests, the study of globalization should extend beyond the realm of phenomena limited by the scope of the study of the ways in which transnational corporations have induced capital and production at the global scale, into the realm of everyday cultural consumption. Between 2007 and 2010, both the local and international media paid a great deal of attention to Shanghai, as it was preparing for the largest and most expensive Exposition in the history of the event. Undoubtedly, the aesthetics of heritage architecture plays a role in many gentrification processes, including that of Tranquil Light. As many have written extensively, gentrification, despite how the process appears on the surface, is related to the much more profound socio-historical structure of a particular society. When the sociologist Michael Thompson (1979) makes an observation about how and why people
regard old objects as collectible (as well as their fetishism) he is making a theoretical claim about the structural idea behind the process of “heritagization” and conservation. Rather than “nostalgically-perceived” aesthetics, the major factors in the process are the rarity, the uniqueness, and the class-based association of a particular object – which, in my case, is the lilong house. What this process of heritagization shows is how the foreign appeal of the lilong houses relates to the gentrification process.

The possession of a house whose significance and therefore economic value is brought to one’s attention by the agents of the global community rather than locals is the construction of an unfamiliar means of value judgment. It was clear to Mr. Cai, upon his first impression, that he did not believe anyone, let alone foreigners would like to live in a “rundown neighborhood” like his. Nonetheless, as the economic returns have proven to benefit the original residents, such disbelief has gradually been converted into a window of opportunity, through which, simply by keeping oneself in touch with this the global hierarchy of value through everyday discourses, one could continue to benefit until the walls of these rentable heritage houses come down. The landlords, by and large, saw this particular process of demographic change as beneficial, thanks to the voluntary agreement between the landlords and renters on the rent and the length of the contract. There was no single instance in which the original resident was forced to accept rent that was lower than what he or she could live on elsewhere. The majority of the landlords, during the term of this research, were either living elsewhere with their children or relatives or using the rent they received to rent rooms elsewhere. In the case of my landlord, a 92-year-old native of Shanghai, he used the rent that I paid him in six-month installments plus the public facility fee (1,200 yuan, or around US$200) to rent a more spacious place (30 square meters, compared to the 8 square meter room he rented to me), living with his wife close to a well-known public hospital.
As Doctoroff (2009) pointed out, “lilong life is certainly not for everyone,” but how it was possible even for young foreigners to experience the way of life in a big city that they would not otherwise have back home certainly played a role in the rise of this alternative housing market. By 2013, the average rent in Tranquil Light Neighborhood had increased twofold from 2007, up to 100 yuan per square meter per month. So, for example, Charlie’s rent was 2,000 yuan per month (about US$416 – 420). The landlord did not increase his rent because of his help in renovating the room, and the long-term contract that he signed – in fact, as Charlie expressed, he “wasn’t sure whether the landlord would stick to her word to not increase the rent had he not signed that contract with her to freeze the rent for four years.” By the time Charlie left, the room was put up for rent for 4,000 yuan, and was snapped up right away by a German expatriate working for a transnational market research company based in Shanghai. What Charlie’s story tells us is how gentrification, as a process, can be seen as being spearheaded by the increase in both foreigners’ interest in renting buildings that could boost their cultural capital, and the original residents’ interest in reciprocating them since they also benefit from the process financially (see Peh 2014) and not driven by capitalistic forces of the so-called “gentry class” as such. A differential value of a place is driving the poor to capitalize, and therefore, as I have shown, gentrification of Tranquil Light is not gentrification in the traditional sense, but rather a social change that was driven by the prospect of financial gain, which is in the hands of the original residents because they have access to the “culturally-rich” heritage buildings.

**Gentrification from Within**

In *Discourse on the Original and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, the French enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacque Rousseau (2014 [1750]) claims that the root of inequality is the creation of
an artificial superstructure of desires that people in power produce to keep those in a socio-
economically inferior position in a perpetual stage of poverty. According to Rousseau, this
superstructure makes the inferior class desire what they do not need. By constantly creating a series
of unnecessary desires, the superior class is essentially putting the inferior class to work in pursuing
desires that can never be completely fulfilled. Members of the inferior class are made slaves to the
superfluous needs that the rich have created to keep them in check.

In this chapter, I develop the process, which I call “gentrification from within.” It was my original
resident informants themselves who both consistently and mindfully used the term
“middleclassification” or “zhongchanjiehjua” to discuss the situation they were in. I have added
“from within” to denote the unique characteristic of this process where the residents themselves
were the actors in changing the demographic composition as well as the physical condition of the
neighborhood. In other words, the displacement of the original residents has been demanded,
staged, and driven by the local residents themselves rather than by new wealthier residents. In
addition to developing this alternative understanding of gentrification in which the existing residents
themselves were the key actors in the active urban process resulting in the change in demographic
diversity, the goal of this chapter is to engage in the contemporary debates regarding the use of the
term gentrification. At present, the term seems to imply that the two categories -- winners and the
losers -- are often the result of the process of social change and urban transformation. It may be
true, from the consequentialist point-of-view, as my informant Jack has informally observed, that
there were more middle-class residents with middle-class tastes in the neighborhood, and therefore,
by definition, the neighborhood was much more “gentle” than the original working class
neighborhood it once was, where residents spoke to one another in familiar loud voices, and
seemingly impolite but culturally intimate greetings. And by this “gentleness,” we may be able to
understand the change as the subjugation of the retired uneducated working class poor by young educated middle-class gentries. But, as I have shown in this chapter, that was only one side of the story. Now that we know the contexts (e.g., housing policy vis-à-vis social welfare, the impact of the globalization, and the nature and consequences of the subletting process), is it still “gentrification?” Perhaps we can agree that it would not be – at least in the strictest sense of the term – as I have shown how the original residents not only received adequate income from the process, but also, in many cases, substantial economic gain, and were therefore economically and physically better off as a result. In my case of Tranquil Light, the reciprocal economic understanding between the two sides led to a collaboration between them, resulting in both cosmetic and infrastructural upgrades to the houses, which otherwise would not have happened. In addition, as opposed to eliminating diversity, the process seems to have led to an increased diversity among the residents, as well as a much more nuanced and mutual understanding between residents of different cultural origins.

The obvious theoretical problem of calling this process “gentrification” lies in the way this process took shape: the working-class residents (i.e., old residents) were not dispossessed of their houses, but still owned the lilong properties, and could make financial gain through rent, or in negotiating with the local government. In addition, these old residents were pensioners, and were not “underprivileged” or deprived (at least in the strictest sense of the term). In fact, my critique of traditional theories of gentrification vis-à-vis Rousseau – how the process was driven from below by the locals – is based on how this process was not the result of income disparity. Still further from traditional theories of gentrification is the resultant diversification of the neighborhood, which was the opposite of the homogenization that is often the result of gentrification. As pointed out in the previous chapter, especially when the pretext of getting the “safety net” service includes bribing the doctor to pay more attention to the patient (Blumenthal and Hsiao 2005). There is increasing
attention being paid to the re-visiting and potential expansion of the concept of gentrification to accommodate cases from other parts of the world “beyond the West.” As the geographer Hyun Bang Shin (2016) puts it, the study of gentrification needs to expand its scope beyond “the confined experiences of the so-called Global North.” Remaining unchanged, however, are the root causes of the process: capital investment and cultural reproduction. I suggest that with “gentrification from within” as a concept, we can see it as a complete reverse of Rousseau’s concept – it is the economically inferior residents who, through the understanding of the increasing value of the limited resources they have at their disposal vis-à-vis the global hierarchy of value, actively market that which they no longer need to the economically superior class, who see the opportunity to increase their cultural capital by claiming temporary residency in heritage buildings. The success of this reverse process results in the change in the demography of the residents, to include new residents who are seen as “gentrifiers or gentry,” who may not necessarily be richer, but are enticed by the opportunity to possess the antiquated uniqueness that the gentrifiers or gentry themselves have helped to create for the economic inferior residents to use as leverage for their material gain.

Central to traditional theories of gentrification, which usually involve a developer driving out the locals and then replacing them with higher-value residents, is a change in the social composition of an area and its residents, as well as the change in the nature of the housing stock. That is, the new residents, once they are successful in raising the value of the land by the social and cultural capital associated with their middle-class status and way of life, create social and economic environments to push out the original residents. Although some of the old residents of Tranquil Light were low-income residents relying on state-provided pensions, some of them were not, despite their deliberate use of similar kinds of narratives regarding their victimhood (which I have previously discussed in Chapter Two), and their belief that such narratives could help advance their position. We have seen
examples of this phenomenon worldwide, including in Shanghai, especially in central areas where tertiary industries such as banks, private companies, and hospitality services, operate. The different, almost reverse, pattern I observed in this gated community in the center of Shanghai is a demonstration of how the knowledge of the global not only informs but also encourages pragmatic local residents to foresee a different future and voluntarily get involved in the process of urban renewal to enhance their own interests.

As many have observed, the combined recent slowdown in the Chinese economy and heritage status of Tranquil Light Neighborhood have put developers at odds with the tactic of “bulldoze-and-rebuild” that transformed the entire urban fabric of the city two decades earlier. The ownership of the properties was largely mixed: As most of the residents were former employees of the dissolved work-units, there were both residents in Tranquil Light who still paid the symbolic rent (i.e., rent control) to the government, as well as those who were issued property ownership certificates. There are, however, two reasons why it is difficult to know for certain who owns what. First, because of the nature of the structures, the boundary of ownership is unclear. For instance, if the bathroom and kitchen areas were shared by three families, whose right was it to renovate those spaces, let alone lock it to prevent other people from using; and, second, the original residents were deliberately “made unclear” about the rights that they had, even with actual paperwork stating their rights, as Doctoroff (2009) also observes during his quest to own a property, “The lack of protection and the dog-eat-dog nature of the process and the ambiguity of all things that are open to interpretation.” There were also discrepancies among the original residents themselves: although most of them, according to my research findings, were pragmatic about their future (as mentioned in the earlier chapter) and are prepared to be relocated, they somehow had to hold on to the fiction that they
“belonged there” (see Non 2013) and hence still fully retained the right to compensation, even if they had moved away or rented their rooms to someone else.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I present two arguments. First, I argue that the term gentrification should receive a much more neutral treatment. As someone who has never been in favor of the proliferation of academic neologisms, I am personally inclined to this argument because otherwise we would have to mark such gentrification (in the manner of Glass 1964) as “traditional gentrification.” That said, my second argument lies in the proposition that there should be another term to accommodate this phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, Herzfeld (2016) has proposed “self-gentrification,” which was adequate insofar as it was used to explain the two cases in Greece and Thailand. But in my case, which is tightly bound to the notion of a gated community and a particular urban space, it does not evoke the sense of change inside a bounded entity such as Tranquil Light.

Moreover, what the term “self-gentrification” does not evoke (and therefore my problem with the limitation of the term), includes the following aspects of gentrification: the spatial notion (i.e., inside the range of the physical area or boundary); perception (i.e., inside the range of a specified action); action (i.e., occurring inside a particular socio-legal framework); agency (i.e., by the efforts of the locals who literally live “inside” the community), and, finally; concept (i.e., a concept/argument regarding the use of the term gentrification). Hence, while Herzfeld is accurate that “self” denotes the sense that an action is done by one's own efforts, “self-gentrification” does not implicate another side of the traditional argument – that gentrification can be prevented by not giving in to the capitalists and, instead, staying put to maintain the solidarity of the community.
In other words, all gentrification happens because the residents themselves decide to move out. Gentrification by way of capitalism is different from gentrification by governmental expropriation or “state-led” or “state-sponsored” gentrification (He 2007; La Grange and Pretorius 2016; Ong 2014) commonly involves forced evictions; in which case having a choice is not part of it. I do not want to undermine the often large discrepancies in the socioeconomic status of the old and new residents that eventually cause the socioeconomically inferior to give in (the so-called “structure and agency” problem), but I would like to recognize it in a particular context, and through ethnography. In downtown Shanghai, for instance, there is a case of a new district undergoing urban renewal where the local government guaranteed each of the original residents their right to receive a commercial unit so that they could continue to “maintain their lifestyle and the sense of our community”; yet, as soon as this new district was completed and the big corporates saw the opportunity in investing in the area, the original residents, almost unanimously, agreed to rent out their spaces to the big corporates so that, according to an interview with the original residents, “we would no longer have to work, and simply be beneficiaries of passive income.” This process was not forced. Rather it was the changing of their way of life that the residents themselves saw as best fitting for their families. What this interview shows is the contestable importance of “sense of community.” At times, the residents said it is crucial, and at others, they undermined it by saying that they would be happier to bust up that community if it would lead to them receiving more money from the process. A former owner of what was once Shanghai’s most famous dumpling stall (who happened to live near Tranquil Light) shared with me, “it would be nice if I could still sell wontons – since I had been doing that for years – as did my father, my grandfather, and my great-grandfather.” “But that said I would like to rest, as selling wontons, as you know, is a lot of laborious work and I am too old for that,” the 64-year-old stay-at-home father of a son shared with me. When asking about his son and whether he could help with the business, his response was:
Oh, that's another thing. My son has no interest in selling wontons – he doesn’t even like wontons! By renting out my space to someone else, I could afford to send him to a good school, and perhaps abroad if he wishes to pursue his study abroad afterward.
Chapter Six:
The Death And Life of “Creative” Entrepreneurs

During the middle of the afternoon on a rather pleasant day in the autumn of 2013, no one expected a visit from more than two dozen officers from the Urban Management Bureau, especially the residents in one of Shanghai’s most famous traditional alleyway-house neighborhoods. These “officers,” also known as chengguan, are not usually welcomed by the locals, as they are often the last resort of the city’s government for enforcing urban management regulations. Numerous scandals in the national media about how the chengguan in many large cities had been abusing their power make their presence even all the more fraught and contentious (Human Rights Watch 2012; Lubman 2013; South China Morning Post 2014). The residents of Tranquil Light were stunned by the number of these officials gathered at the south gate of the neighborhood, before eventually

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26 A point of skepticism here is whether or not the chengguan are considered "officers," as they are neither members of the police force nor police officers themselves. Calling them "urban management officer(s)," Human Rights Watch (2012) describes them as “a para-police agency tasked with enforcing non-criminal urban administrative regulations that does not have the legal authority to detain suspects.” A more detailed description is that of Lubman’s (2013) in which I would like to quote here in full: “Chengguan are auxiliary para-police organized and hired by city governments to handle various urban problems under laws so vague and general that there is little restraint on their powers. Despite years of bitter public complaints over the thug-like, and often violent, behavior of many chengguan, little has been done to rein them in. This situation can’t continue without consequences: As the population of Chinese cities continues to expand, maintaining order in the streets will become more difficult, requiring the central government to define and enforce needed laws and regulations – or risk public acts of rebellion.”
marching into the main lane. The blue and white uniforms of these officials, as well their white gloves, only added to the growing feeling of dismay among the residents who stood and watched as they dismantled informal structures, temporary tents, and parts of buildings piece by piece, hurling the debris into the back of a garbage-collection truck that followed the procession of chengguan vehicles. A sizeable crowd gathered to observe the spectacle. By four o’clock that afternoon it seemed that no one could focus on their work anymore, especially once the noise from the demolition process as well as the shouting from the people whose property had been confiscated, filled the alleyway.

Although this chapter is not about the chengguan, what their presence in one of the most important traditional Shanghainese alleyway-house neighborhoods illustrates is the escalation of a long-brewing conflict with regard to the complicated issues of globalization, tourism and the “creative” economy, and urban space that I hope to unpack in this chapter. Having been a major trading port in the mid-19th century, Shanghai has regained its prominent economic status and is one of China’s most visited cities today. In 2013, the number of domestic and foreign tourists rose to 260 and 7.57 million respectively (Xu 2012). According to Reuters (2015b), Shanghai ranked only second to Beijing for the number of tourists among all cities in China. An interesting footnote that this same statistic also shows, however, is that Shanghai still ranks at the top despite the absence of historic and cultural attractions. Like Hong Kong, Frankfurt, and Singapore, Shanghai is a relatively young urban financial center that is placed on a much larger “global” stage (World Cities Culture Forum 2014; Yatsko 2001). What foreign tourists want to see in Shanghai is neither cultural relics nor historical sites, but physical evidence of China’s reemergence from the shadow of socialism as well as displays of new forms of modernity (Larmer 2010). For domestic tourists, motivating them to visit Shanghai are pride and patriotism – Chinese citizens from all over China come to the city to have first-hand
experience of the “future of China” (Tsang 2014). In fact, as scholars from various fields have observed, on the agenda of the local government of Shanghai is to achieve the desired “global city” status and put the city itself back on the map as Asia’s most economically viable city to attract customers for Shanghai’s main industries (namely retail and wholesale, financial services and real estate; see the edited volume by Chen 2009). Achieving such status would also give Shanghai the all-around potential resources to compete head-to-head with the capital Beijing in terms of its symbolic importance to the “New China” socio-economic program. Shanghai’s local government has drawn planning inspiration from cities such as New York, London, and Tokyo, which have achieved architectural distinction as global cities by providing ample space for cultural industries (see Shin 2012; Wang and Li 2011; Yusuf, et al. 2010).

Figure 23: An isometric rendering showing the structure of north-south exis of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood. Rendering by Steven Y. N. Chen
The Rise of Heritage and Value-Added Entrepreneurialism in Shanghai’s Tourism Development

In Shanghai, as in many emerging global cities, there is palpable tension between the city government’s preservationist ideals and the practical and economic needs of local communities, which I have discussed in more detail in the previous chapters. Although cultural industries are not among the primary contributors of Shanghai’s gross domestic product (GDP), they play a role in the decision-making process of potential entrepreneurs when thinking about where to open their businesses in China (see Sklair 2006). Cities with strong “cultural brands” seem to be much more attractive to entrepreneurs than cities that only provide infrastructure for business (based on a report by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, as reported in Chang 2015). As the scholars Siniša Cvijić and Jasna Guzijan (2013) put it, the emergence of the so-called “city branding” process is a widely accepted strategy based on the practical recognition of the critical role that cultural identities play in the contemporary urban development agenda – by which all cities are confronted with the need to compete against one another. Since the 1990s, city branding has been a major part of Shanghai’s urban development program, and the preservation of historic monuments is seen as integral to this emerging process (2013). The underlying rationale for this is to protect “cultural artifacts” that the local government considers appropriate for a city with global ambitions.

