

# Shikumen

Shíkùmén 石库门

**The old neighborhoods of Shanghai are characterized by the dense juxtaposition of narrow multi-storied residential buildings called *shikumen*. These iconic dwellings are packed tightly in neighborhoods that are often separated from each other by gates.**

Whereas in Beijing *siheyuan* are the quintessential courtyard dwellings, and *hutong* are the associated lane-neighborhood communities, in Shanghai the distinctive multistoried residences and neighborhoods are called *shikumen* and *lilong* (also *longtang*), respectively. Beijing's traditional urban fabric emerged over more than half a millennium, from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) onward, whereas Shanghai's emerged only during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus, it is not surprising that *shikumen* housing reveals a blend of Chinese and Western elements that reflect the city's emergence as China's most important entrepôt.

Built first to accommodate Chinese who were moving in large numbers from other places into the foreign concession areas in the nineteenth century, *shikumen* and *lilong* subsequently proliferated throughout the metropolitan area to meet the needs of those with different incomes even to the 1940s. Variations in structure and ornamentation, which are still observable today, reflect changing styles and varying real estate markets. Domestic urban architecture with a European flavor is found in other Chinese coastal and riverine cities, but *shikumen*

and *lilong* represent a uniquely hybrid house type and community.

*Shikumen* are the narrow, rectangular, multistoried dwellings found in densely packed *lilong* neighborhoods. Arranged like attached row houses along narrow lanes, each is characteristically narrow, linear, and compact. Most *shikumen* are three bays wide and constructed two or three stories in height of brick with partial wooden internal frames. On the ground floor the plan of a *shikumen*

---

***Shikumen*, small townhouses located off of narrow alleys, are the traditional building style of Shanghai. PHOTO BY TOM CHRISTENSEN.**



1970

typically includes a central main room and two secondary rooms, used usually as bedrooms, which open toward a small courtyard or skywell that admits light and exhausts heat. A staircase reaching to the second story is usually located at the back of the central room. In the rear, sometimes adjacent to a narrow skywell, are a kitchen and storage rooms. In some areas of Shanghai these rear rooms open onto a narrow service lane. Unlike in Beijing *hutong*, where one encounters horizontality created by the gray walls—with only decorated gates breaking the line—multistoried *shikumen* draw the eye upward to catch glimpses of variegated gables as well as tall, ornamented gates.

The entryway to individual *shikumen* is usually through a prominent stone gate with framing pillars as well as lintels and pediments above. The affinities with Western classic orders and carved or molded adornment in European styles are often striking. Frequently one encounters bold numbers above the doorway that indicate the year of construction, clearly a Western convention, while carved Chinese characters declare a name, which reveal its Chineseness.

*Lilong* neighborhoods are arranged in a hierarchy involving streets, lanes, sublanes, and individual *shikumen* that provides a layering of public space, semipublic space, semiprivate space, and private space. In the past gates and lanes served to modulate activities and define relationships. Neighborhood shops in *lilong* generally face outward along a series of broader streets. Set into the row of shops is typically a gate leading into the residential lanes and sublanes. It is especially in the lanes and sublanes that neighbors gather to socialize on hot evenings and during the day. Since many of the interior sublanes terminate as dead ends, their spaces are used by nearby residents as places to safely store bicycles and other belongings.

In recent years *lilong* neighborhoods with countless cramped *shikumen*, some beyond salvaging but many others still inhabitable, have been demolished to make way for contemporary high-rise residential and commercial buildings as well as improvements in transport infrastructure. In the wake of the extensive razing of old neighborhoods, more voices have belatedly been raised concerning conservation of the architectural fabric of Shanghai. Seen by some as a success and by others as a failure in conservation is Xintiandi, a high-profile development to adapt a neighborhood of *shikumen* as a shopping, dining,



**The multi-storied residential forms called *shikumen* and *lilong* are distinctive to Shanghai; like the *hutong* neighborhoods characteristic to Beijing, many are being demolished in the name of urban renewal.** PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

and entertainment area. Occupying a small fraction of a once-vibrant urban community now razed and uprooted, Xintiandi is in many ways a mere shell gutted and reconstructed to serve only commercial rather than mixed residential-commercial purposes.

**Ronald G. KNAPP**

## Further Reading

- Knapp, R. G. (2001). *China's old dwellings*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Luo Xiaowei, et al. (1997). *Shanghai long tang 上海弄堂 [Shanghai's lanes]*. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin meishu chubanshe 上海人民美术出版社.
- Zhang Xichang & Zhang Wei. (2001). *Lao longtang 老弄堂 [Old lanes]*. Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe 上海书店出版社.