

# LOSING COMMUNITY

## A look into Lilongs: the Shanghainese interstices that challenge the progress\*

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### INTRODUCTION

In the dense and vertical urban texture of Shanghai, whose neurotic rhythms influence the everyday life of its inhabitants, still exist interstice realities that challenge the “progress at any cost” and what it involves. Here slowness is still beating people’s time; togetherness, sharing and closeness come back to justify the sense of hosting society in such close spaces and, by extension, the sense of the city itself.

The contribute, which is a result of an analysis made by the authors during their stay in Shanghai and of a thesis work of one of them, aims to give an analytic photogram of some in-between spaces of Shanghai city. These places are mostly made up of Lilongs (里 li: internal, inside; 弄 long: alley, lane), typical Shanghainese low-rise high-density housing neighbourhood, and of even more ancient neighbourhoods that still exist in the Old City of Shanghai.

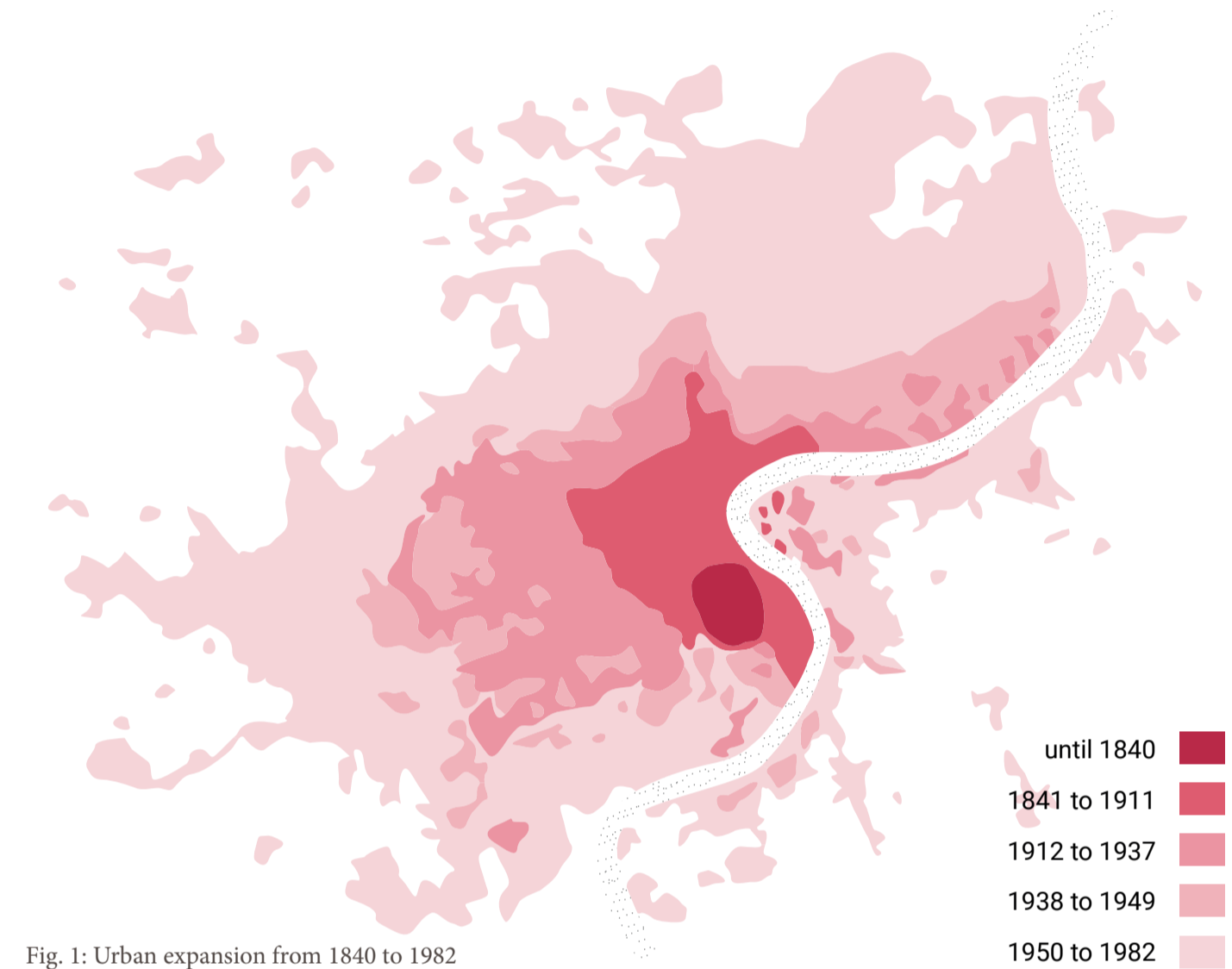


Fig. 1: Urban expansion from 1840 to 1982

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE CITY

The development of the city is deeply linked to a particular moment in Chinese history: the Opium Wars, which sign the start for a new urban and economic development of Shanghai. Before this moment, the city had an extension of just 2km<sup>2</sup> comprising the Old City, surrounded by a 5km long walls built in the XVI century, and cultivated lands all around. At that time, less than 1% of the population lived outside the city walls. By signing the Nanjing Treaty in 1842, at the end of the first Opium War, European capitalists gained the right to settle in treaty ports and to administer them, including Shanghai. Around the walled perimeter of the Old City (Chinese City for Europeans), were created Foreign Concessions that evolved and expanded over the years, to become the real core of the city (fig.1). In 1869 European landlords started to build high-density residential complexes called Lilongs to host Chinese families and workers coming from the countryside. Lilong’s layout, made with intersections of narrow roads, created a semi-closed environment in which Chinese sense of community was perfectly fitting in (fig.2). During the same years, the first Shikumens were built; inspired by Western terraced houses and ancient Chinese dwellings “Siheyuan”, they evolved over the years changing their typology to host more and more people. As early as 1914, the city expansion