Thanks to its historical uniqueness, Tranquil Light was one of the few traditional alleyway rowhouse neighborhoods that was not torn down to make way for high-rise buildings during the first twenty years after the economic opening-up and reform in the early 1980s. It also survived the second wave of demolitions and new construction in the 1990s that paved the way for Shanghai to become a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) just like the handful of cities in the southern part of China that had hitherto enjoyed various SEZ privileges. The earliest efforts to preserve historic buildings took place
in the early 1990s initiated by a few native Shanghainese architectural historians and preservationists. Since these professionals did not have the judicial rights and the power to execute their proposals, their efforts could only prevent a small percentage of historic buildings from being razed in the name of development (see Levin 2010; Ren 2008; Tsai 2008). It was not until the early 2000s that the Shanghai Municipal People's Congress passed the “Shanghai historical and cultural areas and outstanding historical buildings protection ordinance,” which is commonly hailed as one of the earliest regional laws on the preservation of urban historical features in the early 2000s (Peh 2014).

The historian and native Shanghainese Qin Shao (Information Office of Shanghai Municipality 2009a) recounts the origin of this so-called “heritage turn,” as a series of events that began with the hyperbolic success of Shanghai’s most famous luxury retail district called Xintiandi (which was briefly mentioned in the Introduction). Although the idea of this type of adaptive reuse architecture may be foreign to Shanghai, it has played a crucial role in reinvigorating the residents’ cultural consciousness, changing how business owners and local government look at old buildings in the city less as burdens, but more as assets upon which they could capitalize (2013). The underlying rationale of a handful of preservation programs throughout the city is summarized by the deputy chief engineer of the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage Tan Yufeng himself: “At first, preservation was subordinated to development, then they were seen as equal, and now preservation is seen as the premise of development” (Lin 2011a; Mo and Lu 2000; Yager and Kilbourn 2004). Since the early 2000s, the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Cultural Heritage has registered Tranquil Light as one of the city’s important cultural relics to be protected, which made it impossible for anyone to change the way it looked from the outside although some of the
houses’ interiors had completely been revamped by the residents themselves.²⁷

Although it is seen as traditional in contemporary Shanghai, the western architectural style that was chosen by the developer in the 1930s for Tranquil Light project was considered at the time to be “the very modern and sophisticated.” It was built in the British townhouse style with a touch of the classic London-styled crescent, although the lilong were built in straight lines unlike the uniformly beautiful arc formed by a row of houses in a crescent. Archival blueprints and construction documents made available by the Shanghai Municipal Administration of Planning and Land Resources Authority/Department also show that the project was built with the finest craftsmanship, especially the European-styled metalwork and masonry, one could find outside of Europe.

²⁷ As discussed in Chapter Two, in some of the lilong neighborhoods, usually the poorer ones, the government restored the exterior of the buildings, but left the job of upgrading the interior, which was often more helpful in terms of living conditions, to the residents themselves. This was the case especially during the so-called “beautification period” when the local government was preparing for the Shanghai Expo’ in 2010.
All of these were probably reasons why it had not been knocked down even though the buildings in Tranquil Light were mostly three stories and had far less useable floor space than most of the buildings built after the 1990s. Famous film directors had also chosen this place to shoot, as did hundreds of tourists who deliberately came to the neighborhood to have their portraits, casual photos, and selfies shot with the extremely rare backdrop. But it is not only visitors (domestic and international tourists) who have been attracted to the area: while many companies often prefer the convenience and the efficiency of high-rise buildings, it was precisely the “classic, traditional or western appearance” of these row houses that drew young entrepreneurs, artists, and professionals working in the cultural or “creative” industries to settle in the neighborhood in the early 2000s (see
Historically, the transformation into a central gathering area for new residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship took place over the course of a decade. There were quite a few local residents who served as middlepersons (fangdichan zhongjie) who put up signs on behalf of the residents who wanted to rent out or sublet their rooms, and showed the rooms to the potential renters to pocket the “middleperson’s fee” (zhongjie fei). “It was easy for me to get a room…the transformation from a typical senior citizen neighborhood to a community of young residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship was gradual and peaceful, which always drew a lot of attention from the media and young people,” said an informant who was one of the first foreigners to move into Tranquil Light who had witnessed the whole process. One online platform writes, “Just a block down from one of Shanghai’s most luxury shopping malls, Tranquil Light has preserved slices of ‘Old Shanghai’ life alongside trendy cafés, indie handicraft stores, and art studios run by young hipsters.” At its peak around the 2010s, there were more than eighty small shops open in Tranquil Light, and the neighborhood was featured in both local and international media, attracting tourists from around the world. On a typical weekday, there would be at least several hundred visitors to the lane, about half of whom were regulars who came for meals.

On a good weekend, the number of visitors could surge to a couple of thousand, which was almost two-thirds of the residential population of the neighborhood. With an area of just above twenty-three thousand square meters, the neighborhood did not feel congested with its three thousand residents. It did, however, feel different when the number of people doubled thanks to the tourists.

The name of this media platform and details are concealed to protect the anonymity of the neighborhood.
There were also some complaints from the retired residents about the incursions of gawking tourists and the buzz of activity. “One would have thought that it would have been the ‘new rich’ types who felt they had paid for tranquility and had been cheated of it, who complained,” said one of my informants. As one retiree also shared with me, however, it seemed to be the case that there was a much stronger wish among the retired residents to see the neighborhood “remain purely residential as it had always been before the shops began to open.” Some retirees, whose lives were affected by the commercial activities (especially the ones that generated noise), had written several open letters to the neighborhood committee, the lowest level of government in charge of civil affairs, overseeing and enforcing micro-level policies such as family planning, mobile population management, crime prevention and census administration, to name a few (Li 2013; Yung, et al. 2014). These retirees were asking the neighborhood committee to help maintain the peaceful environment of the neighborhood.

The Urban Management of a Traditional Neighborhood in a Globalizing City

The official reason for the visit of the chengguan to Tranquil Light had been made clear more than three months earlier on the community’s bulletin board:

The Tranquil Light Neighborhood Company directly regulates this Neighborhood. The commonly owned houses can only serve as residential. Alleyways inside the community are not for transportation. In recent years, some residents have rented out rooms, renovated spaces in the communal areas, changed the functions of the houses, and opened businesses without certificates, which negatively impact the residential environment as well as social stability. Recently, the residential administration office has decided to close the community and prevented outside cars and people from entering the neighborhood. We expect residents to collaborate with us, obeying the rules that regulate people and cars and be subject to administrators’ regulation. The administrative and legislative departments of the district will legally punish residents who change the functions of houses, illegally renovate or rebuild, and run a business without a certificate. We expect residents to correct illegal behaviors; otherwise, those who refuse to comply will be responsible for any legal consequences. Meanwhile, we remind the residents cautious about consumption and ask you not to buy
products or any services in places that do not possess business certificates, in order to protect your own health, life, as well as consumer rights.

Shanghai Urban Management Bureau

Although this notice was clearly written in official language, and bore the local government’s round red stamp with a star in the middle of it, few residents thought that the chengguan would actually make good on this implicit threat of a crackdown, knowing that Tranquil Light was centrally located in the busy, commercial spine of the city, and not far from the headquarters of a major local newspaper. “The last thing that these chengguan want is news about their brutality appearing again in the news,” one of the residents told me when I was looking at the bulletin board with curiosity a few days earlier.

The fully translated title of chengguan is Officer of the Urban Administrative and Law Enforcement Bureau. Their duty is to “maintain social order” in Chinese cities. To the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the management of urban order is key to social stability. Amidst the many scandals involving high-level officials of Shanghai, including that of the Communist party chief of Shanghai himself (Lieberthal 1995; Winckler and Greenhalgh 2005), a government agency like the chengguan often avoided being seen as exerting their brutality upon citizens in the central areas of the city when enforcing government orders. In the minds of those who opened stores without a license in Tranquil Light, therefore, the notice was nothing more than a paper tiger. In Shanghai, there was a sense of what the late eminent political scientist and China observer Richard Baum (Watts 2006) called “the self-organizing civil society”: while the residents are conscious of their place and their limited rights in society governed by the CCP government, they also know the limits within which such forms of governance could affect their lives. “They wouldn’t dare,” said an owner of a café before the chengguan’s visit. She then continued: “The most they could do is to come and knock on
our door one-by-one, and then we will just close our shop for the day, and then re-open it again the next day.” The rumor about the chengguan wanting to crackdown on businesses in the neighborhood had been going around since in the summer of 2010 – more than three years before it had actually taken place in September of 2013 as I had observed with my own eyes. A local reporter, in fact, had shared the following on a well-known travel blog in August 2011:

Tranquil Light is, as of now, still designated as a residential neighborhood. Therefore, most shops are operating without licenses. The local government, of course, knows about their businesses; hence, it seems that these shops are not afraid of operating in the gray area. Most of the shops, however, don’t have obvious storefronts and detachable signboards. Last year (2010), rumors circulated among shop owners that the government was planning to step in to manage the place. Nonetheless, since nothing has happened since, many residents believe that the government had eventually ditched such plans. That said, shop owners have reported increased police spot checks in the area. Police also come in to check on the neighborhood sometimes as often as twice a day. Detachable signboards are something that can be quickly taken down each time policemen were spotted entering the lanes. “If there were customers who wanted to stay and finish their coffee, we’d just tell the cops that they’re our friends,” says a café owner – who declined to be named.

Having studied this neighborhood for more than two years before this dramatic visit by the chengguan, I would admit that the neighborhood never appeared in any way to call for the urban management to step in. At least, it never looked so disorderly that the city would call in the chengguan, who were most often spotted in encounters with illegal street food vendors on sidewalks, as one of their jobs was to maintain the “city’s appearance, environment, sanitation, work safety, pollution control, and health” (2007). One can obviously see the link between street food vendors and all the aforementioned concerns. This is the case especially when it comes to sanitation, as urban areas in China have become more vulnerable to various forms of food safety hazards, the most notorious among the recent cases being the use of so-called “gutter oil,” oil extracted from sewage and reused to cook food (South China Morning Post 2014). Tranquil Light was nothing close to that. The cafés and restaurants mainly served the middle classes, college students, and white-collar workers who worked in the central business district. Most of these cafes were “rather hip,”
according to many of the customers who gave them four to five stars on multiple local online rating platforms similar to the U.S.-based Yelp. Some of them were uniquely themed to take advantage of the “historic” appearance of the site, with décor that offered patrons the experience of Old Shanghai. Given the nature and standard of commerce in Tranquil Light, there was no basis for the chengguan to crack down on an urban community that did not pose any threat to sanitation, safety, or public peace.

In addition, based on my own and hundreds of frequent customers’ observations, both on the Chinese Yelp equivalent Dazhong dianping (literally “comments by the masses”) online platform and in person, these shops were, in fact much cleaner, friendlier and safer than most of the restaurants or shops elsewhere that had proper licenses. In terms of legal concerns, it was true that most of the shops operated without business licenses. The reason for that was simple: these shops were operating in competition with fully licensed shops, in the gray area between legality and extra-legality, therefore, they could not afford to have a bad reputation online or elsewhere, let alone be inspected, which would often lead to their permanent closure. So, if it was not the obvious lack of professionalism and quality of the products and service these shops offered that were perceived to be harming the public, then why did the chengguan want to crack down on the business in Tranquil Light, knowing that their reputation was also at stake if the residents did not succumb to their power and resist?

The scene in the main spine of Tranquil Light that cut across the neighborhood on the north and south axis was most intense around 4:30pm, as the chengguan marched halfway through the lane. At least a hundred objects – large and small – including tables, chairs, umbrellas and tents, and store merchandise were confiscated and taken away by the officers as they moved slowly through each of
the lanes that branched out from the main north-south spine. Crowds gathered around them as they walked through, and the whole lane was filled with shouting, yelling, and unusually loud conversations in the local dialect, as most of the residents were elderly who preferred the dialect to standard Mandarin Chinese – which, in a way, also implied some degree of resistance to central authorities that communicate with them using the standard Mandarin. Professional reporters were there; also, there to observe the incident were college students from various journalism schools around the city. The local residents did not resist, neither did the owners of the shops, when the chengguan got a local construction worker to dismantle some of the structures that had been erected outside of the houses in the branch lane for unlicensed business activities.

Figure 25: A photo showing the chaotic scene at Tranquil Light on the day of the crackdown described in this chapter: Photograph: author
The Rise of The Residents Engaging in Value-Added Entrepreneurship

According to the Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China, no commercial activities are allowed in a residential neighborhood such as Tranquil Light. The logic of such laws is both to protect residential neighborhoods from disruptive commercial activities such as noisy commercial shops and bars, and complete strangers wandering inside the neighborhood and disturbing residential lives. Exceptions are made for a few shops that receive licenses because their business was deemed by the local government as “beneficial” to the area. These businesses included a community barber, local canteen, paper recycling shops, and local clinics. Teacher Hu’s small shop, discussed in Chapter Two, was not qualified as one of these businesses and was therefore closed down by the chengguan. The entrepreneurs, artists, and professionals working in the cultural industries who arrived at Tranquil Light around the mid-2000s said they found the convenient location as well as the affordable rent to be the main points of attraction. These entrepreneurs, whom I call throughout this dissertation “residents engaging in value-added entrepreneurship” were generally young (between their early thirties and early forties, with a few in their late twenties) and educated with at least a bachelor’s degree. One of the owners of a café in Tranquil Light had provided the description of a value-added enterprise:

It’s when you make your products more expensive simply because you happen to be selling it in a nice area and in a convenient location. For example, I could make a good cup of coffee using a professional espresso machine that I am renting for less than 6 yuan (US$1) including my labor, but I could sell it for 20 – 25 yuan because I happen to be selling it in Tranquil Light – the most authentic urban neighborhood in Shanghai. Of course, as you can see looking around my café, it’s almost a must to make my café look old and classic so that my customers could feel that they’re paying the right price. By the way, Starbucks has been doing this for a long time – their coffee costs less than mine and they have been selling their coffee for 18 – 45 yuan for precisely the same reason!
Although this café’s owner was in his late 30s, not all residents engaging in value-added entrepreneurship were young and new. Some old residents also got involved by offering to provide services to the newcomers. One of Teacher Hu’s old neighbors (whom he called by the title lao tongxue, or old classmate), for instance, re-decorated his high-ceiling room attached to a courtyard in the front of the house on the first floor to rent it to anyone who would like to use it as a meeting place either by the hour or day. Teacher Hu shared with me:

He makes about 10 times his pension by just renting out the space to young people who wanted a nice courtyard in the middle of the city to host a meeting, birthday party, reunion, or get-together -- which is good for me because I am his zhongjie so I get a cut as well by introducing him a potential client…if you know anyone who’d be interested, you must let me know right away!"

The economist Richard Florida defines the idea of the creative class (2002) by the role which they play in what Florida calls the “creative economy.” Florida argues that the lifestyle of the members of this creative class plays an important role in adding value to the products and services they provide. According to Florida, this creative economy is becoming an important part of the modern urban economy, replacing the old mode of labor-intensive industries. More to the point is his argument that if cities are to become successful and competitive in the global market, they need to provide more than just generic spaces for the residents to live, but also a way of life, affordability, and consumption conducive to this “creative” economy.

In his review of Florida’s The Rise of the Creative Class (2002), the economist Edward Glaeser (2002) argues that the contribution of the book lies in its emphasis on the intrinsic connection between creativity and the rise of bohemian lifestyles. This intrinsic connection is, to Glaeser, the social freedom brought about by the synergy of the two components that serves as a foundation for Florida’s argument about how to profit from encouraging “creative people” to live together in a city. Critics have said that Richard Florida’s ideas on creative class and “creative economy” do not work
in reality (2005). My use of the adjective “creative” here refers to how these residents create new ideas and technologies. The local Chinese media refer to these resident entrepreneurs as “creative makers” (chuangyizhe) and “people with creative capacity” (you chuangzaoli de ren), – “flattering titles” that these entrepreneurs comfortably assumed, with which they self-identified. What these entrepreneurs engaged in might not be “creative” in the strictest sense of the term: They did not create any new patents or products. These entrepreneurs were, however, “creative” because they were constantly looking for ways to improve their social and economic living conditions and standards by engaging “creatively” in commercial and artistic activities rarely seen in Shanghai before their arrival. Different from the ubiquitous transnational corporations whose headquarters are located in Shanghai, and inspired by the experiences abroad and the higher education of these resident entrepreneurs, the commercial activities included alternative forms of artistic, entertainment, and leisure activities, such as teahouses and art schools (e.g., teaching Chinese calligraphy and painting), independent cinemas and specialized media libraries, as well as anti-corporate consumerism such as boutique clothing, furniture, porcelain and jewelry stores, and “hip” barista cafés, serving exclusive, imported and certified fair-trade organic coffee.

The condition of most of the houses in Tranquil Light in the early 2000s was poor as a result of the lack of structural maintenance, which I have discussed in more detail in both Chapter Two and Three. This dilapidated condition was, however, good enough for the new residents. According to a few shop owners, “it made much more economic sense” to be there than elsewhere. A young jewelry designer shared with me the following:

In fact, had it not been because the building was so run down, it wouldn’t be affordable. A business like mine needs to be right in the center of Shanghai. My clients are fashionable people who live in the city. When I first moved in, the room was a complete mess and I had to spend about 100,000 yuan (about US$15,500) to turn it into the nice workshop and showroom space that you are seeing. It’s a lot of money, yes, but it’s also a one-time thing and this renovation would last for 5-10 years very easily. This is the center of Shanghai at the
end of the day! It’s still much cheaper to pay for the renovation to make it look nice than to rent a room this size elsewhere in the same area. For instance, a friend of mine is renting a room this size just right across the street in a high-rise mixed-use complex for 30,000 yuan a month (about US$4,600).

Another contributing factor that led young shop owners to settle in Tranquil Light was also the sheer uncertainty of property development in the central business district. “When everyone knows that the neighborhood will be removed, but no one knows exactly when. Hence, it’s extremely difficult to speculate,” said one of the old residents who rented out the first floor of her row (she owned two rooms on the first and second floor) to a young local Chinese man who opened a small tea house. On the owner’s part, since she did not know when she would be asked to move out, the best strategy for her was to try to make as much money as possible while the house was still legally hers. This benefitted the pragmatic tenants who were charged reasonable rents and were not asked to provide much proof of their income, status, or guarantors. Like the artists and the creative classes in the famous art districts in many cities, these residents engaging in activities in the value-added entrepreneurship were operating on small budgets (see Li 2013; Tan 2005; Yung, et al. 2014).

