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Gentrification from within: urban social change as anthropological process

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Based on ethnographic research in a traditional Shanghainese alleyway-house neighborhood (known locally as lilong) during 2013–2015, this study describes how knowledge of the global encourages pragmatic local residents to foresee a different future and voluntarily get involved in the process of urban renewal to enhance their own interests. This study unpacks the notion of architectural heritage as a selling point of dilapidated structures, which is the means through which local residents mobilize their knowledge to benefit themselves in the fight against local government authorities and the market economy. “Gentrification from within” is the concept that I develop in this paper to explain this unique process of demographic change involving capital investment and cultural reproduction, in which the original residents themselves are the key actors in the diversification of a traditional neighborhood.

Keywords: gentrification; architectural heritage; historic preservation; social change; Shanghai

Introduction

Tucked away from one of Shanghai’s busiest streets is the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, 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’s pedestrians have often walked past the entrance of this neighborhood without even realizing that it was there. The street on which the neighborhood is located is the spine of the city’s most commercially vibrant district. To the few who happen to notice the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, they may be puzzled by the fact that the place looks so different from the indistinguishable high-rise buildings surrounding it. Adding to this antiquated perception of the Tranquil Light is the presence of the neighborhood’s senior residents, mostly retirees in their 60s and 70s. The obvious question for many – including myself when I first visited the neighborhood – is how it can exist, given the skyrocketing real estate prices in such a prime business area of a global city and the speed of the “demolition and relocation” (cháiqián) pattern of urban redevelopment that has for decades been dominating the land development program in Shanghai (see Ong 2014; Shao 2013).

How could a low-rise neighborhood like this exist in the landscape of high-rise buildings in the global city of Shanghai? First, it could be the case that the municipal government of Shanghai has been successful in preserving the city’s diminishing historical structures (see Levin 2010; Ren 2008; Tsai 2008), in which case, the preservation of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood (fictitious name) would be an example of the government’s recent success in making room for the physical remnants of the city’s short

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history despite the dominance of rapid economic development that tended to favor tearing down the old and building up the new from the ground up (see Urban Land Institute 2014). Second, 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 the past two decades following the economic reforms, an increasing number of traditional neighborhoods in downtown Shanghai have been turned into commercial and retail districts, as well as hyper-luxury residential complexes (see Schaefer and Hyat 2013; Wu and He 2005) (Figure 1).

These answers are not completely off target. Nevertheless, they are rather simplistic, as evidenced by both the lack of maintenance in the fashion of a “historic preservation project” (Tsai 2008) and the presence of retired residents who do not look as if they were members of the gentrifying class. The municipal government’s preservation efforts may have been much more effective than those of a decade ago (Yang 2014); yet one of the major criticisms 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 (see Ren 2008). Since the overlapping point of skepticism concerning these two answers lies in the role of the new urban “gentry” in transforming the former working-class quarters, this paper takes the process of urban social change often referred to as gentrification as its theoretical point.

Figure 1. An aerial photograph of a surviving traditional Shanghainese low-rise neighborhood known locally as the lilong. This photograph shows this centrally-located neighborhood surrounded by high-rise buildings similar those surrounding the Tranquil Light Neighborhood. Photograph by Sue Anne Tay.
Gentri
cification was generally understood, initially in sociological literature (as in the
sociologist Ruth Glass who coined the term; see Glass 1964), as a process of demo-
graphic change by which the original working-class residents of a neighborhood are dis-
placed by new, usually individual, middle-class residents buying properties originally
belonging to working-class residents and renovating and improving them to conform to
middle-class tastes. According to this so-called “classic” gentri
fication, the process
would homogenize the social composition of the neighborhood. A handful of recent
social science writings (especially in Critical Geography and Social Anthropology, e.g.,
Harvey 2008; Herzfeld 2010; Pan 2011; Smith 2006) have associated the term gentri
fication with negative social change, such as how the privileged middle class use their
capital to push out the underprivileged (especially as pointed out in Smith 2002), mak-
ing such areas both demographically and culturally less diverse, and less accessible to
members of lower social classes (e.g., gated communities, see Low 2003).

