

***Chasing Chopsticks Street***  
*A Sequel to Foshan's Forgotten Qilous*

by  
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## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.



## Abstract

Since China's economic reform in the late 1970s, large extents of its cities' vernacular urban fabrics have been replaced by state-of-the-art high-rises in a building frenzy that was equally unprecedented in its destructive endeavours. Devasted were not only physical relics passed down from ancestors, but also the intangible heritage – memories, values, and rituals embodied in the architecture – that connected a people to its cultural roots. As local distinctiveness was sacrificially offered to a ubiquity of anonymous skyscrapers, the alarming loss of collective remembrance and identity awakens a fervor to reintegrate the past – in its meagre remains – into the modern-day city. Yet, contemporary practice, from the preservation of iconic buildings to the commercial-romanticization of entire historic districts, often bestow upon urban relics a seeming immutability that in effect jeopardizes their communicative potency to convey the age-honoured tales and customs orchestrated by the architectural artefacts.

This thesis explores alternative intervention strategies for vernacular buildings in the historic inner-city, to withdraw them from modern obsolescence and to perpetuate their role as active hosts of living traditions in the contemporary city. The investigation focuses on a cluster of dilapidating shophouses, locally called “qilous,” on Chopsticks Street in Foshan, China, one of the few remaining swatches of the city's historic core. The study searches for insights from the Chinese attitude towards the past, the shifting and the resilient patterns, examining contemporary and historical texts to understand the underlying political, economic, and philosophical influences. It dives into the macro-histories and micro-stories of the qilou's maritime typological genealogy and intimately local significance, observed and documented through a process of drawing by hand. It finally proposes design interventions for three qilous on Chopsticks Street, presented through a series of hand-drawn narratives, inspired by cinematographic approaches, accompanied by short poems. The stories, at once visual, architectural, and metaphorical, seek to unveil the buildings' accreted past and embodied significance in a contemporary language that can be perceived and interpreted by people today, and continue to cue cultural rituals for present and posterity.



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To Mom and Dad.

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Cooling house - lotuses on the roof terrace.





## *Prologue*



This thesis descends from three lines of preoccupations.

The first: my fascination with folklore. This includes not simply myths and legends, but the whole body of cultural knowledge encoded in customs, rituals, and built structures passed down from ancestors. The Chinese civilization prides itself for five thousand years of continuous existence. As a descendent of this ancestry, I am curious of how practical considerations, spiritual beliefs, moral teachings, and philosophical ideologies curate the way we inhabit physical space throughout the ages and, reciprocally, how do tangible forms manifest the evolving values that shape us then and now. Were oyster shells cladded on walls simply because ancestors ate the mollusks lots when waters were clean and fish was abundant? Why was I told to cross the wooden threshold with my right foot first? What did the seven robed guys do to have their gatherings in the bamboo grove immortalized in poems and on stone tablets? How does the sequence of rooms and courtyards recreate the cosmos? I want to know the answers to these riddles written in a disappearing language of forgotten symbols.

The second: to my curiosity for traditional ways and imbued meanings, adults – by that, I mean those who claimed the wisdom of “adult” before I – would sigh, “These old things, useless to keep, a pity to discard, what use is it for you to know these counterproductive things?” They are indeed useless in the sense that they possess no scientifically provable benefit. Yet, do we not all agree that these outdated traditions have defined you and

I, and them, as a unified people throughout the generations? Is it not enough of a reason that we *feel pity* for the loss to reflect upon how we can perpetuate the cultural memories with which we identify? It is understandably burdensome to be clogged up with obsolete remnants of past. What can we do, then, to keep inherited tales and objects relevant in the present? Can something be old and refreshing at the same time, as opposed to tired and useless? Does the past have to expire?