Among the many in the fashion business was a Shanghainese entrepreneur who had just returned from Europe with a degree in management and wanted to own a small boutique shop to sell collectible souvenirs. For most of the young entrepreneurs like her, paying a large sum of money to get either the license or certificate of standardization was not an option.

Government-sanctioned mass surveillance in China is well known and has been well studied (Langfitt 2013; Levin and Wong 2013; Wu 2011b). In addition to the 40 surveillance cameras in Tranquil Light, informal information disseminating methods such as gossip, volunteers for the neighborhood committee and residents alike kept the authority informed about activities in the neighborhood. Consequently, it was highly unlikely for the local government to be unaware that
there were, at its peak, more than eighty shops open in Tranquil Light, which was considered a large proportion given that there were fewer than 200 rooms that could be used for commercial purposes. 183 of these 200 rooms were on the ground floor; one-third of which had the courtyards still intact in the south-facing frontages. In theory, the “extra-legal” businesses (not regulated by the law) may be able to operate under the government’s radar. In practice, however, such a closed neighborhood watch system would not allow any social activities, let alone businesses, to operate in stealth in this manner. Among the most active members of the neighborhood watch team were the elderly themselves, who kept track of what was going on in their microlocality (i.e., the lanes) and transmitted information among themselves through both informal channels such as gossip, complaints, and more formal channels such as reports when they wanted their concerns to be officially heard by the neighborhood committee.

The extra-legal businesses of the residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship were possible for many years because both the old and new residents themselves in general also believed that the local government saw the benefits in having these shops in the neighborhood for two reasons. First, there was a practical reason for the local government to turn a blind eye to these shops. The rents collected by the residents from these shops were important sources of income for many retired residents, many of whom were discharged from their local work units, and therefore, did not have enough income for their daily lives, let alone to support regular visits to the hospital as well as necessary medicines. It may be true that most of these residents had public health coverage; however, they would still find themselves not being treated appropriately by the doctors unless they also provided the doctors with extra money in the form of a “red packet” (hong bao). As many reports have shown, China’s healthcare system is ineffective owing largely to the systemic corruption from within both the health ministry and medical profession. Physicians do not get adequate
compensation, leading them to recommend expensive but unnecessary tests, charge extra fees for ambiguous items, prescribe excessive medicines, and demand kickbacks from patients. My 92-year-old landlord, for instance, was open about this every time he came to collect the rent:

Without this red packet in the doctor’s hands, he will spend less than a minute with you even if you are in great pain... so, I hope that you’d understand why I cannot tolerate late payment for rent – I also need the money.

Renting out the rooms that they did not use would allow old residents such as my landlord to earn an income for themselves, and therefore alleviate the welfare responsibility of the local government.

In addition, although the “creative” industries in Tranquil Light only accounted for a minuscule portion of the city’s income from tourism (Beech 2013; Fan 2007), it had a much larger impact on the city’s tourism strategy, as it helped to open up dialogue among scholars, architects, planners, economists, and local government officials about how to make use of Shanghai’s architectural heritage for tourism (World Cities Culture Forum 2014).

The Rationale for the Crackdown on Businesses

By 5pm, the chengguan were preparing to leave, as they had collected a few hundred pieces of evidence from the shops that had refused to close. Despite the public warning announced more than three months earlier on the community’s bulletin board and at the north gate of the neighborhood, the chengguan also knew that some of the shops could just shut their main gates, and would re-open once they had left, so the chengguan also inspected the interior of all 198 buildings, looking at the gap between the gate and the wall, through the cracks in the walls, as well as through the windows to make sure that no one could escape the crackdown. The scene got more intense when one of the shop owners, a senior resident who ran a small grocery store that had been selling cigarettes and
confectionery for twenty years, passionately asked the chengguan for an explanation for why they wanted his shop to be closed after twenty years in operation. Having lived in the neighborhood for more than four decades, this senior resident had always been an important figure in the neighborhood, especially when it came to the history of Tranquil Light. More than three dozen reporters and journalists had photographed and written about his little shop, as one of the few remnants of Shanghai’s “nostalgic micro-economy” (Chang, et al. 1996; McCain and Ray 2003; Shao and Ruan 2003). The explanation that was given to him by the chengguan was, “Shifu, (lit. master, but commonly used also as a respectful form of address for older men) we have no choice…we really have to do it across the board; otherwise, how could we tell those people whose merchandise we have already confiscated?”

Why, all of the sudden, did the local government get the chengguan to crack down on businesses in the neighborhood, knowing the benefits of these businesses? There were two possible explanations. First, the shop owners no longer recognized the need to play a modest role in the neighborhood based on the mutual understanding of the status of the extra-legal nature of their businesses. As the competition and concentration of shops grew, it was difficult for the local government to turn a blind eye to the extra-legal nature of these shops. For instance, after only a few months of profitable operation, one of the small cafés in Tranquil Light had been transformed into a full-scale “café and bar,” which was drawing more regular visitors than before. Apart from the differences between a café and a bar in terms of business licensing, the local government could not turn a blind eye to the noise pollution, as well as other forms of public disturbance that came as a result of such a leisure-oriented business operation.
There was, however, another, even more revealing explanation. Once his business could generate enough profit, an owner of a small handmade cookie shop began to find other available rooms in the neighborhood to rent from the original residents, and then sublet them to others at much higher prices, acting as, what was often called in Chinese, “a second landlord.” There were a handful of these types of petty-shop-owners-turned-second-landlords in Tranquil Light. Such activities, though not illegal elsewhere, had a profound impact both on the real estate market in the neighborhood, as well as on the adverse sentiment toward the residents engaging in value-added entrepreneurship as a whole now that these shop owners had become landlords themselves. They were able to operate in the gray area because the local government saw them as a “creative” engine whose businesses did more good than harm to the local community. An owner of a small teahouse operating in Tranquil Light between 2008 and 2013 said:

Tranquil Light had always been the poster child for the peaceful co-existence between modernity and tradition. By that, I mean old architecture and new business activities, old buildings and new functions, old residents and new residents, and so on. In the five years that I have had a teahouse there, the local government has taken many guests to visit Tranquil Light, ranging from ministerial-level officials of the CCP to state guests such as members of the royal family from other countries. They even took them to see my small place – as an example of a renovated apartment that has been “creatively converted into a traditional teahouse”. Thanks to this diverse mixture of businesses, customers and residents, everyone is learning to live in harmony. This peaceful co-existence has grown out of a sense of mutual respect for each other.

The problem arose when these shop owners became capitalists themselves at the expense of others, as well as failing to compensate for the various forms of negative externalities they generated.

**Structural Inequality Among Renters**

The other explanation for the local government’s decision to crack down on the businesses in Tranquil Light might have to do with the structural inequality among the renters, as not all residents
benefitted from the economic opportunities brought about by the heritage and “creative” industry and the visitor economy. First and foremost, while most of the residents were living in run-down rooms, most of the new residents were living in renovated spaces, some spacious and well decorated, as they could afford the rent. In addition, while many residents benefitted from renting their places out, there was a strong sense of discontent among those who could not do so, whether it was because they only had one single room for themselves to live in, or because their rooms had no mandatory amenities such as bathrooms, or extra spaces that were considered to be desirable among the new residents such as a courtyard (for an outdoor café), or a balcony (for a teahouse) attached to it. These residents who were excluded from these new economic opportunities were then sensitive to any forms of what they saw as “public disturbances,” which they could use as cases against those who had these opportunities. One can resort to a popular framework proving support for the role of jealousy in Chinese communities in relation to the structure of kinship and landownership, and other social relations of a particular locality observed by scholars of Chinese religions and gender relations. Through this lens, the tension between the old and new residents rests on jealousy between neighbors. These new tenants together with the original tenants who sublet their rooms were the sources of contention among the residents who lacked similar opportunities.

This structural inequality also extended to the renters. The landlords often preferred foreigners because they had the reputation of being straightforward (meaning “not tricky” here), hygienic, wealthier, and friendlier. That said, there were also foreigners who, according to the renters and tenants who lived next door to them, “partied all the time” to the extent that the neighbors filed noise complaints to the neighborhood committee, and eventually the police. The presence of these foreigners often led to arguments among original residents such that eventually the neighborhood
committee had to step in to resolve the conflicts. Nevertheless, the old residents still preferred to rent their spaces to foreigners even when a foreigner and a Chinese resident of equivalent socioeconomic status made the same cash offer.

One of the most vivid moments of my time in the field was when Ai, a 30-year-old fashionable Shanghai-born resident of Tranquil Light told me: “I cannot understand why the neighbors hate me so much.” Before saying that to me, we were at the local office of a governmental agency called the Trade and Commerce Bureau (locally known as Gongshangsuo). Ai had a comfortable background growing up in the home of entrepreneurial Shanghainese parents who were some of the first to set up private clothing businesses in the 1990s when private entrepreneurs were again allowed to engage with marketization. “Unlike most of my classmates’, my parents were quite open,” Ai said. They gave her the freedom to choose her own fields of study and supported her financially to pursue them. When we met, Ai had already returned from studying abroad after having obtaining her master’s degree in a fashion business-related discipline and spent a couple of years abroad “trying out different business models”. Although her parents were still financially supporting her, Ai had already made her mark in the Shanghai fashion scene, as quoted in a local fashion magazine:

Born and raised in Shanghai, Ai founded her fashion studio with her business partner who has a background in finance in the center of the city that she knows best. They – two stylish women – found that there was so much they could do together to develop the business and inspire one another. According to Ai, the success of her business owes its roots to the diversity, and creativity of Shanghai with its growth of entrepreneurs and creative industries. With her business partner, Ai started the company in 2011 to “bridge the gap between fast fashion and luxury brands, offering well-made, individual pieces at an accessible price.” Ai aims at redefining the gradually changing “idea of Shanghai style” and culture.

Ai was asked by the Bureau to “come and have a tea” (lai he cha), a euphemistic expression that the authority often uses when individuals were asked to come to the local branch of the Bureau to report themselves. In this case, it was an invitation to the district branch of the Gongshangsuo to
discuss an issue with her little shop in the neighborhood. “We were informed by your neighbors that you have been conducting business activities in the neighborhood, which is not allowed…and yes, someone called us; your neighbor called us,” said the Deputy Director of the Gongshangsuo. Since she started renting the room on the first floor with both a large courtyard and full-scale kitchen attached to it a few months back, Ai, in fact, had been doing nothing but discretely conducting her own businesses: She displayed and sold her designer clothing, organized invitation-only parties, and hosted private dinners. The question that both Ai and the Deputy Director had, first, was how did her neighbor know about her private activities? Second, why did they even care since Ai’s business was in no way disturbing them? Her courtyard was considered a luxury given that rooms like that would usually be too expensive for an individual to rent, or would have been rented out already. The former tenant of Ai’s courtyard had to move out because she knew that her business would be one of the first to be targeted by the chengguan since the courtyard in which the former tenant rented to run her “Hip n’ Chick Café” was one of the largest private open spaces in the neighborhood and was perceived by some as the most expensive in terms of decoration. Ai simply rented the room from the owner of the Café who had already closed her shop and moved out (and who, in this case, acted as a second landlord). Ai paid a little bit more than the price that the owner of the Café paid to rent this courtyard from her. As soon as she moved in, she re-decorated the courtyard with minimalist IKEA furniture with the purpose of turning it into not only her workshop and office space, but also a multipurpose room to be rented for usually expensive events, such as private dinners, parties, a function space for events such as an exclusive speed dating club, and so on.

During the first two months, the profits that she made were more than enough for her to operate the place with ease. Word soon got out that her business was doing well and her clients became regular visitors. These guests, mostly middle-class young women, were by no means modest in their
self-representation especially when it came to their choices of clothing. Within the next two months, she sensed, in her own words, “that my neighbors stopped being friendly to me, even though I bought them fruits almost every day.” There could be other factors that made her neighbors feel uncomfortable about her presence. “I wouldn’t want to ask Ai to close down her business if not for the constant reporting of public disturbances caused by her from, mostly, her senior neighbors,” said the Deputy Director of Gongshangsuo. “But all my events have never made any noise,” responded Ai, and I was able to verify the claim because I was often invited to her events to take part in her social activities. Although the Deputy Director of Gongshangsuo did not share with us the actual written comments that she received, she did say that one of the persons who lodged a complaint wrote that the lamps in Ai’s room were, simply, “too bright” (tai liang), which according to a few neighbors “disturbed their sleep.” So, it was not even the noise that bothered the senior residents, but the light through two tiny windows on the side of the courtyard facing the lane. In addition, there was a complaint from a resident claiming “what she cooked for the private dinners that she often organized created too much smoke and an unpleasant smell.” Ai was speechless after she heard that it was the noise and smell from dinners and the light in her room that her neighbors were complaining about. She felt that no matter what she did someone would be able to come up with a reason to be against her. Ai bitterly shared the following with me:

Now what? They [the old residents] have exhausted justifications to hate me based on all of their senses. I mean, literally, all their senses: They hate what they see, hear, and smell – I am sure that they’d probably complain about the taste of my food and the roughness of my clothing too if they’d gotten to eat or touch it. Had they tried my food and touched me they would have complained about my food and my physical body too!

Some of the neighbors who lived close to her branching lane shared with me from time to time gossip about their discomfort. One such neighbor, a 72-year-old retiree who lived with her husband across the branching lane from Ai’s room, shared with me the following attack on Ai’s perceived presence among her and her neighbors:
I liked her [Ai] at the beginning when she moved in. But then she’s become strange. She would be seen in the lanes with different men. Most of them are white. Are they all her boyfriends? Sometimes they hugged, and also kissed in public. Why would she think that’s okay? Also, in the summer she wears so little: a tiny tank top and ripped denim shorts – so short that anyone could almost see her groin! I tried to strike up a conversation with her a few times about how uncomfortable I was whenever I saw her, but every time I saw her she always said to me that she’s in a rush and wouldn’t have time. Who does she think she is? Her parents must be paying for her so that she could rent such a big room in “our neighborhood.” Sometimes she would buy a basket of fruits for us [old neighbors] – how patronizing!

These men with whom Ai were seen were her clients for whom she organized private dinners and activities. Ai had a boyfriend who was with her regularly, but her lack of communication with her neighbors, as well as her taste in fashion, might be the root cause of the misunderstanding that she was “sleeping around with many men.” Her renting one of the largest rooms in the neighborhood also did not help. It seemed that the structural conflict could explain it all: She was the object of jealousy in the neighborhood because of her foreign education and seemingly more comfortable way of life, along with how she was renting out the neighborhood’s largest room of which the old residents could only dream. After the meeting with the Gongshangsuo, Ai asked me to share with her what I thought was the reason for her being sabotaged by her own neighbors, and I did so by telling her the information above. “What? Really? Those old people said that? I was so nice to them,” Ai said. Ai was by no means the new kid on the block. By the time of this incident, she had been living in Tranquil Light for almost three years. Ai used to have a small shop that was once a garage in the neighborhood until she saw the notice that she had to close down her shop – which would be followed by a personal note and visit from the Gongshangsuo. On the day of the raid, there were some quiet protests at the beginning by some of the residents, especially the shop owners and their employees, and there were some efforts from their side to resist the Gongshangsuo by covertly opening their shops, especially those shops that did not need display windows, such as cafés, restaurants, and teahouses. An aspiring fashion designer, Ai was forced to close her first showroom prominently located at the north side of the lane behind uncovered gates that she rented to display
her designer shirts. This small showroom was just for her to make extra income on the side, as she also had another full-time job in fashion management elsewhere. After the meeting, I asked Ai to talk about her experience and she did so by writing down her thoughts on a small yet stylish piece of paper she bought from a Japanese department store nearby:

The day the officials from the Gongshangsuo came and took the liberty to enter my place without asking for my permission was indeed disturbing (queshi ling ren bu an). I hope that the meeting with the Deputy Director of the Gongshangsuo today has in some ways helped me to clear the air with them. I hope that there won’t be any problems in the future. At the end of the day, they are still the mediator between neighbors, as no one wants to get into trouble, if not necessary, especially just because of jealousy. In a way, it’s because the Gongshangsuo did not think that I was taking my business “seriously” (kan jiu bushi zai renzhen de zuo shengyi). Although this attitude may have gotten me off the hook, I couldn’t help but feel offended: I have been living here for three years and have run my business with passion and love for what I do! They have to do their jobs: They have the pressure from the neighbors to investigate my business.

They [the Gongshangsuo] have their own goals to achieve social harmony. They have their own sense of sadness and joy in life. The Gongshangsuo probably appreciates [residents engaging value-added entrepreneurship like] us, but in a way that their admiration of our lifestyles hinges on their preconception that we are free of any concerns and are only living our lives for enjoyment – which is why they don’t see me as doing serious business! Now, in terms of practical adjustments, I just have to lay low, stop doing my private dining business, and pull down the curtain so that no one can see inside the room.

By 6 pm in the evening, the chengguan lined up again at the south gate (through which they had entered earlier). They marched all the way to the north gate and back. The total distance was four hundred meters, which, according to a seventy-two-year-old resident who walked back and forth in the lane every day as exercise, usually only took about ten minutes. The march of the chengguan, however, took a full four hours to complete, as they spent significant time taking down and confiscating “illegal” objects as they moved through. Resistance from the residents was not met with violence, but unusually gentle explanations from the chengguan that “this had to be done.” One reporter said that the chengguan had prepared for this crackdown for weeks before they came in – as the last thing they wanted to get out was more news about their brutality. On their way out, they put up another notice on the south gate, this time a much larger notice than the original warning
that most people seemed to have ignored. With a long and meticulous explanation of their actions during the day’s raid, the core message was simple: mission accomplished: Tranquil Light has returned to its original “tranquil” state.

Conclusion

Through a detailed narrative of an event that lasted four hours – the crackdown on shops in a Shanghai alleyway by the Urban Management Bureau or the chengguan – I have unpacked the intertwined layers of conflicts around the structurally unequal distribution of benefits from the growing tourism and leisure industry in traditional neighborhoods. The event I have described here speaks to some of the important issues affecting the sense of “urbanity” in contemporary Shanghai, such as city branding and the rise of new residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship, the ways in which place has different meanings to different groups of residents, and how the old residents mobilize to protect their rights to political participation in such places. It was the resistance and resentment to some emerging and observable forms of inequality from within that brought down the whole heritage and “creative” tourism enterprise in the historic lilong neighborhood of Tranquil Light. The remarkable paradox of this story is that it all began as a “paradise” for the residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship and young returnees from abroad.