In the case of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, the change in the demography of
the neighborhood could be observed in a form almost reverse to that of classic gentri
fication. Over the course of my fieldwork in the neighborhood, it became more diverse,
as the number of both foreign and non-Shanghainese residents increased. At its peak,
there were more than four hundred foreign and non-Shanghainese renters, out of the
total of approximately three thousand residents (most of whom had lived in the neigh-
borhood for at least two decades) registered as “regularly living in the neighborhood”
(changzhurenshu). With the advent of online peer-to-peer and list-find-rent (such as
AirBnB) lodging platforms, the actual number of renters in the neighborhood was diffi-
cult to determine. I began to re-visit my initial impression of this neighborhood when
my key informants told me that they saw the above situation as “middle-classification”
(zhongchan jiejihua in Mandarin Chinese). There was an aspect of social change that
was similar to those found in cases involving classic gentrification claims, namely the

Figure 2. A computer-generated rendering of a cross-sectional view of a typical row house in
the Tranquil Light Neighborhood 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.
way in which new urban residents transformed the demography, physical conditions, and cultural perceptions of a former working-class neighborhood (Wu and Luo 2007; Zukin 1982). Yet, in this case, the framework of gentrification must be modified, as it is a particular kind of gentrification process whereby the neighborhood’s physical structure, despite its dilapidated condition, has been deliberately and actively kept unchanged by existing residents in the service of the new, often upper-middle-class residents’ sentimentalism. These new residents wanted to live in the neighborhood in place of the original residents owing to the historic value of the architecture of the neighborhood (see Peh 2014).

As the title of this paper suggest, I attempt to use ethnography to shed light on this particular situation as an anthropological process, revealing multiple layers of intricate social interaction vis-à-vis the generalized picture of gentrification as a sociological process with a fixed definition. The ultimate goal of this paper is to develop a concept to accommodate this particular kind of gentrification process to distinguish it from that of classic gentrification, yet with the goal of arguing for the concept of gentrification as a whole to receive a much more neutral treatment than it has thus far.

The case study and its methods
The Tranquil Light Neighborhood is a gated community. Built in the early 1930s in the architectural style of British row houses, the Tranquil Light Neighborhood was at that time among the most renowned and prestigious neighborhoods in Shanghai, especially in the first decade following its completion. Each building was designed to serve a single household of two to three residents. In the 1930s and 1940s many residents were public figures attracted by the neighborhood’s prime location (Figure 3). Many of them fled Mainland China for Taiwan and Hong Kong prior to 1949 because of their close

Figure 3. An aerial view of a typical lilong neighborhood showing the rigid south-facing orientation of the building and the structure of the lane being sandwiched by the front of the row on the one side and the back side of the row on the other. Photograph by Sue Anne Tay.
affiliation with the losing Nationalists. Among the households at the time my fieldwork was conducted (2013–2015), fewer than five percent of residents were original owners who had purchased their homes in the early 1930s. All private housing stocks in Shanghai were confiscated and re-distributed to a large number of workers upon the foundation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), and at this point the structure of the community changed rapidly to accommodate four to five times more residents than was originally planned. A typical row house unit consists of three stories, with one courtyard (4 x 4 meters), one living room (4 x 5 meters), two bedrooms (4 x 5 meters), two bathrooms (4 x 2 meters), one kitchen (3 x 1.5 meters), one garage (2 x 3 meters), and two storage rooms (4 x 2 meter) (Figure 2). Since 1949, apart from the kitchen and bathrooms shared by all neighbors living on the same floor or in the same row, each of these rooms had been used as a bedroom. As of 2015, there were 198 buildings still standing, accommodating around 950 households and approximately 3000 residents, compared to the original 500 or so residents in the 1930s. At the time of this research, around two-thirds of the current residents were the legal owners of the rooms. These owners, who I call the “old residents,” had moved in between the 1960s and the 1980s, an era when workers were allowed to trade their rooms with one another. About a third of residents were outsiders renting rooms from the original residents who had vacated their rooms and moved out to make their rooms available for rent. The spectrum of social classes to which these renters belonged was diverse, including young Shanghainese who wished to live independently of their parents, migrant workers who sought low-income housing close to their workplace, and foreigners (myself included) who saw the neighborhood as a natural choice given its location, rent, and the unique architectural quality of its buildings. Defining the dynamic of this community was the co-existence of old residents and newcomers with different occupations, interests and lifestyles (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A photograph showing a typical form of casual interaction among the neighbors in the lilong, many of whom have known each other for many years. Photograph by Non Arkaraprasertkul.
I spent 16 months during 2013–2015 living in the Tranquil Light Neighborhood to conduct ethnographic research. The room that I rented was a 2 x 4 meter annex of a house (known locally as a “pavilion room” or tingzhijian) that was once used as a storage room for the family who owned the building prior to 1949. According to official data provided publically by the local neighborhood committee (juweihui) at the time, new residents including myself accounted for 438 out of a total of 3172 residents who were “actually living in the neighborhood” (as opposed to those only having their names registered as residents but not actually living there (or changzhu renshu)). The demographic of these renters, the so-called “outsiders” (wailai renshu) included 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); and business owners using the residential spaces as their offices, who were attracted to the neighborhood’s central location and its architectural uniqueness. When I moved in to the community in summer 2013, a staff member at the juweihui keeping track of incoming residents told me the neighborhood’s demography: around one third of the old residents had moved elsewhere and been renting their rooms to the new residents. He also told me that the major trend was the rising population of the new middle class. “Thanks to its architectural uniqueness,” he said, “the Tranquil Light could have been developed into a commercial or high-end retail district had the residents been offered the option to relocate elsewhere.”

