

# SHANGHAI

## The Shikumen of



PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRÉDÉRIC LAGRANGE

Within Shanghai's sleek city walls lies a cluster of enclaves that seem frozen in time, where traditional architecture — and a more traditional way of life — has survived the wave of modernization. **Jonathan DeHart** reports from behind the ornate gates of the city's shikumen lane communities.





**LOCAL FLAVORS**  
Clockwise from top left: Homemade noodle soup from a vendor on Maoming Road; a Maoming Road food stand; one of Tianzifang's bustling shikumen lanes. Previous spread: from left: A vase and flower arrangement from a dress shop in Tianzifang; shikumens — essentially British row houses with a Chinese twist — are characteristically Shanghaiese.

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BEYOND A WEATHERED STONE ARCH THAT OPENS ONTO AN ALLEY off Maoming Road in the heart of old Shanghai, a man in his late 60s takes my order. "Do you want that with tomatoes or sausage?" he asks. Vainly scanning a menu plastered on the wall and scrawled in red Chinese characters, I opt for tomato, unsure how it will taste with fried rice but curious to try. He fires up a portable burner on a counter-top under a translucent plastic roof, splashes oil into the pan and starts chopping.

His wife seats my local friend Sally and me at one of three tables squeezed into a room that opens directly onto the old-school residential lane, known as a *lilong* or *longtang*. "This is actually their house," Sally tells me. This is confirmed when I request water and the woman opens the door next to our table to grab a bottle from the living room just beyond. "My grandparents have a cupboard like that one," Sally adds, pointing at a dark wooden cabinet hanging from the wall, filled with porcelain bowls, plates, chopsticks and spoons. A table beneath it holds a rice cooker and two electric kettles that look as if they were made in the 1960s.

As we wait for lunch to arrive, a stylish young couple walking their golden retriever stops on their way home to chat with the older couple, who take orders from two more customers, one who joins us in the dining room and the other who plops down at a table outside. Our food appears — noodles in hot soup with a fried egg for Sally, and a heaving bowl of fried rice tossed with green onions and tomatoes for me (a surprisingly good combination).

Finishing our food, satisfied, we pay the bill (about \$3.50) and thank the smiling couple. Walking past one-speed bicycles leaning against walls and drying laundry flapping in the breeze, we pass back under the elegantly crumbling archway and emerge onto the street outside. A steady flow of honking cars and motorbikes whirs past, and, like that, the spell is broken. We are back in modern Shanghai.

"There's really nothing quite like a classic Shanghai-style lane neighborhood," says Patrick Cranley, president and co-founder of Historic Shanghai, a provider of historical and architectural tours of the city. "They are self-enclosed urban residential blocks designed to create a close-knit community that you feel as soon as you enter: a unique combination of privacy and public transparency at the same time. While these lanes are quite hidden, the residents all know each other well — and know each other's family affairs, like it or not!"