The picturesque quality of the “tranquil” neighborhood was an idea repeatedly invoked by both the original residents and the entrepreneurs who had lived in Tranquil Light since the mid-2000s. The former had seen how the neighborhood was transformed by the energy and the creativity of young minds into something unprecedented, which, to many of my informants who were original residents, “was actually quite refreshing to see, after all of these years of only seeing each other’s old faces.”
Shanghai’s local government first tried to give the residents engaging in the value-added entrepreneurship some room to flourish, and therefore exercise their creativity – creativity that would be hampered under a stricter tax regime. Having the Xintiandi as a model par excellence of architectural heritage tourism in the city, both locals and visiting foreigners alike also welcomed such entrepreneurial energy, which helped the neighborhood to attract not only consumers to buy goods and services, but also potential tenants (especially foreigners and educated locals) who wanted to be a part of the diminishing cultural heritage before it eventually disappeared, which, as described in the previous chapter, had led to the phenomenon that I would like to call “gentrification from within” (also see Non 2016) Local tourism flourished as a result. During the first five years of co-existence between the new and the old tenants, it seemed that both of these groups benefitted economically, financially as well as politically from each other.

The peak of this so-called “honeymoon period,” between the new residents engaging in entrepreneurial business and the local municipal government lasted for about eight years. The tension between the old and new residents had gradually built up thanks to the structural conflicts resulting from unequal access to the unprecedented range of opportunities emerging in the community. A sudden change occurred, however, when some of these entrepreneurs had crossed the line by deciding that they could take advantage of the grey area in which they had been smoothly operating their businesses. In the original residents’ words, these new residents were “opportunistic investors” (touji de touzizhe) such as in the cases in which they became second landlord themselves. The plot twist here was that it was not the local government who decided when enough was enough, but the old residents themselves who had essentially initiated and somewhat orchestrated the crackdown: These residents not only formally voiced their concerns to the local government, but also made sure that their concerns got circulated throughout the community’s moral landscape by
informally transmitting their impressions of the situation and those involved in the situation through gossip. Insofar as the combination of these formal and informal methods of casting discontents proved effective, the old residents succeeded in putting pressure on the law enforcement authorities to enforce the laws that the authorities had no prior intention of enforcing.

The sense of uneven benefit distribution that some residents felt is expressed by how the residents quarreled with each other over the prejudicial distribution of opportunities on which they could capitalize on a short-term basis. In this chapter, I specifically show how “residents” cannot be understood as a single homogeneous group. Most vividly illustrated in this chapter is how the original residents – or those one who lived in the neighborhood before the economic reform and housing privatization in the 1980s – gradually came to see the arrival of new residents engaging in entrepreneurial businesses, who moved in after the early 2000s to capitalize on their alleyways, as an unjust process. This story shows how uneven access to economic opportunity could be a source of intra-local resistance that manifests itself in resistance against outsiders – both business owners and tourists alike. In this case, what may appear on the surface to be a conflict between the locals and the non-locals, or the people and the powerful Chinese government, is indeed a series of collective unfolding conflicts among the neighbors themselves. The story told in this chapter exemplifies the conflicts, which may arise when not all residents in a neighborhood such as tranquil light benefit from the economic opportunities brought about by the cultural industry and the visitor economy. This story illustrates another form of resistance – one against the implications of the value-added entrepreneurial activities in a residential neighborhood, rather than one of protest against heritage tourism.
Chapter Seven: 
The Meanings of Being a Man

If the weather was good – which, in the case of Shanghai, would also mean that the amount of heavy particles in the air, generally known as PM2.5, were not too high – I would spend my Saturdays outside of the wall of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood. Around early afternoon, after completing my routine of strolling up and down the north-south main alleyway talking to my neighbors, I would walk out of the neighborhood through the north gate that was located right around the corner from my room, past the lottery kiosk where I would often run into Mrs. Yan, and into a busy street of Shanghai. Usually, after having spent the weekdays conducting research in the neighborhood without leaving the neighborhood’s immediate periphery, I would crave going outside just to see different groups of people. Truth be told: I needed the private time to myself. About a twenty-minute-walk from the north gate west of Tranquil Light, I would arrive at a public park right in the center of downtown Shanghai. On weekdays, this park was just a place where mostly old residents of Shanghai hang out and meet each other. Thanks to its long history as the only public greenery in the middle of the city up to the early years of the new millennium when the east part of Huangpu River – the Pudong New Area (Pudong Xinqu) – was then being developed into a new town in itself, this park was surrounded by both the local lilong neighborhoods, as well as high-rise apartment buildings
Not only does this park have a name – People’s Park (Renmin Gongyuan) – but it has always been known, as I mentioned earlier, as the lungs of the city ever since it was deliberately converted into a public amenity by the CCP from a former racecourse, which was exclusively designed and built for the foreign subjects as well as affluent Chinese during the quasi-colonial period (1842 – 1945). Many social functions of the ordinary citizens of Shanghai take place at this park. For instance, while many residents of Shanghai know People’s Park as a place where comrades of the opposite sex during the high socialist era (1949 – 1978) hung out and got to know each other (alongside the wall on the famous waterfront known as the Bund about another twenty minutes on foot west of the park), the young people growing up in the 1980s would knew it as an “English corner” (yingwenjiao) where those who would like to tap into the opportunity to learn a foreign language would visit. At the time of my research residency in Shanghai, many still gathered at this small corner in People’s Park to speak English with a handful of middle age Shanghainese residents who were keen to practice, learn, and also show-off their English to other, usually younger, Shanghainese residents. That said, the liveliness of this English corner was no comparison to a decade ago when there were no private English language schools where well-to-do parents could send their children to learn “proper” (biaozhun) English from foreign teachers. This park is more popularly known to the locals, today, as a “blind date corner” (xiangqinjiao), especially in the last couple of years, thanks to both foreign and local media coverage. The idea of a public place for potential partners to meet was not new to Shanghai, as historian Xiaoneng Yang (2012) writes:

In the past [during the high socialist era], homes had no space for dating, and there were few places that could accommodate courtship, so people congregated on the Bund and in public parks. Pairs of lovers often sat side by side; several couples would share a long bench, with no room for intimacy, yet completely oblivious to the presence of others. Now there are an endless number of places where couples can meet privately.

Foreigners, however, know this particular corner as “Shanghai’s Marriage Market,” for its sole purpose in pairing singles with potential partners. It is, however, often not the bachelors and
spinsters themselves. Instead, seen in this blind date corner are the parents who are looking to play matchmaker for their busy children.

Figure 26: A scene of a typical weekend at Shanghai Marriage Market where parents play matchmakers for their children. Photograph: Michael Herzfeld.

The purpose of the last two paragraphs is to point to the fact that, in a global city like Shanghai, it is impossible to only conduct ethnographical research in a traditional way – i.e., with an absolute well-defined boundary of a single field site. In reinforcing my resistance to the notion of term multi-sited ethnography as discussed in Chapter Four, I would like to think of my encounter with the Marriage Market at People’s Park, simply, as another phrase of my ethnographic inquiry about Shanghai. As much as an ethnographer might want to romanticize it in terms of commitment, hard work, and
complete attachment to the field site, the nature of fieldwork consists of two parts: the part where the ethnographer resides in the field site to do the research and the part where the ethnographer says, “I need a break,” and therefore gets out of his or her field site for a hiatus. This unexpected ethnography at the Marriage Market, indeed, falls precisely into the second part, when I, the ethnographer, felt the need for some space for myself to think about what I had experienced during the past six days during which I had barely stepped outside the periphery of the 23,500 square meter area of the gated neighborhood where about 3,000 residents were people I knew.

As I will show in this chapter, many of the residents’ beliefs and thoughts were constantly in the process of being shaped and reshaped, as a result of their conversations with the outsiders. That is to say, although the boundary of Tranquil Light was a useful tool for me in defining a preliminary area of my research, this boundary is not useful when it comes to the understanding how the larger social structure and relations in Shanghai operate. In addition, every time I traveled outside of the neighborhood, I came back with a set of questions for my informants; therefore, I myself was not only a carrier of external ideas that played a role in re-shaping the dynamic of the community, but also the source of external information since my purpose in residing in the neighborhood was different from that of the residents. In the case of the Marriage Market, the first thing I did after I found out about its existence was to return to Tranquil Light and speak with my informants about it. Most of my informants – and all of those who were already above 60 years of age – knew exactly what I was talking about because for many of them they were introduced to their marriage partners through a similar process to what was happening in People’s Park.
Courtship in Modern Chinese Society

In traditional Chinese society, it was not uncommon for the parents to “introduce” (jieshao) potential partners to their children. The term for this, especially when parents more or less decide who their children’s spouses will be, is “arranged marriage.” In fact, it was even more common for one to get married through the help of a matchmaker during the high socialist period. Indeed, many of the Shanghainese who grew up during the high socialist era (1949 – 1978) got married through a matchmaker – this was necessary since everyone at that time was assigned to work in a work unit, which most of the time did not provide a convenient meeting place and time for young people of opposite genders (Davis and Harrell 1993; Whyte 1990; Yan 1997)

In other words, it is the contemporary social situation that appears to be the cause of strengthening this traditional practice. At work, the relationship between two young people was largely collegial, and there were no actual opportunities for two comrades of opposite genders to get to know each other. The authorities frowned on overt flirting, and sexual relations were even more taboo. This lack of opportunity necessitated the help of matchmakers, resulting in their prominent position in high socialist China. These matchmakers, interestingly enough, did not generally work for money. Although the term that is typically used today for matchmakers is hongniang (literally “red lady”) – a term borrowed from the name of a petty servant character in the classic Chinese drama the Romance of the West Chamber (Xixiang Ji), in which the character hongniang was the messenger between her master and master's lover – the term that was used then was instead a much less dramatized and more gender neutral one, namely jieshao de ren (literally “introducer”). Many of them were aunts, uncles, bosses, teachers, and the next-of-kin of the bachelors, who often derived their sense of dignity and happiness from their success in helping to match couples (see Levin 2010; Yang 2013).
Because of the lack of dating opportunities, marriages in high socialist China were rarely based on love. In fact, love was, and sometimes still is a foreign concept to those who grew up during the Cultural Revolution in China (Whyte 1984; Yan 2003). For one of my informants, Mr. Zheng, love was not something he wanted to define. “Love is, of course, important (ài jìshì běn zhòngyào), but do you know what is more important? To be ‘normal’ (jīngchăng),” said Mr. Zheng. I then asked what he meant by “normal.” Only after a long period of time and after I had asked him the same question many times, did he eventually admit that he sincerely did not know what love meant, but he did know for certain that it would not be normal to be single – and what was really important was how others looked at you. Indeed, consistent with many stories told in memoirs, novels, and studies of Shanghai under high socialism (see Croll 1981; Watson and Ebrey 1991; Whyte 1990), expressions of love at that time were strictly prohibited; and the local cadres encouraged marriage to be thought of more as a “duty” to the country (guojia) rather than as a personal choice. In fact, a marriage by personal choice “would be seen as bourgeois.” Mr. Zheng continued. It is known that the social policy of high communism promoted free marriage with the goal of liberating women from abusive relationships as a result of arranged marriages. That said, replacing such a notion of marriage is the one that emphasized the responsibility of the proletariats (Yan 2003). In other words, the responsibility for a couple to get together, respect one another, and eventually reproduce, should not involve any perceptible materialistic values, or conventional attitudes of patrimonial maintenance of wealth and property, or even personal feelings of affection. Mr. Zheng, at one point, even shared with me how his boss at his work unit told him that love was just “an idea that Westerners came up with” (xīfāngrèn gāo de xiǎngfǎ) and therefore had no underpinning truth, let alone necessity in the eastern socialist society in which they lived.
Mr. Zheng’s only daughter got married in her late 20s, thanks to his hard work to make sure that “socioeconomic compatibility” (expressed in a four-character Chinese idiom men dang hu dui, literally “matching doors and parallel windows”) was not the only criteria in selecting the single man with whom his daughter could get married. Through the quota of his wife, he had purchased from his work unit a modest room for his daughter to be her newly-wed home (hunfang). This space would normally be called an attic (except that it was not officially recognized by their neighborhood committee, yet, as a room). All of this investment was so that she could have her own space and therefore privacy when she moved back from her college dormitory in the early 2000s. Mr. Zheng’s daughter lived there until she got married to a local man whom Mr. Zheng introduced to his daughter. His parents happened to have a small room in a two-bedroom unit that they owned, so Mr. Zheng’s daughter eventually moved out to live under the same roof as her husband’s family. The attic then became empty after their daughter moved out. Mr. Zheng, being kind as he often was to migrants from other places, would let them stay in the attic while he would go through the process of finding them affordable rooms in Tranquil Light and in nearby neighborhoods.29 His neighbors who had male children had to work hard to find rooms large enough to deserve the title “marriage home” (hunfang). “We’re lucky to have a daughter. For pensioners with economic conditions like ours, it would be different if we had a boy…this attic would be too embarrassing to be given to him as a wedding home,” said Mr. Zheng.

29 In fact, I was also invited to stay there until he could find me a pavilion room, and I was highly tempted, but unfortunately Teacher Hu’s skill as a local real estate agent had already gotten me the pavilion room that was to become my residence for the next 16 months after I moved to Tranquil Light. Hence, I missed out on the opportunity to stay in the informal attic that many historians of Shanghai’s modern life described as “a place that is hot in the summer, and cold in the winter…and was often given to slaves, laborers, or whoever was too poor to get an official room.”
Mrs. Zhao’s son, whom I also got to know quite well over the course of my fieldwork, was a six-foot-tall, gentle, and quiet man, who, as far as my observations had allowed me to make assumptions about his personality, often, if not always, listened to his mother. Mrs. Zhao had been the head of the household since she got married to his father in the late 1970s. Despite not exactly being a young man, Mrs. Zhao’s son did not seem to feel the need to get married. He worked in a local newspaper company, and his day-to-day job was generally not demanding. At home, his mother took care of the household work, cleaned his clothes, and did the cooking. From time to time, I also saw him helping his parents to hang clothes, get water from the dispenser, as well as water the plants on the balcony. Although I did not get to know him as well as some of my other neighbors, (Teacher Hu and Mrs. Hu, for example), I could feel from our conversations that he hardly felt the need to have a girlfriend. “Why would I do anything like that? I am happy with my life (wo de shenghuo jiu ben xingfu le)” His mother who I had gotten to know quite well (even better than her son), on the other hand, had exclusively shared with me her concern that her son would “never find someone to marry” (zhao bu dao jiehun duixiang). Whenever we met, either by running into each other in the main lane or in the branching alleyway, or when I went over to see her on a weekly basis to ask her about her life and occasionally to eat whatever she cooked for dinner for her husband and her son, she always told me how agitated she had been that her son never showed any interest in getting married. This was the reason why I was not surprised when she said that she would like to be a matchmaker for her son.

During the high socialist period, couples often got married when they were younger (see Lee 2006). In modern China, in fact, women are considered to be “leftover” (sheng nü), or lacking the attractiveness and therefore prospects of marriageability if they are not married by 27 or 28 years old (To 2015). It is generally understood among parents at the Marriage Market with whom I had
conversations that men are able to postpone marriage longer with less of a drop in their “value” all thanks to the traditional preconception that youth and fertility are causally related. One informant, a 60-year-old mother who had been actively helping her 32-year-old daughter to get married said to me that she “was looking for men between the ages of 32 to 50.” While men are not stigmatized to the same extent as women, for a man to have remained single at the age of Mrs. Zhao’s son was generally still seen as socially unacceptable. Because she did not want to draw attention to her “problem,” Mrs. Zhao was taking an active role in remedying this situation, which was not in itself surprising. What caught me off guard, however, was the first part of what she said: “I will go to People’s Park to find a wife for my son.” My initial impression of People’s Park, after having heard that it was also called a Marriage Market, was that it was probably the kind of place people would go to in order to try their luck at finding someone with whom they might want to start something romantic. It did not initially strike me as a place where a mother – let alone a mother of a 39-year-old seemingly rather mature son like Mrs. Zhao – would go to “try her luck” (peng peng yunqi) on his behalf. After hearing this, I could not help but ask her if I could tag along with her to investigate the scene. It was at the Marriage Market that I was surprised to find out that most of the people who took part in this matchmaking activity at the Marriage Market in People’s Park were not those looking for marriage themselves, but were serving as matchmakers on behalf of their children – with or without the knowledge of the children themselves. Every weekend, many thousands of parents and matchmakers would hang out at the Park exchanging phone numbers and sharing information about their single children – within the sight of hundreds of tourists who were drawn to the Park by their curiosity. These matchmakers at the Shanghai Marriage Market were not the same kind of traditional matchmakers who would help the bachelors for free, as discussed earlier in the chapter. In contrast, the modern socioeconomic conditions have given rise to a new generation of matchmakers who charge a fee for their service. Once I when was there with colleagues from the
US. We were ferociously followed by a few parents and matchmakers who saw them as potential partners with the assumption that my colleagues were single, and as opportunities to make money by being their agents.

**Housing, and The Meanings of Being a Man**

At these Marriage Markets, the parents and matchmakers would try to find potential matches for the people whom they represented. While many criteria may be considered, the economic conditions of each party are often a major component (as stated earlier, marriages usually need to satisfy the *men dang bu dai* requirement). Intricately related to the socioeconomic condition of Shanghai residents is the housing market in the metropolis that has been instrumental in driving a series of changes in Chinese family structure. Most importantly, as reported by the Chinese statistical bureau, housing is the main reason why the divorce rate in urban areas has been rising – for seven years consecutively (Fincher 2014; To 2015). As a result, getting so-called “fake divorces” (*jia lihun*) has become common. To avoid paying the newly implemented, hefty property tax when they wanted to sell their homes or get a second home, couples could easily get this so-called fake divorce so that they would not have the two homes registered under one person (up to 2015 when I was in the field, see FlorCruz 2015). This ineffective new regulation, introduced by the State Council announced in March 2013, was implemented in order to curb speculation in China’s overheating property market. The reasoning behind it was that citizens would find it less tempting to purchase a second home if they had to pay up to a 20% capital gains tax upon its sale. This measure, according to the local government, would allow greatly sought-after housing units (some were built to be affordable housing) to be available directly to those who really needed them, such as lower-middle-class residents, and thereby prevent them from falling into the hands of the upper middle class, who
would then rent them to the lower middle-class residents as an investment. This measure, however, may not be enough to deter this practice, because, as many economists and business analysts have speculated, the extremely low interest rate on savings has encouraged urban residents who are in possession of household registration to put their money in the housing market rather than in capital investment (Fu 2015; Langfitt 2016; Shepard 2016c). “I have a pile of divorce and marriage certificates at home for that reason – since it costs almost nothing to get divorced, why would anyone pay tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars of profit from their property investments to the government?” said Rachel, one of my informants who had a white collar job at a local educational institution in Shanghai.