According to the Urban and Rural Planning Law of the People’s Republic of China, the neighborhood is marked as “residential” (partly due to its heritage status, in which unregulated commercial activities would be seen as detrimental), hence no commercial activities are permitted. This was a factor that deterred developers from investing in the Tranquil Light Neighborhood (this, in fact, is a common impression that has been widely studied, see Lin 2011; Ren 2008; Wu and He 2005; Yager and Kilbourn 2004). At the end of my fieldwork, the local government had yet to decide on any plans that would involve such a policy, due to the complicated legal and financial issues specific to the site, including the PRC Urban and Rural Planning Law, and the complicated issue of legal rights, since the original row houses had long been sub-divided between different families, and therefore no one legally owned an entire building. The residents relied on their own resources to renovate their houses (Phillips and Sommers 2006). The demographic changes in the neighborhood that would be associated with conventional conceptions of gentrification were brought about by the residents themselves, who wanted to earn extra income by renting out physical spaces that were no longer useful to them, rather than by outside “gentry.” Central to the argument about an alternative form of gentrification that I make in this paper is the particular “architectural uniqueness” of the old edifices, which did not seem to have the same appeal to the original residents as it had to renters from outside. In this paper, I seek to develop an alternative understanding of gentrification in which the “existing residents themselves” are the key actors in this urban process, resulting in greater demographic diversity (see Arkaraprasertkul Forthcoming); hence, the concept “gentrification from within.”

In this paper, I seek to unpack the notion of heritage as a selling point for old, dilapidated structures, but also to understand how the locals mobilize their knowledge of this selling point to their advantage. Heritage is seen here as a “desirable scarce resource” (Appadurai 1981; Esposito et al. 2014; Herzfeld 2010) that the economically powerful seek to possess in order to claim their somewhat opaque sense of cultural superiority through the attainment of historical architecture as cultural capital whose importance lies in its symbolic economy (Zukin 1991). Yet, subverting the dominating structure that
rich have created is the notion of heritage that the economically-challenged original residents use to maximize their potential to attract middle-class renters and buyers, showing that they are not completely powerless victims of outside forces, as gentrification would posit.

Heritage in the city

Since China’s involuntary opening up of trade as a treaty port to foreign powers as a result of its defeat in the Opium War, Shanghai has been the most convenient point of access for foreign goods and the export of China’s products. The British were the first to arrive to Shanghai in the mid-1840s, and re-organized the city’s spatial structure to accommodate the treaty port’s commercial activities. By way of what they called “land regulations,” they imposed new comprehensive planning to the organically-grown, medium-sized market town. Due to Shanghai’s flat geography, a grid structure was imposed, and became the basis of land division and property investment in the bounded territory called the International Settlement, in which several colonial powers had their jurisdictions. Low-cost local Chinese laborers were hired to work in this bounded territory, and the new form of housing introduced to accommodate these laborers were replicas of traditional British row houses – a series of short-width houses joined by common sidewalks called *lilong or linong* (里弄). Between the row houses were small lanes for accessing each unit. There were no open spaces besides these lanes, which automatically served as spaces for cooking, meeting, washing, and so on, which, as historian (Lu Hanchao 1999) argues, was perhaps the reason why these row houses have since adopted the name “*lilong*” – as *li* means neighborhood and *long* means lanes (also see Arkaraprasertkul 2009). With the success of the first units, the *lilong* neighborhoods became the dominant form of urban housing in the city of Shanghai by the late nineteenth century, especially in the more affluent parts of the International Settlement such as the French Concession. 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 housing around three million people (Bracken 2013). It was only in 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 (see Morris 1994).

