With at least one courtyard enclosed by four single-story buildings that face inward toward the open space, siheyuan represent the quintessential Chinese “courtyard houses.” Throughout China quadrangular courtyard structures come in many configurations, including many that are multistoried and others that have mere “skywells” with shafts of open space instead of broad courtyards. But siheyuan are best known because of their ubiquity in Beijing and other northern cities.

Classic siheyuan associated with Beijing and neighboring cities, where they are found in many configurations, are sometimes quite simple but more often rather complex in terms of layout. Virtually all siheyuan share canonical elements: enclosure behind high gray walls that afford substantial seclusion; a single off-center entry gate that controls access; orientation to the cardinal directions, with main structures facing south or southeast to ensure maximum sunlight and passive solar heating during winter; balanced side-to-side symmetry that represents a balanced aesthetic; and an organization of space along a clear axis that is associated with family hierarchy. Sumptuary regulations during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing dynasty (1644–1912), which were nonetheless often flouted, were supposed to regulate the overall scale of siheyuan dwellings by controlling the dimensions of timbers and thus the width of halls, the nature of entryways, and colors and other ornamentation. As a result, the siheyuan residences of nobles and imperial princes were generally clearly differentiated from those of merchants, who had the resources to build large siheyuan but were constrained by regulations from doing so, and the more modest structures of common people.

Early in the Qing dynasty scores of sprawling siheyuan manors of imperial princes existed in Beijing, the configurations of which were consistent with the codified sumptuary regulations appropriate to twelve princely ranks. For the most part, except for elements of the entryway, princely mansions could not be distinguished from ordinary siheyuan dwellings from the outside. But inside they replicated to some degree the facilities found in the Forbidden City, reduced, of course, in overall dimensions. Princess Der Ling, first lady-in-waiting to the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), wrote that “The houses in Peking are built in a very rambling fashion, covering a large amount of ground, and our former house was no exception to the rule. It had sixteen small houses, one story high, containing about 175 rooms, arranged in quadrangles facing the courtyard, which went to make up the whole; and so placed, that without having to actually go out of doors, you could go from one to the other by verandas built along the front and enclosed in glass” (Der Ling 1911). Manor-type siheyuan of this type became essentially extinct by the middle of the twentieth century: Some deteriorated, others were renovated to become the headquarters of institutions or multi-family dwellings for the poor, and many were demolished to facilitate the building of modern structures and roads. In the hutong lanes (narrow alleyways) surrounding the Shichahai and
Beihai lakes, remnants of some of these manors survive but mostly only in vestigial form.

The only site that is easily visited is just to the north of the Imperial City walls, where elements of the siheyuan manor of Prince Gong, the brother of the eighth Qing emperor Xianfeng, (reigned 1851–1861), the father of China’s last emperor, Puyi, still stand. The gardens of Gong Wang Fu, the palace of Prince Gong, were opened to the public in the late 1980s, displaying impressive rockeries and pavilions. Yet the sprawling old residence itself remained hidden, its manifold alterations and scars resulting from having been used after 1921 to house Furen Catholic University, then Beijing Normal University and the Chinese Music Academy, and finally the Beijing Air-Conditioning Factory during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). On the eve of the Olympics in 2008, the expansive mansion was reopened to the public.

**Typical Layout**

The layout of a relatively conventional siheyuan with its series of gates, open spaces, and independent structures can be seen in the siheyuan on Huguosi hutong, once the residence of Mei Lanfang, one of China’s preeminent Beijing Opera singers. A single entryway with a pair of large doors painted red along the southeast portion of the outer wall leads to a small vestibule with a light gray brick spirit wall, a partition that visually separates the outside from the inside. Turning left leads through another gate into

*Courtyard in a Garden in Shanghai, 1979. Virtually all courtyards share similar elements: enclosure behind high gray walls that offer substantial seclusion; a single off-center entry gate that controls access; and an orientation to the cardinal directions, with main structures facing south or southeast to ensure maximum sunlight and passive solar heating during winter. Photo by Joan Lebold Cohen.*
a “public” zone, a narrow rectangular open area used by servants, by visitors waiting to be announced, and by a busy household to store bicycles, briquettes for cooking, and other items. Two large deciduous parasol trees spread their branches over the narrow courtyard. On the south side of the courtyard, in which are planted two large shade trees, is a north-facing building called a dao zuo, or “rear-facing” structure. Facing the dao zuo is a “festooned gate,” or chui huamen, that leads to the inner central courtyard, although the view is blocked by a patterned screen wall.

Together the large inner courtyard and the rectangular one at the entry and another slender one on the west side of the residence make up more than 40 percent of the total ground area of this siheyuan. The interior courtyard, with trees and potted shrubs, serves as the center of family life. Tables and chairs from adjacent rooms can be moved into the courtyard for family members and their guests to enjoy sunny days and quiet evenings.

As with any classical siheyuan, the main hall, called a zhengtang, is a low, south-facing, single-story building on the northern side of the courtyard. Within this building the senior generation resides, with space for entertaining guests and family. Bedrooms and studies are also found here. Perpendicular to the main structure is a pair of flanking buildings, one facing east and the other west, normally used to house married sons and their families.

An important element of Beijing siheyuan is the set of narrow covered verandas that serve as all-weather passageways around the courtyards. Because the surrounding individual buildings are structurally separate, each side of
the quadrangle is entered and exited through a door facing the focal courtyard. Since no doorways interconnect any of the adjacent buildings that make up the courtyard complex, movement between buildings is most direct across the courtyard during fine weather.

**Decline and Fall**

Throughout Beijing after 1949 courtyard houses increasingly came to be shared by many unrelated families rather than continuing to be private dwellings for extended families. Once-commodious spaces were divided up, and courtyards filled in as “temporary” kitchens, bedrooms, and storage sheds. In time the essential organic core of many siheyuan, the courtyard itself, was obliterated by structures. Limits on running water, toilets, drainage, and maintenance in general led to the deterioration of the once-pride structures.

In 1990 authorities began demolition of siheyuan and hutong neighborhoods in general to facilitate the modernization of the city by eliminating substandard housing and rebuilding residential quarters to meet current needs. Quickly many residents raised alarms about the demolition of the city’s architectural patrimony. Residents of many ramshackle siheyuan dubbed them zayuan or “mixed-up courtyards” because of the dilapidated condition they were in and the fact that they were occupied by many households. Efforts by government authorities to conserve individual structures and neighborhoods have been slow and uneven. Private efforts have had some effect. After two decades of sweeping destruction of hutong neighborhoods, less than a thousand siheyuan have been designated for preservation. Even courtyards that seem “safe” because they are listed for preservation have sometimes been summarily demolished to the dismay of residents and preservationists.

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**Further Reading**