Residents began to circumvent the new regulation by simply getting divorced in order to avoid paying the capital gains tax, while still living with their previous spouses as if nothing had happened. This form of pragmatism might seem to be something rather acceptable – or even expected – for the residents of an economic engine city such as Shanghai. Even so, it was a perplexing one for the older residents, who still saw getting divorced as a taboo. That is to say, the obvious question is: if the most fundamental unit of rituality and rites, family bonding, and therefore social structure as a whole – marriage – could be faked, what else is left to be conceived as a truly untouchable belief in urban China? Apparently, the government had not conceived of this scenario when they enacted this tax on second homes (China Daily 2015).

The family and housing structure in Shanghai is different from that of most of Mainland China for other reasons. Historians have observed that it may be that Shanghai’s treaty port culture has played a crucial role in promoting the status of women who had more opportunities to work outside their homes than men especially in the concession areas, and therefore pursued their own professional
interests (Jiang 1998; Scully 1998; Yeh 2006). Therefore, Shanghainese women were the first to break this cultural imprisonment, which in turn collectively empowered them (Yeh 2006; Zhu 2015). During the high socialist era, women were also responsible for meticulously managing food coupons. According to my informants, a ration coupon to be managed could be as small in its value as a bowl of rice. As the women were given this tedious task in almost three decades of high socialism (1949 – 1978) while the men were at the factory working on manual labor tasks, women were in charge of the economy of the household. In fact, a quasi-derogatory term ma da sao, which in the local Shanghainese dialect means to “shop, wash, and cook” has long been associated with Shanghainese men, who stereotypically do not see doing chores as tasks associated with a particular gender and in fact are content with sharing the responsibility with their wives. Many popular media outlets may be exaggerating when they promptly promote Shanghai men as “a rare species in this world” and “the most valuable type of husband” simply because of their absolute obedience to their female partners (He 2011). As my 82-year-old neighbor Mr. Liang has suggested, it is not that Shanghainese men enjoy being dominated by women, it is just the pragmatic notion that “we don’t see why we cannot help out with the chores – two pairs of hands are better than one.” That said, this particular attitude is one of the “positive” stereotypes of Shanghai men.

In January 2015, Chinese health authorities published a detailed report pointing to the gender imbalance in China as “the most serious and prolonged” in the world (Reuters 2015a), which demographers saw as a direct ramification of the country’s strict one-child policy. Like most Asian nations, China has a traditional bias for sons. Many families abort female fetuses and abandon baby girls (usually for both local and international adoption) to ensure that their only child is a son, so about 118 boys are born for every 100 girls, against a global average of 103 to 107 (as also cited in Reuters 2015a). Hence, from these statistics, it would seem plausible that men were the ones having
the trouble of finding marriage partners, especially when Chinese law only recognizes monogamy. In fact, there is an emerging study on this single male phenomenon – the so-called “lone stick (guang gun) phenomenon” – of single males who either have to marry outside of the traditional social groups, or never get married.

Despite this national gender imbalance, the paradox here is that the majority of matchmakers at the market actually represent females. Although, in general, there are more men than women in Shanghai (e.g., Ebenstein and Sharygin 2009; Hudson and Boer 2002; Liu and Choi 2006; Tucker, et al. 2005), one explanation for the market niche to focus these women’s needs is the population of females in the service sector, which, in the past decade, may be higher than that of males owing to the rising educational level of women (at 109 men to 100 women, see Zhu, et al. 2009), and the nature of the city’s service-oriented economy as mentioned above. Since hypergamy, or the action of marrying a person of a superior economic class, is still the societal norm, women aspire to “marry up” rather than marrying men whose status is lower or equal to theirs. This aspiration for women to marry men who have better socioeconomic status may be stronger in rural areas where the traditional preference for sons has created, what the Chinese state also sees as a national demographic crisis (Chang 2009; Subrahmanyam and Lee 2011). In cities, the gender imbalance at birth is not so severe. In addition, many of the industries in Shanghai are service-oriented (Jacobs 2011; Poston and Glover 2005; Reuters 2015a) and in these industries, females often have more employment opportunities than the males.

Many of the single men and women who were being represented at the marriage markets, lacked the major socio-economic possession expected of marriageable bachelors or spinsters – a house. This lack of home ownership presents a major difficulty in the modern Marriage Market because it brings
traditional Chinese values in direct conflict with the overheating housing market in megacities in China. Traditional Chinese custom holds that possessing a house (fangzi) is both a psychological fulfillment of, and a rite of passage for starting the new life of a married couple — who usually would not be able to leave the homes of their parents until they got married. According to my participant observation and interviews with both parents and their unmarried children, I found that given the greater financial resources of the parents, as well as the children’s unstable socioeconomic status, youths tend to allow their parents a lot of influence in the selection of potential spouses, especially when the parents are the ones who would be funding the houses for newly-wed couples.

As is the case with residents of marriageable age in China’s first-tier cities (yixian chengshi), the local Shanghainese (Shanghai ben di ren) are discouraged by their parents from marrying non-Shanghainese outsiders. While parents often cite cultural differences as the explanation for the structural incompatibility between local Shanghainese and outsiders, the stories that my close informants shared with me point to the opposite. For instance, a neighbor living four doors down from Mr. Hu who has a single daughter in her 30s shared with me:

It’s hard to imagine a Shanghainese son or daughter marrying a non-Shanghainese who doesn’t have a house because they don’t have a Shanghai household registration (hukou), which is a legal prerequisite for purchasing a house. This phenomenon, however, is not restricted to outsiders, as many young professionals in Shanghai cannot afford a house either, as their low salaries simply do not let them purchase houses. For young men, in particular, it is important both to have a physical house, as well as to be able to present a good “face” (mianzi) to the families on both sides.

I was struck by the diagnostic narrative often present in conversations regarding real estate in Shanghai: the difficulty for both men and women to get married. What I was beginning to sense were parallels between the housing market and the marriage market. While for women this revealed anxieties about becoming “leftover women” – an expression similar to “left on the shelf” in English – the larger cause for concern may well be the difficulty that men face in purchasing a house before getting married. Men not only feel the pressure of dealing with traditional values of being “well-
matched in social and economic status” (men dang bu du), for which buying a house is one criterion, but they also experience the challenge of being able to acquire other material and symbolic goods. Many Shanghainese men revealed in interviews that they are “probably not going to marry a Shanghainese woman.” According to several conservations I had with my informants with sons, this is in large part because “Shanghainese women often hold unrealistic expectations of what the men need to do to be ‘good’ men,” and the men’s inability to fulfill these expectations, especially given tangible economic constraints. Some of my male informants have said, “[Because I don’t have a house,] I don’t even feel like a man anymore.” The men were stuck between the women whose expectations were driven by traditional values, and their own burdens stemming from these values, which was to provide a house, and they ultimately find it difficult, if not impossible, to fulfill such expectations given the economic climate in which they both are living (Jacobs 2011). Although there is also a growing trend towards the marriage in which the couple does not immediately own a home at the time marriage – the so-called “naked marriages” (luo bun) – the pressure from the parents still plays an immensely and deeply psychological role in the children’s decision-making process. The women who got married this way, whom I interviewed at the time that this research was conducted, shared with me that although it has become increasingly common to settle down with men who lack houses, the “worst enemies” are the parents, certain friends, and family members who still would not understand why they would do so.

An informant, a 27-year-old female Shanghainese resident who had lived with her parents for over two years told me, “I am a modern woman and I don’t care whether or not he [my partner] has a house, but it would make it a lot easier for my parents to accept him into our family.” Her partner, a 27-year-old Shanghainese male resident of Tranquil Light, with whom I had the opportunity to talk afterward, shared with me the following:
Of course, I want to marry my girlfriend (wo dangran yao jie gei wo nvpengyou), whom I got to know when we were both in college here in Shanghai. She is Shanghainese, but I am not. That said, I have learned Shanghainese during my college years, and we speak to each other in the Shanghainese dialect from time to time – especially when we talk about money because it is easier to do so in Shanghainese! The problem is that her family would like her to get married to someone with a house. Hey, we’re the same age – both of us are 27 years old, which for her is the last year before she would be called a leftover woman, but for me it’s just the beginning of my career. My salary is 6,000 yuan a month (about USD $1000). How could I afford a house in Shanghai – a one-bedroom apartment in the suburbs is already at least 1 – 1.5 million yuan. Give me 10 more years, only then will I be able to maybe prove to the bank that I could pay back the mortgage! I will become a “slave to my mortgage” (fang nu), but I don’t have any other options (mei you ban fa). Right now, the only way I could possibly get married is for my parents to make the down-payment for me – which would mean they would have to sell our current house to do that. All for what? All so that I can prove to my girlfriend’s parents that I am a man? This is too much! (tai guofen le!).

One of the two scenarios that this informant presented here was that it could well be the case that it was not the woman herself who made these demands, but her parents; in which case, these demands then were a weapon used by the families of the woman to increase their own status, or to assure that their daughter gets as large a share of the groom’s inheritance as possible by getting the parents of the groom to fork over more of their assets to their son. It could be the case that this girlfriend of his may actually be unhappy about what her parents were doing to a relationship that had the potential to last and to be meaningful to the couple. Also expressed in the tone of voice of this bitter informant was the belief that his girlfriend is selectively clinging to traditional values only when those values benefitted her. Not only was he unhappy with the expectations placed upon him by others, he was not happy that he lacked the financial capability to fulfill those expectations:

They [his girlfriend’s parents] are still living in two different pasts: the traditional past where a man was the breadwinner and the woman is the housewife, and the Maoist past during which housing was entirely provided for by the state. Just like my parents, they didn’t have to work hard to get a house. If the state has provided me a house that way, I wouldn’t have any problem. The irony here is clear: if this idea comes from the Maoist era when the state provided housing then it would make sense that the groom not be expected to provide a house. They resort to the traditional Chinese values because it works to their advantage. They harken back to the Maoist era whenever they think the socialist narratives fit. They just want it all!
In 2015, the average salary for job openings in Shanghai was 5,891 yuan (about US$942) per month, which was China’s highest followed by Beijing and Shenzhen (Bloomberg News 2013b). The professional services sector including consulting, law, and human resource services were the best-paid positions with an average monthly salary of 10,154 yuan (about US$1,636). Average middle-class homes, both new and second-hand, sold during the first quarter of the same year cost an average of 30,585 yuan (about US$4,933) per square meter (as reported by Shanghai Daily 2015a).

So, what this means for this informant is in order to buy a 50-80 square meter apartment and prove his worth to his girlfriend’s parents, he would need 1,530,000 – 2,450,000 yuan (or US$236,000-379,000) to secure it. For a person in an entry-level position whose income was just above the average in Shanghai, this would mean that he would have to borrow from his parents to cover the 20% down-payment between 306,000 – 490,000 yuan (about US$51,000-82,000), and then spend the next thirty years of his life paying off the mortgage. This is all assuming that he would be able to keep a stable job with requisite annual wage increases until then. “This scenario, though, doesn’t even include the expenses of raising a child, which was made clear by both my girlfriend and her parents to be the first priority once we’ve gotten married,” he said. In the end, the pressure of getting a house, according to him, was the main factor for their eventual breakup. What all of this says, then, is that the key factor for urban marriage in Shanghai is the possession of a house, which is largely a remnant of the traditional belief about the role of a man in the family. The man is supposed to be the breadwinner and to provide economically for his family. Therefore, since real estate is the major capital that can be possessed by Shanghainese, home ownership is seen as a prerequisite for marriage.

Noticeable in everyday life is the already strong tension between the Shanghainese and the non-Shanghainese. For most of the Shanghainese, basic housing was provided by the state, on the basis
of need, for free or at a token cost (as reported by Shanghai Daily 2015b). Economically, this integral advantage already put them ahead of non-Shanghainese, among many other ways. For instance, as rent in Shanghai accounts for about 30-50% of a person’s average income, having a house substantially eases financial pressures, allowing the Shanghainese to have more disposable income. As the demand for housing in Shanghai continues to rise with the growth of the economy and population, the Shanghainese’s privilege of owning a home also means they can liquidate their real estate assets, which intensifies the tension. With this in mind, according to the matchmakers, Shanghainese (especially those living and working in the city) typically prefer to marry other Shanghainese so that neither of them would have to be concerned about the possibility that one is attracted to the other because of their assets in real estate. At the time of this research (2013 – 2016), however, because of the declining economy, it has become much more difficult even for the Shanghainese themselves to turn their existing real estate assets into capital, which would, in turn, be used to purchase new housing units.

Central to this chapter is the ethnographic exploration of the changing attitude toward both traditional values as well as the sense of personhood, particularly masculinity, among men in Shanghai — what I would like to call “emancipatory masculinity.” What this term indicates is the emerging meanings of manhood and husbandhood that are diverting from the notion of the necessary possession of the qualities traditionally associated with men and husbands, in this case, such as higher socioeconomic status and home ownership. Owning a house is at the center because it is important to the couple both physically and socially given the kinds of economic activities urban China is engaging in. At the same time, as a by-product of such economic activities, it has become increasingly difficult for wage earning residents to possess one. Since an individual home can be owned in three ways: by buying, inheriting, and obtaining it through marriage, parents of daughters
go to the Marriage Market to find marriageable partners so that their daughters would both no
longer be stigmatized as “leftover,” as well as have a place to live. The relationship between the
housing and marriage markets is clearly revealed through the dilemma facing men in dealing with
their emancipatory masculinity. I reveal some of the key factors regarding the rising number of
unmarried women in urban areas, and the underlying factors that lead men to opt out of structural
preferences to marry counterparts from the same city (tong xiang ren) altogether, such as the structural
inequality resulting in the uneven economic opportunities given to residents of a first-tier city like
Shanghai that has rendered it more desirable than other urban areas since the economic reform and
opening up era.

Mrs. Zhao: Planning a Hunfang

“Leaving the house was not an option for my son,” said Mrs. Zhao. The Zhaos moved into the 40-
square-meter room in Tranquil Light in the 1960s, and since then it has been the family’s only real
estate asset. Although keeping her son at home with her would be the only economically feasible
choice for him, I also sensed that Mrs. Zhao was personally happiest with the idea of keeping her
son near her. This would mean that the space in which the three Zhaos were living needed to be
spatially reorganized. The central living area would be split and part of it would become the “room
for the couple” or hunfang (literally newly-wed home but in this case, just a room). As previously
studied by many scholars, historically it has not been uncommon for the daughter-in-law to live
under the same roof with the mother-in-law (Peng 1987). Many photographers and writers have
documented how generations of the Shanghainese residents have been dealing with the shortage of
space, both before and after the Communist takeover in 1949 (e.g., Davis 2010; Lu 1999; Watson
and Ebrey 1991; Wolf 1968). In the case of Mrs. Zhao, if her son were to get married – and
assuming that it would be a “traditional” case of hypergamy on the bride’s part – their daughter-in-law would be moving in and living on the same property as Mrs. Zhao. This is largely due to the central location of Tranquil Light, whose quality and prestige would be impossible for the future daughter-in-law to compete against.

As I often had the opportunity to come up to her room to talk to her and her husband, who was on the second floor, Mrs. Zhao had, from time to time, helped me picture her plan for the newlyweds in the actual space by vividly walking me through her future plan in the actual room. She would bring a thick pile of furniture catalogs – her favorite being IKEA’s, which, at the time of this research, had three branches in Shanghai alone, dominating the home décor market – to me and ask me what I thought about the chairs, tables, couches, and lamps, on the pages she purposefully folded halfway to remind herself that she was interested in them and would like to talk to someone about. Mrs. Zhao also often emphasized, “What do you think of my plan? Since you’re an architect, your comments are welcome!” According to her plan (about which I could not help much since the room was so small), the newlyweds would either be living right next to them, or above them thanks to the ten-foot-high ceiling of the room in which another half-floor could be added if she wished. At the moment, Mr. Zhao’s son was living right next to his parents. His “room” was a do-it-yourself kind of enclosed space inside a room, which was divided from his parents’ room-within-a-room by a thin custom-made wooden-framed panel that his father had put together to give their then-22-year-old only son his own space when he moved home after finishing college in 1998. The living space that this hunfang would absorb would add another five to eight square meters to the newlyweds’ room, which would probably be enough for a queen size bed for them, and perhaps a mirror and make-up table for the daughter-in-law, which would replace Mr. Zhao’s son’s beloved bookshelf located in the corner of the room – “Why would he need that bookshelf anyway; he’s been reading
too much and that’s why he doesn’t have a girlfriend,” she said as she reacted with an annoyed tone when I asked her whether her son would be fine with it. The parents and the newlyweds would also be sharing a kitchen, bathroom, and the corridor leading to the facilities as well. Although this arrangement may not be convenient for either Mr. and Mrs. Zhao or their potential daughter-in-law, this would likely be the only option since buying a new home in Shanghai would not be financially feasible given the Zhaos’ pensions and the booming property market.

Historically, about two-thirds of the rooms in Tranquil Light were hunfang like these. Indeed, Mr. and Mrs. Zhao were not the only residents who were determined to turn their old and only real asset into a “new” home for their child. After almost one year of residency in one of the nicest first-floor units (with a view of the courtyard or tianjing) in Tranquil Light, the young graphic artist named Ming found herself searching for another place for her small design studio for just that reason. “My landlord came to visit about a month ago, telling me that her son is getting married, and therefore wants me to move out so that she can renovate (gaizhao) the room for her son and his wife,” Ming said. In fact, earlier that year, Ming chuckled with a knowing smile when she heard the story of how one of our common friends was told by his landlord to move out from his place for the same reason. “The son is getting married seems to be the standard excuse when the landlord wants to rent the room to someone who would pay more, or to evict the current tenant altogether just because they were no longer in sync…did you even check whether or not your landlord really has a son? I bet she doesn’t even have a son,” said Ming.