Fig. 2: Lilongs layout. The Commercial belt surrounds the Shikumens

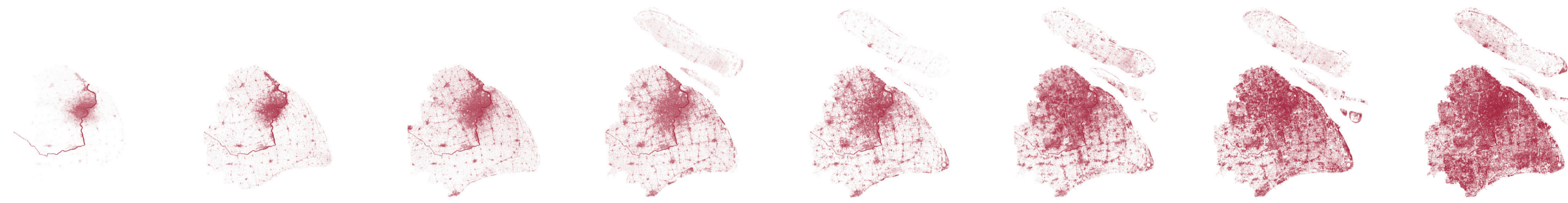
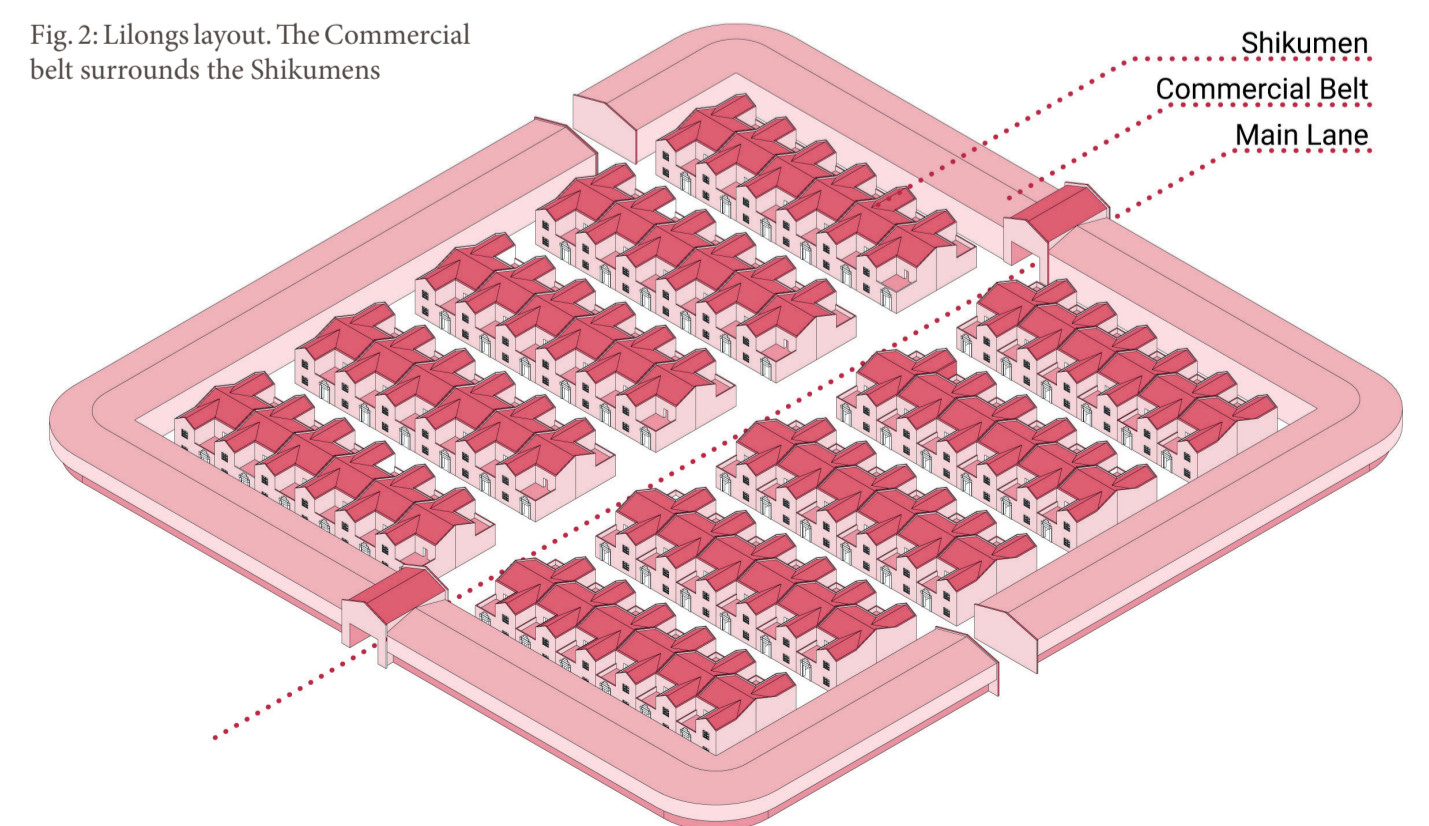
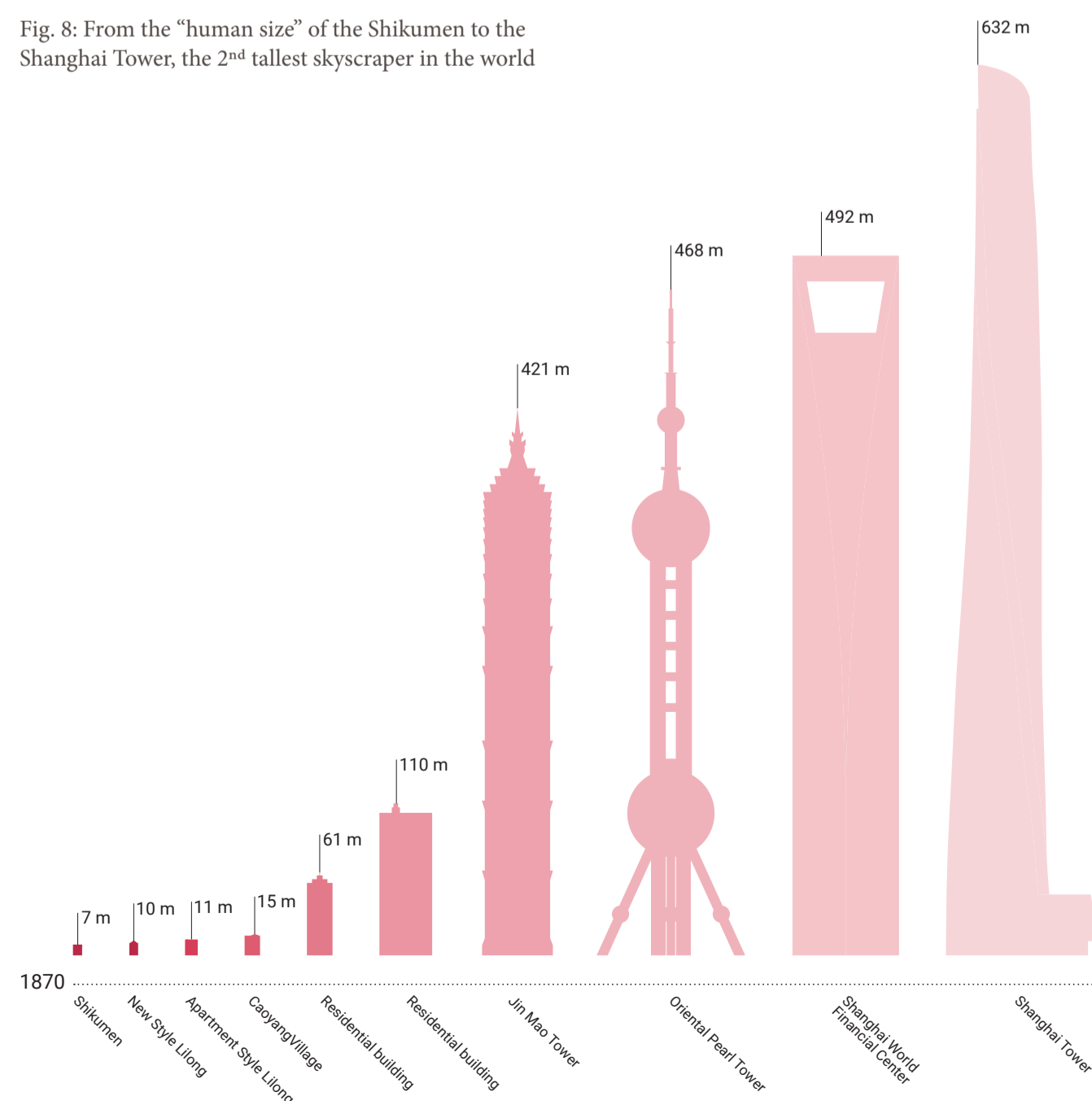