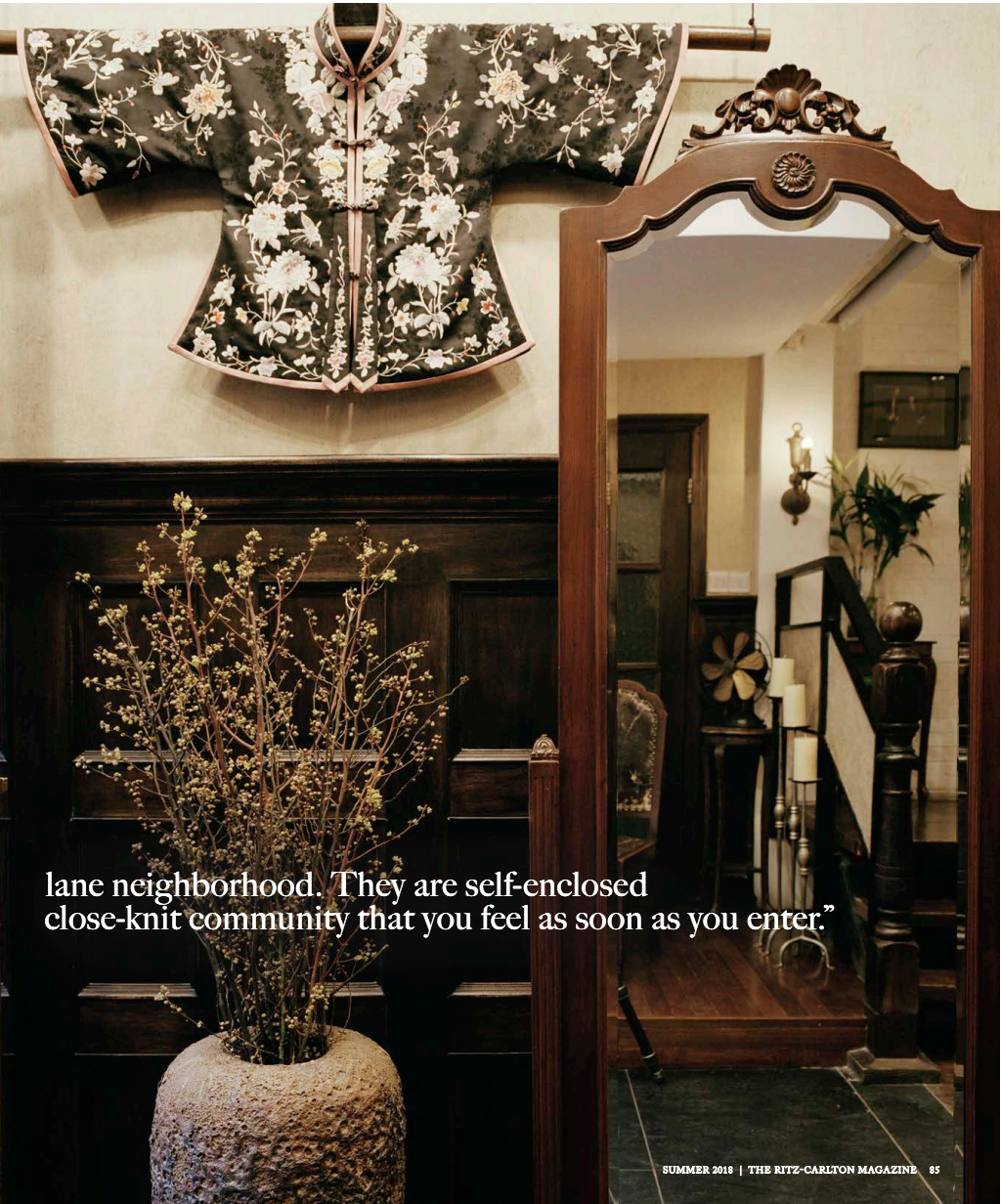
While the old and new coexist in many lane communities, development has taken its toll. Landlords, developers and local government have passed through swaths of old Shanghai, leaving a mixed bag of untouched communities, organically evolving neighborhoods and sleekly gentrified projects. Those who have benefited from this push have seen dubious wiring, outdated plumbing and shaky staircases spruced up. But just as many have been forced from their homes in the name of renewal. Increasingly, these timeworn neighborhoods, so emblematic of Shanghai, face an uncertain future.

A SHIKUMEN IS A TWO- OR THREE-STORY TOWNHOUSE, OFTEN WITH A second-floor balcony, fronted by a walled courtyard that is entered through a high stone gate adorned with a stylistic arch, typically featuring an ornate carving or a hint of art deco flair. These homes, so characteristic of Shanghai, are essentially British-style row houses with a Chinese twist.