Not surprisingly, it turned out his landlord did exactly that, and our common friend Peter found out about it two months after he had moved out. Ming’s comment sparked his curiosity, and so one day Peter decided to go back and pay a visit to his old apartment. When he arrived, he found that the
apartment was not a hunfang, but had been turned into a small office for a young photographer who was neither a child nor close relative of the landlord. This new tenant paid twice as much rent as Ming did, suggesting that, in fact, the wish to collect more rent was the reason why Ming was coerced to move out:

I did not want to say anything – in fact, I had nothing to say – when the landlord said she wanted me to move out because she wanted to give the room as a wedding gift to her only son… but had she told me she just wanted to double the rent, I would probably still increase the rent to whatever she would want me to pay since I really liked that old apartment…. So, I have to say that I feel hurt that the landlord lied to me just to kick me out.

In addition, when I asked Teacher Hu about the use of this excuse, he also told me that the landlords in Tranquil light were highly calculating – proverbially “using their small abacus” (da xiaosuanpan) – thus, it was in their nature to want to maximize their income from the only asset they had. To maintain face and not to “appear greedy,” – to get their current tenant to move out while avoiding the reputation as ruthless capitalists – the landlords had to come up with a more noble excuse. “They would use this excuse more when they would like the current tenants to move out before the end of the contract; otherwise, they could simply say that they don’t want the tenant to be there anymore,” said Teacher Hu.

That said, not all landlords lied to get more money or to force their tenants to move out. In the fall of 2015, after two years in the space that was once the Hip ‘N Chick Café, Ai was faced with a similar situation. Her lease, through the former owner of the Café, was about to be over and her landlord told her that she would like to have the room back. Ai was convinced that her landlord was also using this excuse to get her to move out, so she told the landlord that she would be ready to increase the rent to whatever the landlord needed as Ai, after two years, had made the space her home and did not want to move out. “I basically told her [the landlord] to name the price,” Ai said. Eventually, the landlord had insisted that getting the room back was all she wanted. Ai was fixated
on what she believed to be the “greed of the Shanghainese,” as she believed that someone must have offered so much more cash than she could that the landlord was so insistent on her moving out. It was not until Ai actually met the son of the landlord who one day came to visit her with his friend who would be helping him to renovate the room into his hunfang that she realized that the landlord did not lie to her. The landlord was indeed preparing the hunfang for her son who, ironically, did not like the room that much. As he told Ai, he would rather sell it, or to continue to rent it out to Ai or someone else, and use the rent to pay the mortgage for a standard one-bedroom apartment in a high-rise building elsewhere. It was, however, because of his future wife, who fell in love with both the location of Tranquil Light and the unique style of the house, as well as his mother who, like Mrs. Zhao, did not want her only son to live far away from her, that caused him ultimately to decide to live in Tranquil Light.

Evicted from the Upper Corner

In Shanghai, where one lives may say a great deal about your social status and family background. This is largely because Shanghai was once divided into foreign concessions and Chinese localities. The foreign concessions, thanks to their more advanced urban infrastructure, were regarded as the upper corner, while everywhere else, often homes to poor immigrants, was regarded as the lower corner (Pan, 2002). Up until the opening up and reform period in the early 1980s, this so-called “spatial-class dichotomy” was only limited to the land west of the Huangpu River. Conversely, today’s Pudong, on the east side of the river, would be what one might call “beyond the lower quarter (xiazhijiao),” or an absolutely undesirable area in which to live.
Most of Tranquil Light’s current residents moved into the neighborhood between the mid-1960s and the late 1970s. Apart from the all-around turmoil of the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976), this decade was the period when most of the proletariat families who moved into Tranquil Light during the first decade of the Communist takeover in the 1950s began to expand, and therefore needed bigger spaces in which to live. For instance, Mr. Ding was born at a hospital about a ten-minute drive away from the neighborhood in 1953, and was the second of four children in his family. By 1963, the family consisted of four children and two parents, who all lived together in a standard 40-square-meter room on the second floor. This used to be the master bedroom of the house before it was confiscated and redistributed to his family right after the Communist takeover in 1949.

According to many studies of housing distribution by the CCP during its formative years (1949 – 1955), the role of the work unit in Shanghai was consistent with the approach to the economic planning of the central government. As new industrial projects and educational establishments were planned and set up in the city, housing was directly connected to the establishment of these projects, often through the establishment of the work unit. By planning housing investment in conjunction with industrial and other public investment, the unity of urban development was ensured. According to the housing expert Ya-Ping Wang (1999), this policy reflects one of the CCP’s key planning principles – to enable people to live near their work.

By the mid-1960s, the room in which Mr. Ding’s family of six lived became too small; so, Mr. Ding’s father decided to trade it for a larger room in a newly constructed public housing estate (gongfang), built in the early 1960s. The residents with whom Mr. Ding’s father traded the room were a newlywed couple in their late-20s who have stayed in the room to this day. While the exchange of rooms may have seemed beneficial to Mr. Ding’s family, since they gained a significant amount of space, it was not at all easy for him psychologically. He and his family found this departure from the
“upper corner” or the prestigious urban space, southward into the “lower corner,” to be difficult.

He shared with me:

Leaving such a ‘nice’ neighborhood surrounded by interesting people to live in a new place where everyone pretty much had been relocated was not fun, as all of us had to re-establish new contacts and new neighborhoods – but this time with people with whom we had nothing in common.

Apart from being a standard size for a family of 4-6 people, this apartment into which they moved, according to Mr. Ding, “had nothing desirable in it – just an empty space.” As opposed to the unique style of the houses in Tranquil light, the house to which they moved to was a newly developed area where the local government built thousands of USSR-styled five-story worker housing walk-ups (sometimes also called “new villages” or xincun). A typical USSR-styled unit was known exactly for being “just a room”, as described by Mr. Ding, since the goal of this style of accommodation was to maximize functionality for socialist families (Lu, et al. 2001).

Mr. Ding began working as a state-employed middle school teacher before becoming an entrepreneur in the high-tech industry after seeing the opportunities brought about by the new economic era of the 1990s. By the time I got to know him, he would have been retired had he still worked for the middle school’s work unit, but now he had his own factories in the outskirts of Shanghai, making critical laser-technology components for deep-sea liners, specifically for Scandinavian companies. He spoke about his personal history:

Although I grew up during the calamity of the Cultural Revolution – the worst manmade disaster (renweizainan) in human history – I had never been sent away from Shanghai. There wasn’t any law, let alone rights. I was lucky to be married to my wife, a Shanghainese woman. We helped each other and got through the hardship. I am now living in a comfortable three-bedroom apartment near a metro station. So, I drive when I need to – usually when I go to my factories, but usually, I just take a taxi or the metro. How did I make money? It’s a long story, but nothing complicated. I began investing in the Shanghai stock market during its infant years [1980s – 1990s] when the price per share was relatively cheap. Some were even given free to the members of the work unit—and even then some of my colleagues didn’t want to take them! The Cultural Revolution did make people more careful and suspicious of
what was being given to them. I simply held on to those shares and sold them when the
price went up. When there’s a business opportunity, I sold all of them, cashing out all of my
shares to start a business. It wasn’t easy at the beginning. In fact, my advice for young
entrepreneurs is: "don't go into manufacturing, go into selling." There’re many problems
with the manufacturing, mainly the fixed costs, such as salary. If the business isn’t good,
you’d still need to pay your staff’s wages.

Although his life took a sharp turn thanks to the economic reforms that allowed him to live
comfortably, he still reminisced about his time in Tranquil Light. From time to time, he would
mention how prestigious it was to be living there and growing up in that neighborhood as a kid,
having all of his friends, who were also his classmates, sharing his family’s interest in socialist politics
and having their “classy-taste” for some Western cultural elements, such as classical music (although
they were not allowed to express them in public during the high and late socialist era from the mid-
1950s to the late 1980s). Since Mr. Ding was a busy businessman, I was only able to secure brief
meetings with him, and I had to resort to another approach (e.g., riding in his Mercedes with him to
his factory) so that I would have an hour or two with him while he was driving. These trips also
allowed me to appreciate his keen, insatiable taste for Mozart and Beethoven. “I am very happy that
we can now choose to listen to whatever we want,” said Mr. Ding, expressing his feelings regarding
his publicly repressed interest in Western “high culture” in his earlier years.

Even though it had been almost five decades since he moved away from Tranquil Light to public
housing, he still acutely remembered how begrudged he felt leaving it. For him, that departure meant
moving out of his elite school, and from the circle of his close classmates with whom he had played
since they were all children, located right around the corner from Tranquil Light. “It could just be
that I was very young then; but everybody, even my closest friends, were sort of making fun of me
about moving to a school in the lower quarter,” said Mr. Ding. Although high socialism would like
to claim that the standard of education was equal across the board, it was obvious, at least according
to the memory of a Shanghainese person such as Mr. Ding that this was not the case. Good teachers had personal ties to the “upper corner.” Even without the presence of an operating real estate market, there was a strong sense of spatial politics when it came to where one lived. To Mr. Ding and the many in situations similar to his, this strong sense of spatial politics was the only underpinning sense of belonging that provided a person with some sense of safety, community, and therefore personhood during the high socialist era.

In fact, the influence of the location of housing was widespread in other aspects. For example, it had an impact on how a potential female partner might perceive a male, especially if the “free house” that the country had given (guojia gei de) was not located in the upper corner of Shanghai. Mr. Ding, a pragmatically economic-minded Shanghainese, recognized early on that today’s housing market was artificial and that unless one possessed a large amount of disposable income, buying a house was simply unthinkable. Resonating with my findings in the field are results of an International Monetary Fund research (see Chalk 2011), in which the four factors driving the consistently high demand for housing on the consumers’ part are: high domestic savings, limited opportunities for investing those savings domestically, the lack of a tax regime to get people to invest elsewhere, and, finally, the rapid rise of living standards. The author of this particular report called for the government to “confront these structural issues with a menu of measures,” since the artificial elevation of the price of housing because of the interest in individual investment in this fashion would eventually limit the access to housing for the majority of the population, thereby leaving a large portion of the housing stock unoccupied. While the demand for housing in Shanghai was always high, housing stock seemed to be reserved only for the population of certain income levels, or those who were willing to become a “house slave” (fang nu) for up to 50-60 years to pay off their mortgage (Shepard 2016b).
In terms of macroeconomics, this situation was a recipe for a housing bubble waiting to burst once the developers could no longer pay for the housing that had been built because the price set was too high (see Bloomberg News 2013a). “My advice on buying a house in Shanghai is: wait, wait, and wait some more” (deng, deng, haiyao deng), Mr. Ding said to me while I was riding in the passenger seat next to him as he was driving his one-million-yuan (US$180,000) Mercedes to his factory. As someone who had moved several times and was acutely aware of the real estate market, he understood the difference between the actual and the asking prices of the property. With his son about to go to college, he had bought an empty unit for him a couple of years ago. “It was not that unbelievable that a house would mean as much to a man as it does today, but the gravity of that today is nothing I could possibly conceive of then [during the first decade of the economic reform],” he said. Mr. Ding continued, “And since that is the case today, I also had no choice but to buy one for my son, so that he could get married to a woman he likes.” When I asked Mr. Ding what kind of wife he wanted for his son, he raised four fingers and began counting down the criteria, “Most importantly, a Shanghainese; two, not from a business family, three; younger and shorter than my son; and, finally, the last but not the least, gets along with her mother-in-law – my wife.”

Getting a House is not a Dinner Party

A revolution is not a dinner party (geming bus bi qing ke chifan), or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. – From Mao Zedong’s Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan (2004 [1927]).

Above is one of Chairman Mao Zedong’s most famous quotations. Growing up during the high socialist era and being well-read in Mao Zedong thought, as most Chinese of his generation are, Teacher Hu cited this quotation in Chinese, in full to me one evening over dinner. “Do you know what is not a dinner party?” Teacher Hu asked me rhetorically. He continued, “Getting a house.”
These words of sardonic wisdom were followed by his typical long and jovial laughter. Mrs. Hu, who was in the kitchen at the time, heard what he said and also laughed along with him. At the time, I did not understand why they were laughing so hard. It was not until later when I had the opportunity to read and digest the quote above, that the meaning became clear. “You can just replace the word *revolution* with the phrase *getting a house*, in Chairman Mao’s original statement about revolution, and you’ll get the picture of the most crucial urban problem here in Shanghai,” he said.

It may be that I read too much into this rhetorical question, especially as both of us were eating dinner when he expressed it – so perhaps it could just be that he thought of something congruently jovial vis-à-vis the context of our interaction. Even so, how Teacher Hu went on to cite the entire quotation and not just the catchy first part that everybody knows, I felt was telling because the way in which his version of the quote poetically combines two extreme ideas: the spirit of high socialism, and a contemporary problem brought by capitalism. Like the Chairman, Teacher Hu believed that difficulty, hardship, and some level of struggle were necessary for the achievement of a peaceful formation of a new family, as he followed up, “it is unfortunate that most young people can’t easily buy a house today; and what that means is that you just have to do everything – and through every possible means – without feeling too much guilt, to get there.”

In urban China today, purchasing a house is felt as the most critical social pressure among young white-collar workers. This pressure, however, is a relatively new phenomenon, as many of the properties owned by current homeowners actually came inexpensively. The residents of Shanghai employed during the first four decades of the Communist regime were guaranteed a place to live by their work units. When many of the work units were dissolved between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, the local government was eager to do away with the burdensome responsibility of
maintaining these so-called “public housing (gōngfáng) estates” from the work unit era. Therefore, the government sold the apartments to the residents at a low price (see Bloomberg News 2013a).

During this period, Shanghainese residents, in essence if not in name, inherited and were able to own the property. During the first decade of the reform, this inheritance did not create a sharp difference between those who legally owned homes and those who did not because economic activities were still being suppressed by national politics, as Shanghai was the center of turmoil during the Cultural Revolution (1966 – 1976).³⁰

It was only after 1992, as the historian Marie-Claire Bergé (2009) observes, that Shanghai began to unleash its full economic and productive potential when given the green light not only to engage in an economic development program but to become the head of the dragon (see also Brook 2013; Macpherson 1994). After this first phase of economic development, the discrepancy between owning and not owning a house became more and more apparent, as those who owned a house could sell or rent it out to migrants coming from other cities to work in Shanghai. As my informants have observed, the structural discrimination by the Shanghainese residents against those who do not own houses began in the mid-1990s.

Returning to the Marriage Market at People’s Square, a couple thousand anxious Shanghainese parents, many with handwritten “ads” providing some basic information about their children, were in attendance for the opportunity to meet one another regularly on weekends. Reading each other’s small ads, they were keen to start a conversation with one another if they liked what they saw on

³⁰ Shanghai was the epicenter of the so-called “Gang of Four politics” (sī rèn bāng dé zhèng zhí) where basically a group of four party elites, led by Mao Zedong’s wife, Jiang Qing, used to initiate, execute, and implement the Cultural Revolution in order to compete for power upon Mao’s death. See Baum (1994).
each other’s ads. The origin of the English non-literal translation of the Chinese “blind date corner” (xiangqinjiao) to “marriage market” (jiejun shichang) may have owed its origin to the uncanny resemblance to how this whole operation may have appeared to foreigners, and mainly foreign journalists and correspondents, who visited the place in its early days around the early 2000s. The mandatory pieces of information on these ads were always the place of origin of the children, the year they were born, income, educational level, and occupation, as these are the basic facts that they assume were necessary to know before having a tête-à-tête about the possibility of a future meeting. On the bottom half of the page, expectations (yaoqiu) of potential partners were provided; these included how old the potential partners should be, their income, height, and – usually most importantly – whether or not possessing a house was a requirement. In addition, if there was a four-character contemporary idiom “you are the one” (fei cheng wu rao) written at the bottom of the ads, it meant that you should not even try to contact this person if you do not meet his or her (usually her) expectations. Not surprisingly, these expectations were often, if not always, that the person is from Shanghai and owns a house.

**Traditionalism as a Way of Getting Everything**

On the surface, what seems to be at play here is the return of traditional values. At a deeper level, however, as the anthropologist Matthew C. Gutmann (2015) observes, the Marriage Market phenomenon may appear, at least superficially, similar to the traditional custom of arranged marriage in which the bride or the groom had little or no say on the matter in ancient China. As reported in this ethnographic survey, it was the “pressure” brought about by modern life that was the culprit for the difficulty in getting a marriage partner. Therefore, the harking back to traditional values seems to come about as a response to modern pressures. Indeed, the most common motivation that the
parents mentioned when asked the reason for coming to the Marriage Market was the sentiment that they would have to return to the traditional parental role in order to help their “busy children” succeed in their personal life. According to what the parents had to say about this parental role, it seems as though the children completely had their own agency in finding the right partners for themselves, and the parents were “just helping” (jiu shi bangzhu). Taking into account the privileged upbringing of China’s singleton generation, the relentlessly busy urban way of life, and the solitude (often as a result of the emphasis on the individual’s interest in the process of upbringing, and of a bachelor’s life in a contemporary society) it might be possible to see how they might accept their parent’s support in finding the right partner. These three factors are in fact the findings from my own ethnographic research with about two hundred children who were aware of their parents’ involvement in their prospective martial affairs. Zhu Laoshi, one of the matchmakers to whom I was close during my research, spoke ardently about how he made money as a hongniang:

The children also know that whomever they bring home has to be approved by the parents. Since the children are not financially independent, they have to listen to their parents – this is why most of my clients are open about the fact that their children also know that they are at the Marriage Market on their behalf.

This phenomenon goes against Yan Yunxiang’s idea of a modern courtship, love, and premarital sex, in which he argues that the “triumph” (2002) of free-choice marriages is a global development, and that China is “no exception” (the specific noun that he loves to use, also in Yan 1997). Socialist control may have brought about freedom of marital choice, amidst the structure of traditional belief regarding gender roles in the backdrop. As we have seen in the story of Teacher Hu and his wife, this freedom did not lead him to aspire to find his partner by himself, but instead to the belief that the most sustainable marriage was the one that sat on the solid ground of socioeconomic compatibility, with the deep foundation resting on the bedrock of obligation to the couple’s immediate circles of kin. His story might be of a different generation, but this sentiment seems to
have passed down to his daughter who also got married for the “pragmatic reason” stated above. In the high socialist era, as the allocation of housing was provided by the state, there was not a strong association between housing and the meaning of being the head of the family. With the liberation of women in the workforce, the important position of the head of the family was no longer completely in the hands of the men. In Shanghai, in particular, there is a popular stereotype that the men are those who “cook, wash, and do all the chores,” while the women are the ones who command (He 2011).