For those residents who moved into the Tranquil Light after the Communist victory in 1949, they had the benefit of rent control, keeping the amount of money that workers were required to pay at a bare minimum (Lu et al. 2001). Officials working at the *juweihui* estimated that more than two thirds of the residents of the Tranquil Light received their rooms through this means. The 200,000 *lilong* units were barely adequate for three million residents in the 1930s, and unable to accommodate the eleven million residents of Shanghai by the reform era of the early 1980s. The local government resorted to the market to build more housing for the new residents (Peng 1986; Zhang 2004). Thousands of *lilong* neighborhoods, which were no longer considered the most “economic” form of housing, were demolished during this period to make way for higher-density housing, such as the mid-rise walkups and high-rise apartments we see in Shanghai today. The legacy of the *lilong* as a “cultural form” in Shanghai may not be as rich as that of the traditional courtyard housing compounds in Beijing – or the *hutong* (胡同) – whose history dates back hundreds of years (Ruan et al. 2014; Wang and Chen 1987; Wu 1999). The complex history of quasi-colonization, economic modernity, and Communist re-purposing of the most dominant form of dwelling unit in Shanghai, however,
has had a profound impact on local Shanghainese residents (Li 2015; Wan and Ge 2011; Zhao 2004; Zhu 2002). According to data provided by the Cultural Heritage Protection Department of the Shanghai Municipality Administration of Cultural Heritage (2009), there were less than a hundred lilong neighborhoods left in the city, compared to 150 just five years ago.

The second landlords

During the time of this research, the handful of designated historic structures in Shanghai were not clustered in groups, but instead scattered around the city, as a result of the historic preservation program focusing on preserving buildings instead of larger areas where residents of many neighborhoods relied upon each other (Arkaraprasertkul and Williams 2015). The result was that the preserved low-rise neighborhoods were being surrounded by high-rise new developments that were mainly shopping malls catering to high-end consumers. One after another, street corner wet markets disappeared and were replaced by “City Super” and other elite 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 lives, 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 lifestyle. 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 nearby the neighborhood. For three decades [1950s-1980s], all 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 life style.

As a result, many residents, even those who had lived in preserved neighborhoods like the Tranquil Light for their entire life like this 72-year-old informant, eventually give in and move out, as there is 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.

To most of the original residents, the drive to move out came when they gave birth to their children or when they had grandchildren, which would render the need for a more spacious home more urgent. What then should they do with the rooms, since most of them only had that dwelling unit, but not the right to sell it? They rented it out to new residents and became so-called “second landlords” (erfangdong) to the new residents (as the first landlord was the local government who redistributed the housing stocks by way of a rent control program for these old residents during the high socialist period from the early 1950s to the early 1980s). Although at first these second landlords
were only trying to make extra money out of their fixed assets, once they realized the potential of the historic narrative as a selling point, they were not shy about using the historic narrative as a justification for increasing the rent. For instance, a senior, long-term resident of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood always cited a popular narrative regarding the historic importance of the neighborhood to maximize his capital return when renting out his space to others. This resident himself no longer lived in the Tranquil Light, as he had moved elsewhere to help his grandson, and had openly shared with me how satisfied he was to live in the modern apartment that his son/daughter had bought. That said, he always prefaced his introduction both to the room he rented out, and the rooms where he acted as a middleman (zhongjie) for his neighbors with the line:

No lilong neighborhood was better known than this neighborhood in the early twentieth century – many famous people lived here. Although it’s old and rundown, it’s still the one of the most historically important places in the city.

While on the surface, this senior resident’s narrative gave the sense that he was “shamed” into undervaluing what he had, his action could also be seen as paving his way into what the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2004) calls “global hierarchy of value,” the idea that an artifact, object, or even an idea itself could be understood as more valuable than others owing not to its quality, but to the impact of neoliberal ideologies and policies. For example, as I pointed out elsewhere (Arkaraprasertkul 2012, 2013), by understanding how valuable an old building built during the semi-colonial era could be in the eyes of foreigners, the old residents were able to understand how they could profit from their “old and rundown” houses by substituting these two value markers with the alternative markers of “authenticity and historical importance.” The original residents, who were already losing their interest in living in a preserved neighborhood, mobilized their knowledge of the global hierarchy of value, especially the interest in heritage architecture, to maximize their profits in the process of getting themselves out of a neighborhood that was becoming less and less communal.