Fig. 3: Built expansion from 1984 to 2018



Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7: outdoor daily activities of the Lilongs

Fig. 8: From the “human size” of the Shikumen to the Shanghai Tower, the 2<sup>nd</sup> tallest skyscraper in the world



ded beyond 34km<sup>2</sup> (32km<sup>2</sup> was the extension of foreign concessions only) and in 1940 more than 65% of the entire population, composed by Chinese, Europeans, Americans and Japanese, lived in foreign concessions. This kind of cultural melting-pot allowed Shanghai to distinguish itself from the other Chinese cities and to preserve strong links with the West.

Since 1953 China decided to program its economic growth following a five years planning strategy; the same precise and systematic approach was adopted to design Shanghai masterplans which allowed the city to rise in the global markets and to develop as we know it today. (fig.3)

### URBAN AND CULTURAL INTERSTICES

Within this context of fast and intensive urbanization, Lilongs and, more in general, ancient portions of the city which have not been restructured and are abandoned instead, act as in-between spaces, in both a physical and temporal meaning. Thin and fragile realities, in these districts time seems to have stopped a few decades ago when people lived and worked in “communes”, where they constantly shared time and spaces. Nowadays, old houses owners use the interiors less than the outdoor spaces, which they share with neighbourhoods and where enjoy several activities; on the street they practise Tai Chi and gymnastics, wash vegetables, cook and eat, wash hair and clothes, spend free time. (fig. 4, 5, 6, 7)

For several decades many of the old dwellings did not have boilers and, because of this, public baths were highly used: bathing after dinner became, therefore, a further community moment. Today many of those buildings obtained boilers from government and, despite this, many of the inhabitants still decide to use public baths, to stay with neighbourhoods and spend time together. The developing process, which is still running through the city and which follows marketing logics, could cause the end of those social practises, typical of Chinese culture.

Starting from the last two decades of the XX century until now, due to the enormous income of people from rural places in the city, Shanghai experienced a severe lack of accommodations. The heights, then, took rapidly place into the city skyline (fig.8): some Lilong districts were utterly shot down, others underwent a process of gentrification (as Xintiandi or Tianzifang), and some others were being isolated, together with inhabitants, by the lack of maintenance and development. Following this practice, a large amount of Shikumen and even older buildings were razed to the ground to give way to a more capacious neighbourhood in which, following modern urbanistic rules, the enlargement of the streets cancels

the community sense which since ever characterized narrow alleys of Lilong.

### SURVEY

After a comprehensive analysis on the transformation status of the urban system and the Lilongs demolition, research has focused on the Old City district through bibliographic research, a comparison of different data, several interviews and photographic surveys.

Starting from the demolition of the surrounding walls in 1912, Laochengxiang (老城厢: Old City) has undergone an in-depth transformation process. Several portions of the district do not exist anymore: some historical batches, once occupied by Shikumen and older dwellings, has been fulfilled by tall buildings, others still wait for a new destina-



Fig. 9,10: Demolitions occurred in the Old City in the last twenty years.

Fig. 12, 13, 14, 15: Indoor photos of building in the Old City



tion of use (fig.9,10). In this way, the significant architectural heritage made of stratification, additions and subtractions dating back before the first Lilongs, has been partially compromised. (Fig 11)

During the interviews with inhabitants, some of them opened their house doors and showed us the interiors. Most of the ancient dwellings of the district are in a precarious state: not every building is equipped with functioning sanitary services nor boilers; electric and hydraulic systems are significantly compromised by age and lack of maintenance; wooden structures should be renovated and protected from fire risk (fig.12, 13, 14, 15). People that live in these places are waiting for better housing, despite the reluctance to leave their place: the demolition of their property would allow them to live in modern and safe apartments.

These places of transition, bulwarks of a culture that is slowly getting absorbed by modernity, should be protected and enhanced, as for something fragile and precious that Shanghai cannot afford to lose.



Fig. 11: View of the invasion of the modern and high buildings in the Old City

### CONCLUSIONS

A clear and well-structured regulatory system for the conservation of architectural heritage in China does not exist and, because of this, the preservation of historical goods is not always effective.

Shanghai’s Old City, custodian of the county’s first memories and valuable architectural and artistic artefacts, does not need gentrification and commercialization processes but, rather, a renewal operation to allow the inhabitants to remain in their native places and live in a dignified way. In 2006 a Conservation Plan was approved to protect 34 streets and several buildings in the Old City: nevertheless, several demolitions were carried out and the city was deprived of other historical parts. Shanghai Municipal Committee presented in 2018 a proposal with the aim to evaluate the Conservation Plan and finally adopt severe and efficient measures to preserve cultural goods. Despite that, in 2019, another part of the Old City district has been demolished. The road ahead to provide a robust strategy is still long and several contradictions are still occurring in the Country.

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\*The structure of this work is a product of a thesis research led in 2018 by Chiara Bocchino which ended in a hypothetical urban intervention imagined in a portion of the Old City. Further analysis and considerations for this contribution were conducted with Domenico De Rosa.

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