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## MEMORY LANES

Clockwise from left: A lane community in Jing'an Villa; a local Jing'an Villa woman; the interior of a photographer's studio on Maoming Road. Previous spread, from left: A resident inside a shikumen on Maoming Road; the interior of the popular Jian Fen Shi Jia dress shop in Tianzifang.



the 1920s improved things, but overcrowding peaked during World War II, when 80 percent of Shanghai's population called these tenements home. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), many influential families left their lane homes, leaving their shikumens subdivided into petite apartments and filled to the brim.

Cramped living conditions tainted these once glamorized lanes with an unsavory reputation, but the image began to change when they were given a romantic treatment in works of literature and film that drew on the ambience found within their walls. No less than the father of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun, once dwelled on one of Shanghai's fabled lanes. Many shikumen across the city have also received a face-lift in recent years that brings them into the modern world, amenities and all. At their peak, 9,000 lanes containing 200,000 shikumen buildings accounted for 60 percent of the city's apartment blocks. Today, Shanghai's 1,900 remaining lanes house some 50,000 buildings, and roughly 3,000 tenants reside within them.

While these numbers might paint a sobering picture, shikumen residents today are a diverse, often passionate mix of old-timers, migrant laborers, expats and artists with bohemian dreams. And while renovation and rising popularity have caused rents to soar in some shikumen communities, the communal atmosphere and whiff of history are routinely cited as the biggest perks of lane living.

"The atmosphere of a shikumen comes from the feeling you get when you hear your neighbors talking, the sounds of tailors at work," says Caucasso Lee Jun, a photographer who chose to live and build a darkroom in a shikumen. He viewed the move as an escape from the city to a place where some sense of history remains. "Neighbors communicate often. Today when I lost electricity in my darkroom, my neighbor Mr. Sun helped me get the power running again."

JING'AN VILLA IS A RARE EXAMPLE OF A LIVING, BREATHING SHIKUMEN community that has (so far) been spared modernization. This textbook lilong stretches across several blocks and exists in the shadow of the shopping emporiums and mushrooming skyscrapers of Jing'an. Curious to see how this community has fared since I last visited five years ago, I slip through the iron gate that separates the lane from the consumer mecca of Nanjing West Road. I stroll down the private road, just wide enough for a car, that runs through the lanes that branch off to both

"They were built to respect feng shui, or Chinese geomancy; therefore, the front of each house faces south," says Dr. Non Arkarapraserkul, an anthropologist, architect, urban designer and filmmaker who conducted his doctorate field research while living in a Shanghai lilong, and who is affectionately called "Non." Other elements of design include an expansive front courtyard, a lavish living room and an open kitchen — all reflecting Chinese social customs. "It's been argued by scholars and residents alike that it's this deep blending that made it easy for the residents to embrace shikumen and is therefore responsible for their reception into the culture of 'modern Shanghai.'"

While many early lane dwellers were affluent, not all shikumen were created equally. As merchants rushed to accommodate refugees who poured into the city from Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces during the Taiping Rebellion (1850–64), many of these structures were hastily built, resulting in shoddy construction. The installation of sewage systems in

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sides, and I'm struck with one thought: The residents want for nothing. Fruit and vegetable sellers, a barbershop, a foot massage parlor, a tailor and a mom-and-pop restaurant form an urban oasis. Elderly men in pajamas sip tea around a table. Neighbors gossip as they hang laundry. A grandmother prepares a chicken in front of her kitchen window, eyeing me as I pass. And a barber sees off a customer who's just had a trim.

Inspired by this communal atmosphere and sense of history, a cadre of young go-getters has gradually added a new layer of change to these neighborhoods, opening trendy cafés, watering holes and galleries down some of the more welcoming lanes. While there was a crackdown on a handful of these types of businesses operating without licenses in Jing'an Villa a few years ago, the city's lanes remain highly prized locations for those with vision. And when there is mutual respect between these newcomers and their hosts, it's a win-win.