**Heritage traditionalism**

Although the situation I am presenting here is specific to the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, there are a few generalizable points about this particular process, namely the ways in which the original residents themselves serve as key actors in replacing themselves with new residents. But how do residents of neighborhoods such as the Tranquil Light arm themselves with specific knowledge of history, architecture, and capitalist development processes in order to argue their positions? The old residents of the Tranquil Light had shared with me how the neighbors got together to decide on the “collective narrative” about the history of the neighborhood to tell the relocation authority. For instance, through the network of mahjong players (damaijiang delinjv) and observers who hung out at a particular lane, the residents consistently shared with one another what they knew about the neighborhood. Since the primary influx of residents was during two relatively recent periods (after 1949 and during the Cultural Revolution), many residents were not familiar with the historical narrative of the neighborhood. According to many residents, they indeed did not know this, and thus constantly asked researchers visiting the neighborhood, “why is this neighborhood historically important?” Most of the residents did not know the history of the neighborhood in which they lived. Ironically, it
was only when the local government put up a series of boards telling the stories of the lilong neighborhoods across the city in preparation for the Shanghai Exposition in 2010 that the residents began to realize the “historic importance” of their neighborhood.

A 60-year-old informant who moved into the neighborhood in the mid-1970s, for example, said that she had a small notebook in which she wrote down stories, narratives and urban legends associated with the Tranquil Light Neighborhood whenever she heard them from her neighbors. “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. Making this informant feel insecure was her inferiority in terms her lack of cultural capital compared to her neighbors, as she had moved into the neighborhood almost two decades later than most of her mahjong playing neighbors who moved in with their parents in the early 1950s and had spent their entire lives there. One of the most senior members of the mahjong circle 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 victim card, to which a coherent story about attachment to the place that was about to be gentrified by way of evicting the original residents was central. Each of these residents ended up with a rather enviable package, ranging from the market-based monetary compensation for those who preferred it, to a new home three to four times the size of their old home in the suburbs connected to the city by metro.

The strategy of “playing the victim” 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 in order to make way for new construction despite the fact that the surrounding area had already been cleared for the construction (see Erie 2012; Hess 2010; Ho 2013; Lv 2012; Shin 2013). What this case shows is that 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 legitimate way to blatantly reject, they could get much more out of it than if they showed overt unwillingness to comply with the urban renewal program. There were indications that the old residents (residents who have lived in the neighborhood since before the economic reforms in the early 1980s) were inclined to reenact and valorize the lifestyle of past times by performing their conformity to the historic preservation movement in Shanghai. This enactment of an unchanging past had political potential, as residents themselves became implicated in the state’s projects of what I call “heritage traditionalism,” while incoming residents who rented renovated spaces were enticed by the globally circulated romanticist preconceptions of traditional Chinese neighborhood life.

The Tranquil Light was one of the few lilong that was still present in Shanghai, where the speed of redevelopment and urbanization has been among the world’s fastest, especially during the first two decades after the economic reform and opening up (1980s–2000s). Historians, journalists, and architects often shared the opinion that lilong neighborhoods are historically important and should be preserved. In many ways, the attitude underlying this opinion is based on a Eurocentric notion of heritage as a valuable cultural asset (Estève and Cheval 2010; Jiang and Xu 2012; Mo and Lu 2000; Ruan and Zhang 2004; Wang and Chen 1987). Since the early 2000s, the city’s municipal government has shifted its policy from massive redevelopment to drawing urban
planning inspiration from “global cities” such as New York, London, and Paris (Chen 2009). These cities have achieved architectural distinction by combining modern high-rise buildings and heritage buildings, to some extent creating a sense of belonging for their citizens. This particular value is central to sustaining both the cultural and social values associated with a particular place, making a global city not only a cherished home to locals, but also an attractive hub for business, education, and tourism. Recently, Shanghai’s municipal government has adopted city branding as a major part of its urban development program. Following the “global city formula” (quanqiuxing guoji da shoudu), the preservation of historic buildings has been seen as integral to this emerging brand (see Development Research Center of Shanghai Municipal People’s Government 2014). The underlying rationale is to protect a list of “architectural artifacts” that the municipal government considers appropriate for a city with global ambitions, including the lilong. This situation illustrates how the discourse of history is often put to the service of romanticization, evoking a yearning for the past with complex stakes in the present. The idea of “significant architectural heritage” becomes a political tool in the city of Shanghai with the implication that it represents the benign effort of the state to preserve the history of the city for both residents and visitors. The preservation of the lilong façade – while potentially neglecting more substantive improvements to the dilapidated interiors of the houses – symbolizes the efforts of ostensibly caring local authorities to maintain a dialogue between Shanghai’s past and present.

