



Non Arkaraprasertkul (middle left) takes guests on a tour of his former residence

Vanishing Lilongs

As wrecking balls and construction cranes remake the city, Shanghai's disappearing alleyway communities have an unlikely ally: an anthropologist and filmmaker from Thailand



Longtime resident

By the end of their construction in the late 1940s, lilongs accounted for sixty percent of Shanghai's housing. Today, only about 3,000 residents—a mix of elderly Shanghainese, migrant workers and expats drawn to the romantic notion of lane house living—call these threatened alleyways home.

One of those expats is Non Arkaraprasertkul, a

global postdoctoral fellow at New York University in Shanghai. Originally from Thailand, Arkaraprasertkul first became interested in Shanghai as a child after watching the Hong Kong TV drama *Shanghai Grand* every day after school. The series was about two sojourners who arrive in the 1930s, finding themselves awash in both challenge and opportu-

nity during the city's glamorous but lawless golden era. Years later, as a student of architecture and urban planning, Arkaraprasertkul had the opportunity to visit the "real Shanghai" in 2006.

"I was fascinated by everything I saw then," he recalls, describing how the speed and glamour of Shanghai's urban development resonated with his ar-



Author, professor and former lilong resident Jie Li

Arkaraprasertkul's 16-month stint as a lilong resident left him with invaluable knowledge about a community under threat

chitectural sensibilities and childhood nostalgia. "There are so many things that I thought I could understand by reading textbooks about Shanghai, but no, the reality is much more complex."

It was while studying the history of Shanghai's architecture and urban planning at MIT and Oxford that Arkaraprasertkul realized he wanted to know more about the people who lived inside Shanghai's threatened heritage architecture. "[I wanted to] understand the inner subjectivity and psychological contradiction of the residents living in the space that seems almost frozen in

time, waiting for someone to come and bulldoze them," he said.

To do this, Arkaraprasertku, who also works as an anthropologist and filmmaker, knew he needed to be right in the thick of things. And so he rented a pavilion room in one of Shanghai's few remaining lilongs, tucked into the leafy lanes between the old consular district of Weihai Lu and Nanjing Xi Lu.

Of the countless lilongs destroyed in recent years, Arkaraprasertkul's alley has somehow been spared the wrecking ball. Arkaraprasertku believes this may stem

from the neighborhood's reputation as a haven for the rich and well-connected. The lilong was built in 1932 by Zhang Jingjiang, a wealthy Shanghainese tycoon. Soon a steady crop of politicians, movie directors, doctors, teachers and the Western heads of foreign companies moved in.

The buildings themselves are squat, red brick structures, built in a blend of English and Chinese design. Despite signs of wear and tear, they're fairly well-maintained, though upper stories often show signs of fire—a persistent danger in close quarters. Despite the

odd scar, the neighborhood boasts some of Shanghai's best architecture, says Arkaraprasertkul. "The quality of the building work comes second only to the Bund."

The lilong was designed with uncommonly wide lanes to allow for the passage of cars, a rare and expensive commodity even among the wealthy Shanghainese of the 1930's. Though no longer the case today, the houses nearest the busy lane were most expensive, with communal kitchens on the ground floor. The truly wealthy would acquire adjacent



Reconnecting with an old neighbor

rooms, the largest of which were usually 80 square feet, allowing them truly opulent accommodations considering the standards of the day.

After the communist revolution, residents aligned with the nationalists either fled or found their jobs (and therefore their incomes) greatly reduced. Many subletted rooms to make ends meet, and some houses sheltered up to five families. Still, the process of housing reform wasn't necessarily as

brutal as some imagine.

"It's not as if the government immediately embarked on a program of confiscating and redistributing housing," said Jie Li, author of *Shanghai Homes: Palimpsests of Private Life*. Now an assistant professor of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University, Li spent part of her childhood in a different Shanghai lilong with her grandparents, though that alleyway has since been de-



Patrick Cranley from Historic Shanghai



Lilong life

molished.

So began a process of subdivision that only accelerated during the 1970s and the 1980s. As the residents had children, they found more space wherever they could. This sometimes meant building a spare bedroom in the entry way, or partitioning a bed chamber to form a mezzanine. High ceilings allowed residents to take the process of subdivision to extremes. In some cases, residents created subterranean rooms in a house's foundation; larger kitchens and garages were converted into small businesses. Some enterprises became so successful that proprietors could purchase neighboring properties. By hiring these out, the commercialization of the alleyways began. Arkaraprasertkul recalls how locals used to joke about waking up one day to find that Starbucks had moved in.

Two years ago, the government began to crack down on the commercial interests located in these residential zones. Whereas many people saw examples of bohemian creative industries, the government saw unlicensed commercial enterprise, tax evasion and unsanitary conditions. Today, the government only permits businesses deemed crucial to the daily needs of

residents, which has forced some of the cafes and tea shops tucked within to take bookings exclusively by Weibo. Others use covered walkways to evade authorities.

Besides providing invaluable field research for his dissertation, Arkaraprasertkul's 16-month stint as a lilong resident left him with invaluable knowledge about a community under threat. One of his pet projects was volunteering at the Jing'an Villa museum, a tiny two room structure filled with fascinating photographs and artifacts about the area's local history. Oddly enough, residents would rather use this area for parking rather than open the room to the public. Still, Arkaraprasertkul realizes the entire neighborhood has become a living museum of sorts, a place where hidden lanes reveal volumes about the city's recent past.

***Tom Mountford**

On January 10, Arkaraprasertkul teamed up with Historic Shanghai to offer an insiders perspective on Shanghai's rapidly disappearing lilongs. See www.historic-shanghai.com for a full schedule of upcoming walks, all of which are led by various experts.