"The optimal way to observe the change of a traditional community is to let it change from within," Non says. "Original residents are naturally pushed by familial, health-related and economic forces to move out of shikumen communities, while new residents are pulled in by various reasons, including their central locations, historical gimmick and opportunities for business. The lilong communities that allow this process to take place naturally are usually the ones that are socially diverse, economically viable and culturally attractive."

THIS IDEAL OF "GENTRIFICATION FROM WITHIN" IS EASY IN THEORY but tough in practice, as seen in Jing'an Villa. The labyrinthine network of alleys that comprises Tianzifang, however, has gotten as close as any major shikumen development to achieving that goal.

Originally built as a residence for factory workers, Tianzifang was given a government-sponsored renovation in 1998. Ever since, artists and entrepreneurs, both local and foreign, have built a thriving creative center with more than 200 small businesses, from arts and crafts stores and studios to an array of coffeehouses, bars, eateries, teahouses and shops selling items such as silk scarves, Shanghai-made watches and memorabilia from the Cultural Revolution.

Hoping to see Tianzifang still thriving, I make my way down Taikang Road, where a series of large stone gates, rather elaborate by shikumen standards, lead into the tiny atmospheric alleys that constitute Tianzifang. As Sally and I duck and weave through the crowded bazaar-like lanes, it's clear that the area is just as economically viable as it was the

last time I visited. The sounds of boisterous bargaining and laughter emerge from every corner. Visitors sit in stylish cafés and sip coffee or peruse locally made qipao dresses in shops set in old revamped lane houses. Meanwhile, local residents go about their daily lives in their homes above and around the businesses.

A DEVELOPMENT WITH A VERY DIFFERENT BACKSTORY IS XINTIANDI, a sleek lifestyle center with high-end bars, cafés, nightclubs and shops. Strolling through Xintiandi, I'm struck by its spaciousness. It feels less jam-packed than Tianzifang. Well-dressed westerners and dapper locals clink wine glasses over artfully presented food, while shoppers weave through lanes dotted by fountains, wielding shopping bags emblazoned with name-brand labels. And in place of the bric-a-brac curios filling Tianzifang's eclectic shops, swish window displays feature a range of jewelry, lifestyle goods, fashion labels, interior design and art. The dining options are also decidedly posh.

Although this urbane development has the look and feel of a shikumen, it's actually a rebuilt replica of the real community that once stood in its place. While some might call this Disneyfication, and say that façade-ism (Xintiandi) and commercialization (Tianzifang) are not preservation, Xintiandi has been an astounding financial success, and there may be several other similar projects in the city's pipeline. Jianyeli, which opened in spring 2017, is the city's largest such development. This cluster of 55 structures with shikumen façades houses a boutique hotel, serviced apartments and an assortment of high-end shops, cafés and restaurants. The development is tastefully done, but I would be remiss if I didn't point out that two-thirds of the surrounding community had to be demolished before it could be built. With such projects popping up around town with increasing speed, residents in the city's remaining lilong have learned to live with the possibility that their community could be up next for redevelopment.

Opinions are divided on this trend and how far it will progress.

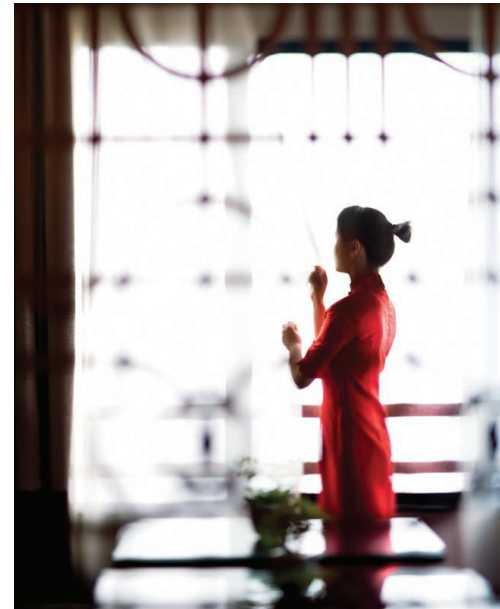
"I think these communities will all be demolished," Cranley says.