Exemplars of Shanghai’s alleyway

When mentioning the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, some of my informants also mentioned two other places – “It’s nice but it’s not like the Xintiandi or Tianzifang, which are more beautiful.” These two places have been held by scholars and experts in urban renewal and architecture as “exemplars” of successful efforts to rehabilitate and re-adapt old buildings for commercial purposes (Mo and Lu 2000; Yager and Kilbourn 2004). In both places, the characteristics of the buildings were quite similar to the uniform row houses in the Tranquil Light Neighborhood: All had three-story-high buildings with their wall-bearing stone masonry structures located in a series of perpendicular alleyways, and were absolutely uniform in terms of how they looked, giving the impression of a traditional neighborhood in which ordinary Shanghai citizens used to live. Whereas Xintiandi was rebuilt from the ground up and repurposed as a high-end retail district using the cliché of an old historic Shanghai neighborhood, Tianzifang had gone through a series of both external changes (done by the government) and internal changes (done by the residents themselves) before it became one of the “hippest” districts for commercial arts and handicrafts from 2007 onwards (Kong and Qian 2011; Wai 2006; Yu 2009; Zhou 2013). Listed in almost all guidebooks to Shanghai, these two neighborhoods became a “must” for those who wanted to see how Shanghai supposedly looked in its colonial prime.

Most local Shanghai residents I met during my early visits to Shanghai strongly encouraged me to visit Xintiandi. “If you want to see the ‘real Shanghai,’ you have to go there,” said one of my key informants. As I have written elsewhere (Arkaraprasertkul 2012), I could not think of anything more ironic – the fact that a native Shanghai resident was telling a researcher conducting a study of the remaining traditional Shanghai sense of community and neighborhood that he should pay a visit to neighborhoods that were rebuilt to look old for commercial purposes, let alone how they used the term “real” (zhende) to describe them. For many who have studied China, it might be easy to see this
as a form of expressing the mianzi – or “face value” – which has always played an instrumental role in any forms of social interaction in Chinese society. Also, since most residents of Shanghai were familiar with the lilong, no local professionals prior to the architect of the Xintiandi project saw this typical neighborhood as a potential typology for a retail 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. In fact, if asked, local residents would say that Xintiandi is special because “it is new,” and represents the history of Shanghai in a perfectly reconstructed form, with which the locals themselves are more comfortable because it does not involve the ramshackle living experience, the physical congestion and unhygienic conditions of lilong culture and history (Pellow 1993). This was what my Shanghaiese informants meant when they suggested I should visit this place, as it represents something old and, perhaps, also “authentic” (Ruan and Lin 2003) in a neat package – a narrative that locals support.

The direct importance of Xintiandi is that there has been speculation that it is “the future of the Tranquil Light,” according to one of my informants. At the time of this research, the residents who have yet to move out believe that eventually they will receive an offer to be relocated to other, bigger and more modern, housing units and that the Tranquil Light Neighborhood will be revamped into a high-end retail district like the Xintiandi due to its central location, convenient access to public transportation, and its sophisticated “heritage” architectural style that is becoming increasingly rare in Shanghai. There have often been stories regarding historic preservation: about how the authorities “heritage-ize” a building without any concerns for the residents living in them, thus creating resistance on the part of the residents who would like their ways of life to be respected alongside the historic edifices in which they have been told to be proud to live. Hence there have been protests in many historic cities around the world regarding the way that municipal governments of historic cities commercialize the history of ordinary citizens without allowing them to have a say in the processes that will affect their lives the most, e.g., the influx of tourists and the commercialization of local products, places, and traditions (Colomb and Novy Forthcoming). In Shanghai, what I had been observing presents a similar story but through a different lens: a story of residents of a city that was once semi-colonized by western colonial powers 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 city’s semi-colonial past as an asset. This was done in order to promote residents’ own interests in making their lives better. The sense of pragmatism in the minds of the Shanghaiese residents was at the center of the way they presented their histories vis-à-vis the city in a global era. The way that the Shanghaiese residents wanted outsiders like myself to think of Xintiandi as the real Shanghai because it “look beautiful” (kandehenpiaoliang) was more in line with their interests than was an actual lilong neighborhood.