Historical studies have attempted to identify the root of this norm, which seems to present a stark contrast to that of other parts of China, which are largely male-dominated. For instance, in northern China, men are traditionally the breadwinners, and therefore, by default, the leaders of the household. Houses, as tangible assets, became important in the era of economic reform, when they were sold or rented to residents at a negligible price so that the state could eliminate the cost of maintenance of the property, putting the basic responsibility of maintaining one’s wellbeing through the maintenance of physical living conditions back in the hands of the household. With the macroeconomic program focusing on export-led industries and taking advantage of the existing industrial infrastructure in Shanghai, the city became a hotbed for burgeoning industries and jobs, especially the service-sector that demands a large number of employees and yields a substantial return on capital. With the rising demand for non-Shanghainese to move to Shanghai to find jobs, the opportunity for the local Shanghainese who possess the housing assets becomes obvious. Those who do not jump on the bandwagon are missing the opportunity of, basically, “turning nothing into gold,” since the houses are in strong demand and therefore tradable assets. Making money from housing provided for free may already sound as though my landlord was taking advantage of the system, but there were many such stories. For instance, his neighbors had a similar room to his – a
bedroom on the third floor. After his neighbor had moved out to live with his children, they
renovated the bedroom and rented it out to a foreigner for 6,000 yuan (about US$1,000) – this for a
room that was, also, given to them at no cost.

So, to conclude, (Yan 2002: 48) may not be wrong that conjugality has trumped the traditional mode
of marriage-by-introduction; yet, the “systemic” issue with the structural inequality brought about by
the economic reforms is the reason behind the return of the inclination to subscribe to the
traditionalistic practice of marriage: this new form of “marriage-by-parental-advice,” as opposed to
marriage-by-introduction, or arranged marriage, is a re-interpretation of the tradition to fit into the
context of a contemporary Chinese society where, as Matthew Gutmann (2015) observes, there is a
series of paradoxes: tradition versus modernity, filial piety versus autonomy, and, especially for men,
wen (literary and mental) versus wu (physical and martial). A house is a physical object, the acquisition
of which requires both mental as well as physical strength to compete and succeed in a process that
is by no means “a dinner party.” Perhaps, what this chapter just begins to touch upon is a series of
“why” questions regarding urban life, such as: “Why are there so many single people in Shanghai?,”
“Why do Shanghainese not like non-Shanghainese?”, “Why do people go to the Marriage Market?” to
name a few. Another way of putting this might be: Why are Shanghainese so partial towards fellow
Shanghainese? Or Why are non-Shanghainese discriminated against by local Shanghainese? As I
have shown, the non-Shanghainese, especially men, are discriminated against owing to their
difficulty providing a house but why is it important that brides be Shanghainese? Given that
hypergamy is the norm and the bride can be of lower status than the groom without causing a
significant loss of face to the groom’s family. The women and their parents selectively revert back to
the traditional belief in the financial superiority of men, at least on the surface, in order to protect
their economic interests. That is, families of Shanghainese brides want to ensure that their assets will
be protected and that they will also get access to what the grooms and the grooms’ families will bring. The men who do not have the economic capital to fulfill these demands, therefore, “emancipate” themselves from this system not because of their disbelief in the tradition, but rather because of the unrealistic financial expectations imposed on them by the traditionalist modernity of urban China. My assumption lies precisely in this structural conflict between various ideological and pragmatic regimes of urban life that make it difficult for a person to be completely liberated to engage in his or her own personal agenda.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I use the basic building block of the family as a unit of analysis, to reveal the tension and dynamic between maintaining traditional values and living in a contemporary society – and how this tension plays a structural role in the manipulation of the real estate market. Encompassing all three aspects of the urban – urbanization (as process), urbanity (as condition), and urbanism (as way of life) in the emerging economy of urban China – I examined urban residents’ strategies of dealing with the shift toward a better quality of modern life while trying to maintain a deep, meaningful connection to traditional Chinese identity, namely how the traditional value of marriage plays a role in shaping an urban community. As my close examination of parents’ perceptions of their involvement in helping their children find partners reveals, there seems to be a duality of purpose: These parents often believe that direct parental involvement in matchmaking solidifies their (and their children’s) connection to Chinese tradition. At the same time, this same “tradition” reinforces a sense of modernity, since it is viewed by the parents as a way to relieve their busy, working children of the hassle of finding a spouse. At a deeper level, the underlying factor leading to increasing demand for marriage markets – both physical and online, is indicative of both the parents’ and
children’s constant battles to maintain and maximize their opportunities in a modern economy, as well as to gain acceptance from others – both of which have intrinsic relations with home ownership, and therefore the real estate market.

A widely accepted explanation for the steady rise in real estate prices across mega cities in China is precisely the lingering impact of traditional Chinese values (Davis 2010; Guilford 2013a; Ren 2014a). The possession of a house serves as both a form of psychological fulfillment and a rite of passage for newly married couples who typically remain in the homes of their parents until marriage. In addition, as the interest rates for fixed deposits has been kept low by the central bank while the demand for housing in the city has been constantly rising, many urban residents also see home ownership as a major form of investment. Hence, the housing market is kept intact by the demand of the wealthy and as a result, those who are in greatest need pay a very high price. That said, the opportunity to purchase a house is only accessible to residents with household registrations, most of whom are local residents.

In the case of Shanghai – China’s largest city – from which I derive most of my ethnographic data, offspring of marriageable age tend to submit to some extent to the authority of their parents in the selection of their spouses, since parents are the would-be funders of the newlyweds’ home. As is the case with residents of marriageable age in China’s first-tier cities, the young Shanghainese are discouraged by their parents from marrying non-Shanghainese or “outsiders.” These parents often claim that cultural differences lead to the “incompatibilities” between local Shanghainese and outsiders in intimate relationships. The more convincing argument, however, is a socioeconomic one: that these so-called outsiders do not possess a home and a household registration – two things
that, I argue, have physical importance to the individual and are critical symbols to the maintenance of “face” for the couples’ families.

In particular, men not only face the pressure of traditional mores requiring them to possess a home, they must also contend with their lack of ability to acquire other economic and cultural capital. In Shanghai, the anxieties of single life find expression in various forms and on multiple platforms such as online dating, open internet discussions on issues relating to sexuality, and in the mass media. The most revealing expression of this anxiety is what is known to western audiences as the “marriage market” where parents of unmarried young adults meet on a regular basis with the hope of finding appropriate matches for their offspring. When asked about the most important criterion for a potential husband for their daughter, most, if not all, parents answer “he must have a house.” The connection between the marriage and property markets is revealed through the understanding of how urban residents choose to maintain selective aspects of tradition in the face of the inevitable pace of modern life in a society like that of Shanghai’s.
Figure 27: An image capturing a typical ambience in the main lane of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood on a nice day. This is my favorite photograph. Photograph: author
Concluding Remarks:
What Really Matters

How does one maintain a sense of sympathy toward another when one’s own livelihood is also at risk? In other words, how does one deal with the constant battle between one’s inner sense of right or wrong, and one’s desire to maintain some sense of security for oneself and one’s immediate family?

In one vivid moment during my fieldwork, I was asked by an informant Mrs. Gu to tell her “everything I know about Shanghai.” Caught completely off guard, I was not sure what to make of the question considering that such a question should have come from me – an anthropologist who had traveled halfway around the globe to Shanghai to conduct ethnographic research – rather than from a local resident from whom I should be learning. It was at this moment that I realized that my preconception of a once traditional socialist urban community, in which at least two generations of residents had lived together in harmony since the beginning of the high socialist era in 1949, might have been oversimplified. This informant had moved into the neighborhood in the 1970s, as a young teenager accompanied by her parents. She did not completely reveal the background of how her parents were able to move from the outskirts of the city into an urban neighborhood that was considered to be “more prestigious” owing to Shanghai’s rich engagement with capitalism. What was
revealed, however, was how insecure she had been after her work unit was dissolved in the early 1990s, and that the only asset left in her possession was a small room in a neighborhood about whose history she knew little. Exacerbating her sense of security were also the rapid changes in the urban landscape around her as a result of what many would like to call the “great urban transformation” (Hsing 2010) and the very fact that she did not know what would happen to her and her family when this process of change had arrived at her doorstep. It was after I had gotten to know her personally, and to know her social circle, that it became clear to me the implication of the question that she posed, that the past had political potential in her struggle to foresee the future. But, why? And more importantly how?

In China, where all land and major banks belong to the government, and political participation from below is limited, citizens seek various ways to prove their right to be in a certain place through their personal narratives. Often the justification for the reclamation of land from the citizens is “legitimated” but only in the name of a weakly defined “common good.” To empower herself in this opaque process, Mrs. Gu wanted her narrative to have to do with the patriotic past of her family, i.e., how they had put their heart and soul into serving the Chinese Communist Party and were therefore rewarded with the right to housing in the neighborhood. Although she knew that many of her neighbors had (somewhat but not always) succeeded in using this type of narrative to protect themselves from unfair treatment by the local government, she also knew that an incoherent narrative could also have the reverse effect on how the local government would see her. Some of her neighbors, she claimed, “did not get anything” when they were asked to move because they lacked a narrative of how they “actually got the house” in the first place. Rooted in Mrs. Gu’s memory was a muddled together sense of self-preservation and collective morality formed during the Cultural Revolution, which, to her, was the period of time that nobody would want to talk about, “but we all
‘sort of’ knew what was happening.” In other words, she believed that people without a clear purpose to survive and a clear stance on doing everything to achieve that goal could not have survived the Cultural Revolution. Because of this mentality that, according to Mrs. Gu, “one needed to have to survive,” Tranquil Light was occupied by many residents who did unpleasant things to others in order to take possession of their houses. Cultural Revolution encouraged the subverting mixture of victimizers and victims. Moreover, the more she could tie her narrative to that of the state’s, the more she was likely to benefit from it. When she had found out that I was doing research on Shanghai from various perspectives, especially history, and urban planning, and that I was a temporary resident of the neighborhood, she welcomed an outsider like me to fill her in on the parts of history that she did not know. This was a strange encounter that eventually led to a friendship between Mrs. Gu and me. While I was learning from her about everyday life in the neighborhood, she was extrapolating what might be useful to her from the history of western architecture in Shanghai and literature on the critiques of socialism (to which she could not get access in the PRC) that I had shared with her. She would then use this particular knowledge to demonstrate to her neighbors, and to various government agents, not only a sense of attachment to place in relation to the state’s narrative on historic preservation, but also, her complete and productive cooperation, whether it be preservation itself or urban development involving displacement. Mrs. Gu’s political expressions are deeply rooted in her local moral world shaped by both her history and her constant battle with uncertainty. “We all create fiction in order to survive; some of us pretend more than others but do we have a choice?” Mrs. Gu said. Like some other informants of mine, Mrs. Gu lived in a traditional neighborhood and used her knowledge of tradition to perform “traditionalism as a way of life” (Non 2013) to show her legitimate place in the hardly legitimate process of urban change broadly defined by the coalition between the officials vetting the deals and the real estate developers to maximize the economic output of land, the most valuable national asset. It was also
this moment that I realized that my role in the community was more than just that of a participant observer. I was helping my informant equip herself with a “weapon of the weak” (Scott 1985). When I asked Mrs. Gu if she had ever thought about the possible ramifications of the fictional story she had created, she looked right at me with intimidating confidence as she gave a short, pointed response: “What’s right is whatever works.”

Through ethnography, my hope is for this dissertation to present a rigorous attempt to integrate anthropological and architectural knowledge to understand the deeper issues we are facing in the world today: The world being constantly shaped and reshaped by urbanization and globalization. For the former, I deal with how the local system of morality is informed by the history and collective experience of the community – what Arthur Kleinman (2011) calls the “local moral world.” Increasing urban population brings in people from different ethical codes to live with one another. Both the locals and the new residents force themselves to manage their moral differences daily. In a physical space, I unpack how a local moral world, or a bounded domain where daily life is understood as the manifestation of moral principles, informs the residents’ performance of their “ways of life” (Wirth 1938).

For globalization, the particular aspect that I deal with is what Michael Herzfeld (2004) terms the “global hierarchy of value” or the constructed system of value influenced by Euro-ethnocentrism. Ultimately, I only believe that the understanding of social relations and cultures of the urban world which we are moving toward must be understood in the realm of space, which is precisely where knowledge from architecture and urban planning could be instrumental. Because it is the people that shape the space, we need ethnographic knowledge of those engaged in the process to understand fully such transformations. In other words, to understand space and place, we need both theoretical
knowledge of what makes space social and practical knowledge of the habitability of the built environment in which social interactions take place. Through housing, the most fundamental and physical need for an urban entity, the goal of this dissertation is to gain a sense of place by understanding the underpinning of the conflicts brought about by different external forces that shape the physical space and the attitudes of its residents.

The problem I had when viewing the same phenomenon through the lens of architecture alone was that it tended to both oversimplify social dynamics, and placed too much emphasis on the possibility of physical intervention. At the end of the day, architects make their living by creating plans for building erection; hence, the drive to get the project built sometimes overshaows the intention to design a built environment that would, in its honest way, benefit the users. The most dangerous issue with this approach, I believe, is that architects are doing much more damage than they would if such intervention would take place after we are able to see the full picture of the interactions among the potential clients of the built environment. Nonetheless, architecture is not completely useless. It gives the theoretical and ethnographic investigation of anthropology both a professional sensibility and technical understanding of space and technology with which the architecture has been built. What anthropology helps to bring to the surface is precisely that critical understanding of the forms and contents of social interactions. For instance, the physical front-to-back orientation of the parallel rows of the lilong houses has an impact both on the nature of the social interactions among neighbors as well as the particularity of the sense of safety through the constant surveillance that such orientation reinforces. “Unless you are in your room with your curtain pulled down, you’d feel as if everyone is watching you,” Mrs. Gu said. Fusing them together, I understand not only in the abstract term but in terms of how the physical body reacts to it as well as how the physical space blurs or intensifies the personal boundaries of the public and private. In terms of policy implications,
I am arguing that housing is not only one of the most important human rights and forms of security in urban China, but it is also the key to China’s social stability and economic growth. Providing access to housing for urban residents who contribute their labor to the city’s economic engine should be one of the state’s main economic policies.

For the said purpose, I have chosen Shanghai as a case study owing both to my familiarity with the city where I have been conducting research on multiple aspects of its urbanization, and its quality as a remarkable exemplar of how forces of both urbanization and globalization can shape an urban place.

**Urbanization and Structural Violence**

Although Shanghai was made a special economic zone only in the early 1990s, the process of urban growth since then has proven to be both swift and effective. In only a decade, Shanghai’s economic growth had caught up with other special economic zones whose process of urban transformation to absorb large populations of laborers had begun a decade earlier. Geographically, on the one hand, Shanghai’s boundary is porous. Temporary migrants and white-collar workers from other cities, temporary visitors and foreign residents alike come and go with ease with the encouragement of the local government to make use of their labor and creative capacity. In the case of foreigners, their presences help to bring to life a sense of cosmopolitanism. Administratively, on the other hand, Shanghai is insular, as the strict household registration regime still benefits only those who happened to reside in Shanghai before the economic reform and opening up, and their offspring. The “Shanghai hukou” has enabled these “native Shanghainese residents” to possess desirable assets – a house – which they could turn into cash, or hold as forms of frozen currency to trade at the right
time. In this dissertation, I have argued that this preferential treatment of these “native Shanghainese residents” is counterproductive. To the city as a whole, considering the current market economy and bank lending system that favors residents with housing assets, this attitude on home ownership exacerbates the problems that the city is already facing about housing provision. The current macroeconomic policy still favors an export-led and service economy that is continuing to pull migrants to find work in Shanghai while default home ownership gives the locals both passive income and the opportunity for them to use that income to invest further in the housing market – at the expense of the migrants who are deprived of both affordable housing and rights in the city of which they, like the locals or even more in most cases, contribute their labor to economic growth.

To many critics not only is this structural violence against the non-Shanghainese unjustified, but the cunning economic mindset of the local Shanghainese, whose excessive self-preservation contributes to debated issues regarding urban civility, exacerbates this violence. Policies initiated by the local government with the hope of curbing this form of so-called “structural violence” (Farmer, et al. 2006) against those who do not possess household registration such as taxes on capital gains for second homes and special permission for “creative” entrepreneurs to rent formerly restricted spaces from the residents have been met with challenges, as I have shown in Chapter Six.

As shown throughout this dissertation, urban development could also intensify the tensions among the old residents, as well as between them and the newcomers. For instance, in the neighborhood where I conducted my fieldwork, there has been a dramatic change in the social structure of the community, especially in the past decades, as well as the way of life introduced by new residents drawn to the superficially decent-looking building façades of the lilong. Previously, it would not have been an exaggeration to say that the three thousand residents of this particular neighborhood “knew” (or knew of the existence of) each other because most of the public amenities such as
telephones, bathrooms, kitchens, and hot water boilers were shared. Today, residents only know their neighbors in their own branch lane. “Because people are moving in and out very rapidly, most people here are now strangers to us,” said a senior citizen in the community.