The third: there is a street of which I have meagre memories, but its image lingers in my head. I passed by Chopsticks Street on the way to lunch with my great-grandmother during a visit to my hometown, Foshan, China, in my early teenage. She lived around the corner from Chopsticks Street, in a condo tower rising on top of the new Oriental Plaza megamall. It was the compensation she received when constructions for the modern landmark razed a large swatch of the city's historic core, including her brick house and the alleys in which my father grew up. Chopsticks Street was at the edge of that demolition; its simple oldness now stood in stark contrast against the state-of-art shopping centre. Passing by, I glanced down the meandering street as far as I could. Its two-storey buildings, mottled brick walls, empty windows, and a few recessed ground floor shops still in business flicker in the waning light of yesterday. The melancholic beauty of this vernacular building cluster likens the gently sweet aftertaste of a bitter tea that lingers on the palate and in thought.

I suppose there is a fourth. This fourth one is a catalyst. On another visit to Foshan, my cousins took me to a new trendy shopping and dining quarter in the city. At Lingnan Tiandi, high-end modern



Fig. 0.1  
Peering down Chopsticks Street.

boutiques and cafes populated the narrow alleys and blue brick houses in a commercialized patch of Foshan's old town. "These houses," my cousins pointed, "See the curved gable walls that extend higher than the roof? These are called wok-ear houses, unique to Lingnan. We, Foshan, belong to the Lingnan culture." "But why wok-ears?" I asked. They shrugged. It seemed to be the extent of what they knew, or cared to know. If the very people of Lingnan did not know, then who would know? We strolled the alleys paved with granite slab and sat down to order drinks with Western names. The traditional setting in its precious quaintness – contrasting the wide boulevards and green-glass skyscrapers of the modernizing city – emanates a pleasant, drunken nostalgia. Yet, just like the drinks, I tasted in it a delusionary piquancy. Urban relics have been reduced to a commodified aesthetic appeal. The boutiques make very little efforts to address the histories of the picturesque shells they infilled; their gut-renovated interiors and overly orderly exterior disremembers the people and mode of life that coloured the bricks. LED signs and glass vitrines inject a new energy that could not fully replace the breath deprived from the aged walls. We sat at the heart of the historic city but forgot the sounds of its heartbeats.

Thus, the thesis departs from here. It ponders how the layered complexity of implicit expression characteristic of the Chinese culture came down to the superficial indulgence of historic looks witnessed in modern Chinese cities, and explores alternative design approaches for intervening in vernacular buildings of the historic inner-city to continue their embodied narratives for posterity in a contemporary, participatory language. The thesis draws upon traditional ideologies and customs to examine the

overarching phenomenon of Chinese urban development and the intimate mnemonic significance of Chopsticks Street and its dilapidating shophouses, locally called “qilous.”

The first chapter opens on the Chinese attitude towards its past. It speculates the parallel processes of destruction and construction – of physical structures, but often in association with ideological eradications – in shifting philosophical, social, political, and economic landscapes throughout history, observing an unprecedented intensity over the past century. It looks at the emergence, necessity, and fallacies of preservation practices, reflecting on international phenomena and the traditional relationship the Chinese civilization exercised with the built form. It criticizes the new rising culture of commodified nostalgia in the last three decades, particularly the commercial-touristic redevelopments of historic city cores, which promote urban relics in an accelerating forgetfulness of the authentic memories they bore.

The second chapter dives into the macro-histories and micro-stories of Chopsticks Street and its qilous, in record and in popular memory. Chopsticks Street today stands as one of the last remaining neighbourhoods of Foshan’s historic core, largely vacated and planned for commercial-touristic redevelopment on the city’s agenda. In a race against time, the thesis endeavours to unravel the ambiance of the street in its heyday and record new rituals that have evolved in its current uninhabited state. It traces the genealogical development of the qilou typology, which hybridized Western aesthetics with indigenous southern Chinese values and environmental conditions. In light of the inability for a physical site visit, a significant part of the investigation

adopted drawing – from shared photographs and verbal accounts in interviews with local residents – as a process of observation, documentation, analysis, and presentation.