Gentrification from within

My informant Mr. Hu had lived in the Tranquil Light Neighborhood for almost four decades, and was familiar with most of the old residents. When he had to retire prematurely in the 1980s from an industrial work unit (danwei) because of chronic illness, he began putting his interpersonal skills to work as a local real estate agent (nongtang de zhongjie). According to him, there was “nothing fancy” about his new job, as he simply worked to provide services as a middleman, connecting those who had rooms to rent out with those who wanted to rent. The early 1980s was when the socialist welfare
structure was beginning to break down with the re-introduction of market capitalism. The local government decided to hand the responsibility of taking care of the dilapidated housing stock to the residents themselves by allowing them, for the first time since the collectivization of housing stock in the 1950s, to own properties. As with many residents with extra space, Mr. Hu did not particularly like to rent out the space to fellow Shanghainese residents:

Not only do Shanghainese demand cut-throat rental rates, but they are also very tricky to deal with – they violate the agreement on the number of tenants, or repurpose the room without the knowledge and the consent of the landlord, as if my room [and my service as the middleman] did not have any value at all!

When asked about migrant workers, Mr. Hu said he preferred them to local Shanghainese as tenants, but he would only “help those who seem decent.” Mr. Hu received a very small agent fee 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 close to the city or migrant workers from a nearby province seeking jobs in Shanghai. He had a reputation in the neighborhood as the “go-to” person whenever one needed help in finding a room. Not only was he quick and efficient when it came to matching the rent seeker and the landlord, but he was also prompt when the clients required customer service, such as fixing electrical appliances and furniture, and acting as a middleman when a conflict between the two parties occurred. “Some migrant workers are simply troublesome (mafan), so being a middleman for them is tiresome,” he said, mentioning how migrant workers were not particularly hygienic and punctual in paying rent. Similar to many residents who had seen the removal of lilong surrounding the famous streets on which the Tranquil Light Neighborhood was located, Mr. Hu originally did not harbor any hope that it would be saved from being bulldozed. It was not until the early 2000s, when the so-called “Xintiandi effect” began to gain traction (Shao 2013), that Mr. Hu began to understand the up and coming trend of historic preservation of cultural artifacts (baohu wenwu). With the success and reputation of Xintiandi, he was surprised to have his service welcome a new set of clients: the creative class and foreigners, who were attracted to the Tranquil Light because of the architectural uniqueness of the historic monuments that had greatly diminished in number, especially from the 1990s when the urban redevelopment program was implemented at full speed.

Like Mr. Hu, many of the Tranquil Light’s residents lived in a perpetual state of uncertainty (although not in fear of forced eviction, as was the case in the past) and in a seemingly unending process of negotiation with various government agents to receive compensation for the foreseeable loss of their homes. In order to make the most out of their remaining time in the heritage buildings, residents such as Mr. Hu had adopted survival techniques, including initiating campaigns to inform the public about the historic importance of these neighborhoods, and strategically utilizing the image of a successfully gentrified neighborhood that hews to the state’s “global city” discourse. He was keen to speak to any foreigners who could speak Chinese just to get a sense of how they thought about the Tranquil Light Neighborhood. Similar to my informant in the mahjong circle, Mr. Hu often wrote down what he learned from “foreign friends” (laowai pengyou) about their thoughts on the neighborhood, so that he could share them with others. Many residents looked up to Mr. Hu, and learned from him how to utilize available information and knowledge from various media sources. Some neighborhood residents, by renting out space to foreigners, implicitly claimed access to coveted symbolic capital.
In the early 2000s, the condition of most of the houses in the Tranquil Light was usually rundown because of a lack of structural maintenance (impossible due to the age of the buildings). The ambiguity of property development in the central business district allowed the creative class and foreigners 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 who rented out the first floor of her row to a young local Chinese man to open a small teahouse. 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 from rent while she still legally possessed the house. This situation benefitted the renters, who were not asked for high rent because of the uncertainty of the situation, and also did not need to provide much proof of their income or status, or a guarantor. Although these creative classes and foreign residents were operating on a small budget, they would still be more comfortable paying higher rents than the local “cut-throat” Shanghainese or migrants whom Mr. Hu mentioned. Thus, the old residents were welcoming toward these newcomers “because it boosts rents,” as Mr. Hu said, as compared to their old neighbors, who were mostly retirees. These new renters also brought with them more “gentrified” lifestyles.