Coming hand in hand with urbanization is the globalizing process, as a result of the establishment of transnational companies bringing in a new economic regime along with what Leslie Sklair (1995 [1991]) calls the “transnational capitalist” class, whose diverse sets of values and the technology that they bring has had an impact on the transformation of an urban place by way of generic globalization. Shanghai has been through this process. The globalizing process from the top-down has shaped the urban landscape to suit the needs of both the service as well as the manufacturing sector; hence, both vertical (for the service sector) and horizontal (for the manufacturing) expansions of the city have resulted. Looking at the skyline of central Shanghai, one can clearly see the references to the skylines of other established “global cities” such as London and New York, which is the globalizing process that can be felt by everyone including temporary visitors. It is clear from the process of urban expansion in the past three decades – the culmination to date being the building of the new Lujiazui CBD and the Expo’10 – that the local government wants to make Shanghai China’s global city. This global city is a state narrative that the residents not only are expected to believe and support, but also directly and collaterally gain from the economic growth brought about by their compliance. But at whose expense? In general, contrary to the popular perception that the elders in Shanghai are opposing Shanghai’s transformation into a truly international city, local Shanghainese feel enthusiasm for what this “global city aspiration” might bring.
Globalization from Below, and from Within

Nonetheless, the impact of the other form of globalization, the so-called “globalization from below,” is not clearly felt. As Gordon Mathews et. al. (2012) have argued, because this process can be defined by the transnational flow of people and goods involving small amounts of capital in the myriad of informal, and sometimes semi-legal, extra-legal or even illegal, transactions, it is natural for the government not to want it to be clearly felt and known. Commonly associated with the developing world, such as the sales of counterfeited goods and technologies (Lin 2011b), the nature of this process of globalization from below gives the local government, even more, reason to want to make its existence obscure. This globalization from below has a profound impact on shaping the locals’ attitudes about the world in which we are living, and about the sets of values in which they claim to believe.

The so-called “creative industry” (which, as I argued in this dissertation, should be better understood as “value-added entrepreneurship”) flourished as a result of the local government promoting it both as a means for local residents to earn extra income, as well as for it to project the image of a globalizing city to the international community (He and Gebhardt 2013; Law 2012; Wang 2011). The product of this engagement in the spatial terrain that Shanghai has to offer is the combination of the subsequent creation of transnational social spaces, and qualitatively new forms of cosmopolitanism, which is precisely what globalization from below could do best to deliver cosmopolitanism to a larger population with swiftness and sensible impact. The most illustrative impact is what I call “gentrification from within” or the process by which the demographic change of a particular neighborhood still involves capital investment and cultural reproduction, yet in a way that brings new forms of productive engagement between the local (residents) and the globalizing
cosmopolitans. In this process, by renting out their spaces to new residents engaging in value-added entrepreneurship, the locals themselves then become the key actors in the diversification – not the homogenization, as is the case with typical classic gentrification – of the neighborhood. What my study has shown is how the interplay between both top-down globalization and globalization from below is saving a traditional lilong neighborhood such as the one studied in this dissertation from being completely commercialized (and “Disney-fied”) or from being left to deteriorate physically, inviting the bulldozers to take it down.

The public had only begun to pay attention to the housing typology known as the lilong when most of them had been razed during the first two decades after the economic reform owing to the Eurocentric value associated with the notion of heritage. While this value was not new, as many scholars and foreigners had written widely about the impressions of the lilong, the tipping point for it to play a role in the making of the preservation program to follow were both the government’s endorsement of the lilong as a legitimate representation of “Shanghai’s urban heritage,” and the success of commercial projects that used this particular value as a selling point. Adding to the public awareness of the lilong have been the presences of foreigners whose attention to this particular kind of housing has made the local residents themselves interested in learning more about what they hitherto saw as simply old as opposed to historic structures. The presence of these foreigners, to the locals, represent some sense of internationalization, and the scarcity of this housing typology today also makes living in a lilong house more “special” than ever before. In their local moral world, residents made the connection between the state’s narrative and their assets in order to extract the maximum benefit from the fixed assets that they have – houses in lilong neighborhoods.
At the center of my search to “locate” Shanghai here is housing, which I argue, is the most fundamental element of urban China. As this dissertation shows, to the residents of Shanghai housing is not only the physical accommodation, but also the symbolic capital that gives the residents a sense of security, sense of personhood, and limited power to negotiate with larger societal structures. This power has had a profound impact at all levels in the life of urbanites, from how they see themselves as citizens, parents, children, and potential marriage partners. The reaction to this sort of discursive power is what puts housing at the center of all negotiations. “What do Shanghainese talk about when they talk about just about everything?” Mrs. Gu asked me. Despite the quasi-tricky tone, I knew that it was not a trick question, and the answer she gave? “A house,” she then answered herself. But was this anxiety new, and brought about exclusively by the market economy? Owing to the economic policy that by design promotes discrimination over certain groups of people, housing is at the center of both the state’s policy on economic growth and the conflict between residents with different household registrations, social classes, and ethnic origins. Housing encompasses all three aspects of the urban, the defining characteristic of the city today, namely, urbanization (as a process), urbanity (as a condition), and urbanism (as a way of life).

Examining housing puts under scrutiny urban residents’ strategies of dealing with the shift toward an arguably better quality of modern life while trying to maintain a deep, meaningful connection to traditional Chinese identity. For a society in which the notion of private property had been the cradle of its social organization, complicating the notion of housing further is the trajectory of Chinese politics and economy. Anxiety over the decollectivization of housing distribution and maintenance in the decade after the start of the economic reform, while the dust of the mess created by Cultural Revolution had yet to settle, had caused the residents to feel uncertain about the implications of their home ownership. These lilong houses had legitimate owners during the full-
fledged treaty port era. Most of the houses in question in this research had been occupied by “capitalists” as well as residents who worked for the system, only to be confiscated, divided, and redistributed among the workers during the peak of collectivism. In the following decades, these houses would be at the center of conflicts between neighbors who had to try to live together despite their different cultural beliefs, the owners who bought the houses and those who had the legitimate right under the CCP’s housing distribution mandate to live in the houses. During the first decade following the economic reform, these houses again would return to the hands of private owners under the banner of market capitalism. Over the next three decades, the population of Shanghai would double, encouraging the new forms of housing that would inevitably dominated by the market.

Policy Implications

An anthropologist’s successful translation and account of another people’s beliefs, norms, and actions implies that there is some shared space, some shared notions of intelligibility and reasoning (rationality) between the two parties (Tambiah 1990: 121).

During my first few months conducting research in Shanghai, I was constantly challenged by one of “the questions” that almost every one of my key informants had for me: “As an anthropologist (renleixuejia) what exactly do you do?” As I tried to explain to them the “technical descriptions” of what anthropology should be about, I was met with even more puzzled expressions. Eventually, I gave up and told them the simplest possible way to explain what I thought was the role of anthropologists. By using the famous words of Julius Caesar as a template, I uttered, “I came, I saw, I criticized, I left” (wo lai, wo kan, wo pipan, wo zou). This particular description (which sounded much more poetic in Mandarin Chinese) to my surprise, almost always brought laughter among my neighbors. As tongue-in-cheek as it might sound, this description was something to which my
informants could relate. I might be the first anthropologist that they had met and got to know, but before me there had been many researchers, journalists, and other academic professionals who simply “came, saw, criticized, and left” them. Whether or not it was unconscious of me to come up with such a simplistic yet somewhat true of this description, this particular stance of anthropology is the one with which I most disagree. There is such a view in anthropology that one can study social interactions in a qualitatively deep and meaningful way without taking a political stance. Like many anthropologists who have argued otherwise (Low and Merry 2010), I do not believe that is possible.

I had set out to pursue this project with an open mind, but with a political stance that was proto-subalterns as often, if not always, is the case in classic “studying down” anthropological research. With what initially brought me to anthropology in the first place, as discussed in Introduction, which was my passion for making a difference in the world through the use of anthropological knowledge, however, I see providing policy suggestions as an obligation.

First and foremost, fairer access to housing for those who live in the city, therefore, should, needless to say, be the priority of the local government if it wants Shanghai to maintain its livability and attraction, whether cultural or commercial. The current housing situation is, as many analysts have argued, dire, and the unequal treatment of those who do not have access to housing could only take the structurally long-brewing conflicts between residents of different social classes and household registration statuses to the tipping point. In terms of policy implementation, fairer – if not equal – access to housing is key to not only economic growth, but also the development of the citizens’ sense of belonging, collective interest, and social unity. If social unrest is what the CCP is hoping to prevent, fairer access to housing is a crucial part of the solution to this problem.
Second, what to do with the lilong houses? Although it has been true since the last decade of the 20th century that the Shanghai government regards historic preservation of select sites as essential to the branding of a city with global ambitions, it has been proven to be the case that there is still little consideration when it comes to how the proper treatment of existing residents of said “historical monuments” fits into the government’s overall preservation program for those sites. As shown in this dissertation, what is most obvious is how the residents are “forced to live in the past,” in dilapidated historic structures that they have no legal right to alter to improve their living conditions. Further exacerbating the problems that these residents are facing is the planned isolation of these historic sites from one another. Walking around the city, one may easily be wondering why “designated historic structures” are not clustered in groups, but instead scattered around the city. It is not a secret that the Shanghai government takes a “pragmatic approach” to historic preservation, by hiring local academics to conduct a study to evaluate the quality of the buildings, and then handpicks “worthy” structures to preserve. This method, in turn, has been making those structures noted/categorized as “unworthy” available for immediate demolition. Some historians have pointed out that the criterion used to evaluate these structures may be oversimplified, as they either focus on the exterior appearance of the edifices or the history of famous celebrities whose historic presence could render these structures “public attractions.” Hence, we get many so-called “preserved historic sites” left in the middle of surrounding high-rise buildings, and the remaining residents, who are mostly elderly, would be left to confront this daunting encroachment outside the gates of their communities. These residents used to shop at cheap street markets, but because of the new urban developments, they increasingly find themselves surrounded by high-rises where fruits and vegetables in their modern supermarkets cost ten times more; the same applies to the social life the residents used to share with the neighbors from nearby communities. Once the network of cross-community neighbors has disappeared, the remaining residents are unable to maintain a sense of
neighborhood. Whether or not this was intentional on the part of the local government, this pattern of isolating the preserved neighborhoods has had a profound effect on the residents’ sense of personhood, and in many cases has eventually driven them to live elsewhere.

That is to say, there has been little to no effort on the government’s part to maintain the sense of community these old neighborhoods have. The government’s primary focus has been on revamping the facade of the edifices, but it seems to have no particular interest in the living conditions of the residents. For instance, an admirable amount of investment was put into renovating a number of lilong neighborhoods to their original 1930s condition as part of the “Better City, Better Life” campaign for the World Expo in 2010. Many neighborhoods benefitted from this beautification campaign with new pavements, iron gates, brickwork, and so on. The living conditions of the residents, however, remained the same. Some residents spent their own savings to upgrade their homes – the very small rooms that were given to them two to three decades ago. Because not everyone had the money, however, while some residents may have wanted to stay on in the community, they may have also been left with no choice but to follow previous residents who had made good money by renting out their rooms to make extra income for their health care bills (and the kickbacks requested by the physicians) as well as supporting the marriage of their children and sometimes also the education of their grandchildren. Others unable to benefit from the process, either because of their personal family situation or the undesirable condition of their homes, had been put in a position where they could only grudgingly accept the unfairness.

Preservation should not automatically be embraced without casting a skeptical eye. Most of the residential architecture in Shanghai, especially the lilong, were not built to last this long. Most of the buildings were put together quickly for economic reasons and were built to last just a little under
fifty years (some of them were even made of wood) but they have been used for more than twice the length of their life expectancy. Given what we know about the social dynamics among the residents, there is a possibility for the preservation of both architecture and community culture together. Here I suggest two processes called group preservation and diversification from within. Affordability is key to livability and is usually a by-product of diversity. Affordability, I believe, is an ingredient in almost all great cities. London, for instance, may generally be expensive, but those who know the city well know exactly where to buy good and cheap products. The same applies to Manhattan. Shanghai has been ranked one the most expensive cities in the world while most of its residents are still living under much lower income per capita (at US$1,162.9; about four times lower than that of New York City). The issue here is, even though Shanghai technically belongs to everyone, no low-income residents are able to afford to live in it or even to engage productively with the city. For instance, if the only method of preservation is one that emphasizes architecture at the expense of older residents who become displaced (even if they want to be displaced for the money) we will end up with a proto-upper middle-class city that lacks diversity and community culture.

In this dissertation, I contend that preservation of architecture alone is insufficient. Diversity is also a key ingredient, as I do not believe that a winner-takes-all approach benefits the residents of the city. This also applies to the upper middle class who will also benefit from it. I believe that if we create a livable environment for the residents, they would want to stick around to tell stories of their past to the younger generation and newcomers to the city. Isn’t that what preservation is all about? In this dissertation, I have discussed at length the sense of safety – or the sense of security - in having neighbors looking out for each other. This sense of personal belonging and social cohesiveness comes from a well-defined neighborhood and narrow, crowded, multi-use streets. All great cities share in common the sense of personal belonging and social cohesiveness, which, in a
globalizing world, can only be created within a community that is open to social change and
diversity. In order to find a way between a community and historic preservation, cities must strike a
balance between preserving their heritage, and being open to change. Destroying heritage destroys
memory, community, and sense of place, while refusing to change can render the city a glamorous
but stultifying museum. In finding the ideal balance, we must operate from the paradigm that places
residents first. There is a limit to how many heritage buildings one can turn into trendy bars,
gimmicky restaurants, and luxury stores, which will be the case if preservation programs do not take
into account the importance of both the affordability and diversity of these neighborhoods. In other
words, how many times can we really go to Disney Land, and still enjoy it? I advocate the methods
of “group preservation” and “diversification from within,” which would require efforts from both
the local authorities and residents to work together. To find the correct balance between
preservation and change, both local authorities and residents need to have a mutual understanding
of the bigger picture and the ethnographic details of everyday life. Ultimately, what is a city but a
collection of diverse individuals drawn together? As Charles Montgomery (2013: 42) poignantly
reminds us: “Most of all, it [a city] should enable us to build and strengthen the bonds between
friends, families and strangers that give life meaning, bonds that represent the city’s greatest
achievement.” In cities which strike this balance, there is a heightened sense of vitality as residents’
participate in, what Jane Jacobs (1961) herself would call, an intricate “street ballet” – a pattern of
observable comprehensive human activity, that nourishes our sense of belonging and common
purpose.
What Really Matters

If man were wise, he would gauge the true worth of anything by its usefulness and appropriateness to his life.

Michel de Montaigne in *The Essays* (1993 [1580])

Anthropology, to me, is virtue ethics. In the spirit of Montaigne’s quote above, this understanding of anthropology is what I believe I have gotten out of my long and painstaking training in anthropological studies. As many great thinkers have pointed out, anthropologists arrive at their field site, observe, compare, criticize, and eventually leave the field site to locate themselves elsewhere to make sense, through writing, of the social interactions that they had witnessed firsthand to the larger audience. The product of this pursuit is all for the audience so they may have a better understanding of the otherwise easily misinterpreted social data. We have benefitted greatly, for the betterment of the society at least, from these anthropologists who have saved us from our natural oblivion of considering others to be inferior. What else, then, have I taken away from anthropology? My answer is, as stated above, virtue ethics, which is a branch of normative moral philosophy emphasizing the development of one’s characteristics. Anthropology does not inform our duty in society – the way deontological ethics does – nor does it provide a set of rules for evaluating the actions of others the same way in which the doctrine of consequentialism hopes to transform our way of thinking. Quite the opposite, it provides me with a thorough understanding of the way things may have been, probably are, and the social forms into which they could change. Personally, taking anthropology as virtue ethics makes me feel much calmer when encountering situations that, at first glance, may not seem right to my moral sensibility. Anthropology provides me with the framework to meditate my systematic understanding of particularity and accept other local moral worlds. Through the story of my ethnographic encounter in a community located in the heart of one of the world’s largest cities, this dissertation attempts to portray the moral dilemmas that millions of people
in China are facing as a result of the rapid urban transformation that has taken place in the past three decades.

In addition to the detailed analysis of the specific site, the contribution of this dissertation lies in how it further clarifies the role of anthropology, as a field of study, in our time. The importance of anthropology in urban settings – often called “urban anthropology” – is often undermined by other fields of study whose establishment began with questions regarding the city. The organic nature of interaction among urban citizens may have made it easier when evaluated through the lens of quantitative analysis. What would be missing by looking at such social interaction through this lens, however, is the nuance of the situation. Human beings live in a qualitative world, so why not use qualitative methods to understand their social interactions? Only by careful – and mindful – reading with patience and taking the observation as an end in itself, can light be shed on the social interactions that, on the surface, might look as though they are simply one collective form of interaction, but underneath which lies something else completely different.

What this dissertation is hoping to get beneath is the layer of quantitative economic analysis on the impact of urbanization and globalization. It is convenient to look at a set of numbers and decide whether or not a given city is the best place to live in, but as this dissertation has shown, the idea and sense of personhood is an important part of living in a city, and it can only be understood ethnographically, especially how one must deal with the duality of the sense of self-preservation on one side, and the collective interest of the whole on the other: all of which have been brought about by the process of unprecedented urban and social change. On a personal level, Shanghai will always

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31 For example, on paper, Shanghai is one of the world’s most advanced cities, with the largest mass transit system in the world, and a highly developed central business district plus nine satellite towns
have a place in my heart – after ten years of research there. For similar reasons, however, my love-hate relationship with the city may at some point, also, reach a tipping point. Toward the end of my fieldwork, I admittedly had begun to feel that the city was changing me into someone who I never was. It did so by changing other people around me, to pressure me, both directly and indirectly, into accepting the fact that in order to survive and make a living in Shanghai, I must become an accomplice of a counterproductive community where the sense of community itself was defined by nothing other than mandatory material reciprocity. Something that someone who always thought that the underpinning sense of community should always be about mutual respect, sympathy, and true unity under the basic idea of right and equality, could not comprehend let alone accept. It was unhealthy on all fronts, and it was not hard for me to say enough was enough for my fieldwork – after three years there. There is something about Shanghai that is attracting this kind of social interaction, which has always been the case since the end of the nineteenth century. Like many anthropologists, despite this love-hate relationship, I still hope to continue to conduct research in Shanghai. My true wish is to produce a long-term observation of the various processes of change that could shape the way we understand issues and problems that “really matter” (Kleinman 2006).

spreading across a landmass of 6,218.65 square kilometers (about 2,401.03 square miles) – about ten times the size of the entire city-state of Singapore. Anyone, however, who has ever been on Shanghai’s advanced transit system would know how overcrowded it is, and how the individual sense of self-preservation of each passenger plays a role in making the trip not only full of discomfort but also lacking a fundamental sense of civility. Moreover, the spreading of the residential areas, where the mass transit is needed most, does not always correspond with the locations of the stations. Hence, puzzling many qualitative analysts is precisely the fact that despite this extensive network of its mass transit system, residents with the city’s household registration still aspired to own private vehicles.
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