The third and final chapter of the thesis responds to the recent attitude towards historic neighbourhoods and the specificity of Chopsticks Street with an intervention proposal for three qilous on site. It argues for culture as not static but a constantly, yet slowly, evolving process, in which old and new memories overlap as collective and individual remembrances imprint reciprocally. This thought elaborates into design approaches for the evocation and continuous accretion of cultural memories. The proposal also seeks inspiration from the cinematography of the acclaimed director, Wong Kar-Wai, in spatial and visual storytelling for both the architectural design and graphic representation. Finally, the thesis presents the re-narrated qilous in a series of hand drawn scenes accompanied by short poems, conceived to reveal the building's past stories and be continuously interpreted through philosophical metaphors composed from traditions, rituals, and literature.

May we not expense too quickly the wealth of cultural and architectural expressions we inherited from ancestors.



Fig. 0.2  
Re-narrating Chopsticks Street through drawing.



聖  
聖



Fig. 1.1

墟 xū

虛 xū

false, fake, empty, vacant, nothingness, illusory, imaginary

墟 xū, with the radical 土 tǔ, soil, earth

ruins, deserted place that was once inhabited

## *Age of Paradox*



## Destruction for Construction

“The twentieth century was the century of destruction.” Such was the remark of the urban preservation historian, Anthony Tung, following his on-site survey of the preservation efforts in twenty-two of the world’s most artistically and historically significant cities. “It was a century of dramatic urban expansion, improvement, and redefinition, but it was also a century when urban architectural culture was destroyed at a rate unmatched in human history.”<sup>1</sup> Cultural capitals from Rome, to Cairo, to Singapore, to Beijing asynchronously yielded to the same fate. The pursuit of industrialization and modernization fueled an ever-escalating speed and breadth of urban renewal in metropolises across the globe, which, dishonest to its claim, often did not renew the architectural and urban fabrics inherited from ancestors but instead mercilessly replaced them with inhumane widened roadways and ubiquitous masses of concrete, steel, and glass. If natural disasters, political upheaval, and intercontinental warfare had not been sufficiently indifferent towards the architectural relics of historic cities, twentieth century urban transformation consciously effaced the surviving character of traditional cityscapes at an unprecedented scale. “Half a century after the Second World War numerous planners throughout Europe, including Germany, have concluded that far more architectural history was destroyed in the urban redevelopment that followed the fighting than by the tens of millions of bombs themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

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1 Anthony M. Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis* (New York: Three River Press, 2001), 15.

2 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 17.

The global destruction of urban heritage was perhaps most blatantly executed in China. In contrast to Rome and Constantinople, whose ancient city walls in large extents continue to be a part of the present-day metropolises, the monumental walls of China's imperial capital – still guarded by soldiers a century ago – are today monumentally absent.<sup>3</sup> After the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949, Communist planners quickly condemned Beijing's mammoth defensive walls of more than five centuries to be a hindrance to urban (or rather, antiurban) expansion and modern development. Across the 1950s, the forty-kilometre fortification along with its barbicans, towers, and gates were gradually but decisively dismantled, sparing only meagre fragments amounting to less than one-twentieth of its original length, in order to build a ring of automobile highways and a subway. Beijing's walls consisted of the Inner City walls that surrounded the original capital and the Outer City walls that enclosed the city's southern expansion. Constructed from brick masonry, the Inner City walls measured ten metres high, seventeen metres wide at the base, and eleven metres wide at the top; the Outer City walls measured eight metres high. A witness described the manual labourers tearing down walls to be likened to "ants eating a bone."<sup>4</sup> On the time scale of human civilization, the age-old monument was devoured in the blink of an eye.

The massive walls of Beijing were not only a physically impressive achievement of the Chinese civilization, but also a supreme legacy of ideological expression in Chinese city planning. Initially built in

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3 Qing dynasty, the last of China's imperial history, was overthrown in 1912.