Non is more optimistic: "Some shikumen will definitely continue to exist thanks to attempts by authorities to keep them as Shanghai's 'heritage.' What's in doubt is whether or not their existence will benefit anyone or will teach the newer generations of residents about the sociocultural history of Shanghai."

Offering a different take, my friend Sally says: "The real essence of a shikumen is a spirit. Many people live together in one place and help each other. But this is not surviving as many residents are getting older and young people are choosing to live elsewhere. But maybe these new developments, these faux shikumen, are still worth having. They help us remember what we have lost." ●

*IF YOU'RE STAYING AT THE PORTMAN RITZ-CARLTON, SHANGHAI, some shikumen, including Jing'an Villa, are a walkable distance from the hotel. If you're coming from The Ritz-Carlton Shanghai, Pudong, slow down and enjoy the journey by taking the ferry — its terminal is near the hotel — across the Huangpu River, before making the rest of the journey by train or taxi. Inquire with your concierge for details.*

*If you prefer to explore on your own, just follow Non's advice: Keep an eye out for lanes leading off of small, tree-lined streets, free of franchise shops. If you come across elderly residents hanging out in their pajamas, offer a ni hao (hello in Mandarin). "The neighbors are usually pleasant to visitors," he says, "so don't be shy — be respectful and friendly!"*



FROM THE CONCIERGE

## SHANGHAI SURPRISES

This bustling Chinese metropolis boasts two spectacular Ritz-Carlton properties — each with its own sense of style and flavor. Rising high above a city stacked with attractions, The Ritz-Carlton Shanghai, Pudong features 285 well-appointed rooms with stunning vantages of the Bund and the city's picturesque waterfront promenade. And The Portman Ritz-Carlton, Shanghai, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, continues to build on its legacy of legendary hospitality. —*Jacob Muselmann*

### THE RITZ-CARLTON SHANGHAI, PUDONG

**High and Mighty**  
Located on the property's 54th floor, Jin Xuan Chinese Restaurant was awarded a 2017 Michelin star, and with its refined Cantonese cuisine and tea-pairing program, it's easy to see why. Before a night on the town, enjoy a crafted cocktail at Flair, the rooftop lounge with an unparalleled view.

**Infinity and Beyond**  
Vacationing in such a bustle, one can forget to relax. Luckily, The Ritz-Carlton Spa, infusing Chinese, Indian, European and Balinese traditions, will make you seem miles away still. (And to literally feel above the bustle, dip into the infinity pool overlooking the Bund.)

**A Jungle in There**  
With the Ritz Kids Night Safari, the littles ones get to explore — sans any haul. It starts when they discover a tent pitched in their room adorned with bathrobes, snacks, Pokemon Go amenities, movies, a lantern and more.

### THE PORTMAN RITZ-CARLTON, SHANGHAI

**Luxury in the Sky**  
Some 45 stories above the epicenter of upscale shopping, dining and entertainment on Nanjing Road, The Portman Ritz-Carlton, Shanghai boasts amenities like an in-house spa and a sleek fitness center featuring a swimming pool and squash court, giving 593 plush rooms yet another option for R&R.

**Fashion Plate**  
At The Ritz Bar & Lounge, which is designed in an art deco style reminiscent of the 1920s and '30s, guests can savor a cocktail while rubbing shoulders with Shanghai's fashionable crowd. Meanwhile, Portman's Restaurant recently reopened with a new design concept boasting Scandinavian flair (think Nordic-inspired furniture, Bauhaus-style lighting) and a new menu featuring a mix of pan-Asian and contemporary cuisine.

**CHINA THRILLS**  
Clockwise from top left: The Club Lounge at Portman's Restaurant; the restaurant's beef carpaccio; the infinity pool at The Ritz-Carlton Shanghai, Pudong.