By the mid-2000s it was already quite fashionable for an expatriate to live in an old-style Chinese house. The most apt explanation lies in the earlier-mentioned notion of the global hierarchy of value (Herzfeld 2004) which, in the case of the Tranquil Light Neighborhood, entails a top-down ladder of different values governing the mindset of the locals. At the top of this ladder is the Eurocentric notion of antiquity (Yalouri 2001). The creative entrepreneurs and foreign residents were very much “romanticizing” the past, since they had never experienced the hardship of living in a house without adequate infrastructure, such as a shared bathroom between three to four families, and the lack of active heating and ventilation systems which was the common experience among the residents of Shanghai who lived in the city before the economic reform (Chen 1993; Guo 1996). Some of these foreign renters also contributed to picturesque perceptions of lilong architectural heritage through media, literature, art works, and scholarly works (e.g., Doctoroff 2009; He 2010; Lee 2007; Wang 2003). For ordinary Chinese residents who had lived in the traditional alleyway-houses for generations – and therefore knew more than the foreigners about the problems of these dwellings – it was the high-rise apartments to which they sought to escape from the dilapidated lilong. In addition, contrary to foreigners’ perceptions, the local residents saw high-rise buildings as symbols of the Eurocentric presence of western modernity: high-rise apartment buildings have become the symbol of an emerging global city.

Conclusion

In Discourse on the Original and Foundations of Inequality Among Men, the French enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2014 [1750]) claims that the root of inequality is the creation of an artificial superstructure of desires that the 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.
I have called the process developed in this paper “gentrification from within,” because “gentrification” was the term my informants used to discuss the situation in which they were in, and “from within” denotes that the residents themselves were the actors in this process: the displacement of the original residents has been demanded, staged, and driven by the local residents themselves rather than by new wealthier residents. The 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 own the lilong properties, and make financial gains through rent, or in from negotiating with the local government. In addition, these old residents were pensioners, and were not underprivileged or deprived in the strict sense of the term. In fact, the critique of traditional theories of gentrification vis-à-vis Rousseau – how the process was driven from below by the locals – is based on the fact that this process, in this case, was not a 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 often is a result of gentrification.

That said, as pointed out in recent scholarship on gentrification (e.g., Lees 2012; Shin et al. 2016), there is a rising attention on the expansion of the concept thanks to accounts 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 the new residents who are seen as “gentrifiers/gentry.” This is despite the fact that they are not necessarily richer; rather, they are enticed by the opportunity to possess antiquated uniqueness that the “gentrifiers/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 a 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 lifestyle, create social and economic environments to push out the original residents. Although some of the old residents of the 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, and they believed 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.
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Notes

1. To protect the anonymity of the informants from whom I gathered information for this paper, 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.

2. In fact, the preservation effort of the Shanghai’s municipal government has been well recognized by the global community

3. It was difficult to pin down how many units were renovated and rented out, since units often changed in their usage. For instance, one unit was renovated for rental, but after the lease to the first tenant was over, the landlords decided to make the unit their own living space. A room used as an office was at the time of my arrival transformed into a café. I have been told that the proportion of commercial to residential units in the neighborhood is around 30% to 70%.

4. My rental contract was over after 16 months, but I still maintained my contacts in the neighborhood, and continued to return to the neighborhood on a daily basis for the next 8 months.

5. This data has been crossed-check with the data on the population of localities from the yearly almanac of the district in which the Tranquil Light Neighborhood is located. The population of registered residents did not fluctuate much during 1999–2011: the number of families (hu) was between 1280 (in 2011) to 1558 (2010), and the number of residents (ren; headcount) was between 3893 (in 1997–1998) and 4423 (2009). As basic statistical analysis of this data shows – assuming that data collection was done correctly – there is no direct correspondence between the number of families and the number of residents. This does not mean that the size of the families changed drastically during these years of data collection. Quite the opposite, there were incoming residents, whose presence constituted a different set of numbers. From an interview with neighborhood officials (jiuweihui), the seemingly uncoordinated fluctuation of these numbers was a result of the influx of migrants (liudongrenkou) who moved in and out of rooms rented from the “old residents.” Although there is a set of detailed data that precisely shows this influx – the differences between registered changzhuren (long-term tenants), and registered and non-registered short-term tenants – it was only available to the government, and not to me.

6. 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.

7. The city’s image-conscious definition of urban improvement is at odds with community leaders who equate such “improvement” with “urban renewal,” inevitably leading to the displacement of current residents from their homes. This so-called urban renewal process – which the geographer Neil Smith (2006) equates with the term “gentrification” – has intensified the inequality between the low-income residents who are often the target for the displacement process, and new middle-class (zhongchanjieji) residents who are the potential buyers and main contributors to the urban renewal process.
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