4 Michael Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), 282.

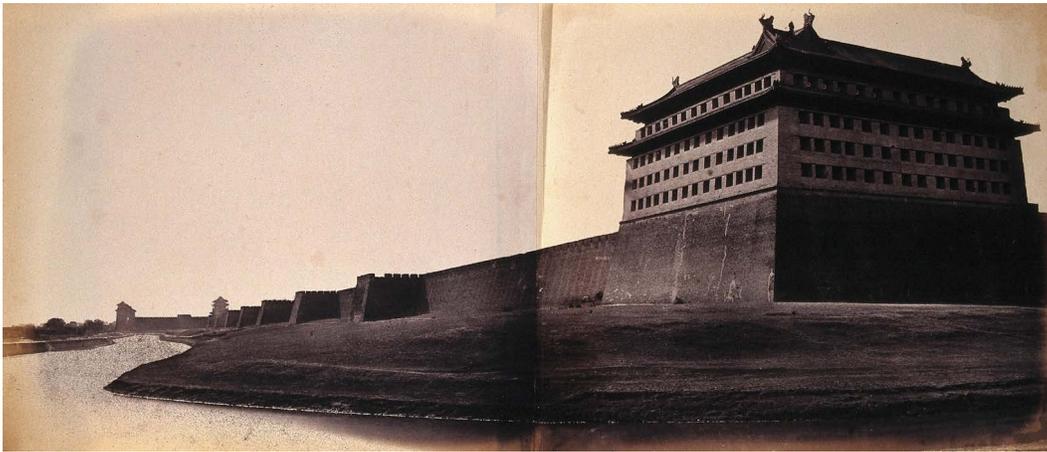


Fig. 1.2  
North and east corner of the city wall of Beijing, 1860.



Fig. 1.3  
The Second Ring Road of Beijing follows the footprint of the demolished city walls and moat, 2008.

the fifteenth century, the Ming capital metropolis was laid out in accordance with Chinese geomantic principles, a conception that mediated the realm of man with the greater universe, legitimized the rule of the emperor with the Heavens, and blessed the empire with auspices to thrive.<sup>5</sup> The city walls were integral to the design. At the physical level, they formally delineated the city plan's geomantic alignment with the benevolent forces of the cosmos and protected the city and its inhabitants from invaders. On the symbolic level, they safeguarded the thriving civilization and cultural values at the heart of the empire. Yet, Communist cadres of the 1950s were convinced that “the major danger is an extreme respect for old architecture, such that it constricts our perspective of development.”<sup>6</sup> As if human civilization up until this point had not developed from an accumulation of preceding generations, the erasure of architectural relics – and cultural memories stored in them – was deemed a necessity for the new China to move forward. When Beijing's fortification walls came down, lost was not only the defensive structure of the capital, but also the symbolic protector of the nation's civilized culture, now left vulnerable to the uncertainties of a rapidly changing era.

This, however, was not the first instance of self-initiated erasure of material heritage in Chinese history. In fact, periodic destruction of architectural inheritance seems to be an age-old phenomenon for this ancient civilization. After overthrowing Qin, the first dynasty

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5 When Ming dynasty (1368–1644) was supplanted by Qing dynasty (1644–1912), the new Qing ruler retained the Ming capital and Forbidden Palace as its own seat of power and imperial residence – this was the only instance in Chinese imperial history where a new dynasty did not raze the architectural relics of the previous one, although of course making stylistic and spatial changes.

6 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 158.

of Imperial China, in 206 BC, the rebel general, Xiang Yu, was famously known to have devastated the Qin capital, Xianyang, and burnt the Qin palace in a fire that blazed for three months.<sup>7</sup> Amidst the ashes, what survived for posterity, as noted by the respected Chinese architect and architectural historian, Liang Sicheng, was regrettably the customary razing of palace and major structures of the preceding empire by the founder of each successive dynasty.<sup>8</sup> Recognizing architecture as a vessel of past values and sovereign dominance, physical remains of the old regime must be eradicated to suppress the former rule, detach the people from its memories, and establish a new heavenly mandate. Effectively, such animosity

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- 7 Sima Qian 司马迁, “Xiangyu” 项羽, in *Ershisishi quanyi: Shiji* 二十四史全译——史记 [*Twenty-Four Histories Interpreted into Vernacular Chinese: Records of the Grand Historian*], ed. Xu Jialu 许嘉璐 (Shanghai: Hanyu dacidian chubanshe, 2004), vol. 1, juan 卷 7, 110. The *Twenty-Four Histories*, also known as *Orthodox Histories*, are the official dynastic histories covering nearly five millennia of the Chinese civilization. The *Records of the Grand Historian* is the first book in the historiography. Manuscript by the Western Han Dynasty historian, Sima Qian (c. 145 - c. 82 BC), it recorded the earliest Chinese histories known at the time, that is, from the rise of the legendary Yellow Emperor c. 2700 BC to its publication c. 91 BC. Original text, “居数日, 项羽引兵西屠咸阳, 杀秦降王子婴, 烧秦宫室, 火三月不灭, 收其货宝妇女而东。” Translated by author, “After a few days, Xiang Yu led his troops west and destroyed Xianyang, killed the surrendered Qin emperor Ziyang, burnt the Qin palace, the fire did not extinguish for three months, seized their treasure and women and headed east.”
- 8 Liang Sicheng 梁思成, *Zhongguo jianzhu lishi* 中国建筑历史 [*History of Chinese Architecture*] (Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 1998), 40. Original text, “周秦数世纪来之物资工艺之精华, 乃遇最大之灾害, 楚人一炬, 非但秦宫无遗, 后世每当易朝之际, 故意破坏前代宫室之恶习亦以此为嚆矢。” Translated by author, “The essence of materiality and craftsmanship of the numerous Zhou and Qin centuries were met with great disaster, at the torch of the Chu man, not only did the Qin palace left no remains, posterity at the conquering and changing of dynastic rule, assumed from this precursor the vicious practice of deliberately destroying the palaces of the preceding dynasty.” The Zhou dynasty (c. 1046 BC - 256 BC) preceded the Qin dynasty; as the longest lasting dynasty in Chinese history, it bred many of the major philosophies, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism, which would shape the Chinese ideology in the following millennia. The Chu man refers to the rebel general, Xiang Yu, who was a nobleman of the Chu state, one of the seven major states defeated and annexed by the Qin ruler during his conquest for a unified China in the late third century BC.

towards the vanquished state deprived posterity of traces of the glory and splendor of its own culture.

The last century of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was tormented by exploitation by Western powers, domestic rebellions, and government corruption, which conclusively weakened the Manchu court.<sup>9</sup> The final days of Qing struggled between internal reluctance and external pressure to adopt foreign modern technologies that pried into the Chinese cityscapes. In Beijing, the city's perimeter walls that were kept whole up until 1900 were punctured for the first time – a move decried by feng shui practitioners as it would bleed qi, a Chinese concept of vital forces that permeates the cosmos, and lead to the downfall of the capital – to make openings for drainage canals and railways that led into the city.<sup>10</sup> Not long after, the Qing reign was overthrown, ending China's two millennia of imperial rule.

In the decades that followed, Republican China (1912–49) turned to a pursuit of modern reforms on both the ideological and physical landscapes, which hastened the devastation of historic urban fabric. The New Culture Movement criticized classical Chinese ideas and promoted instead progressive Western ideals such as science and democracy. Meanwhile, leader of the then ruling Nationalist Party, Sun Yat-sen, called for a nationwide “reconstruction” to spur modernization.<sup>11</sup> “Reconstruction,” here, appears to be a euphemism for “destruction.” City walls and wood-framed imperial-era architecture across the country were toppled.

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9 The Qing dynasty was ruled by the Manchu ethnic people.

10 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 215.

11 Meyer, 218.

In Guangzhou, a political, economic, and cultural centre of southern China, the 800-years-old city walls were torn down while new streets ruthlessly cut through vernacular neighbourhoods. The dense, colourful lanes of Nanjing, a multi-time capital of several imperial dynasties and republican governments, “fell to wide boulevards.”<sup>12</sup> The approved dredging of Beijing’s moats and construction of a railroad around the city walls dismayed the superstitious, to whom the train tracks would strangle the city.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, brash modernization was also choking traditional culture across the country.

On this phenomenon, Liang speculated,

After repeated defeats by the modern powers from the middle of the nineteenth century, the Chinese intellectual and governing class lost confidence in everything of its own. Its standard of beauty was totally confused: the old was thrown away; of the new, or Western, it was ignorant. [...] The general tendency was iconoclastic. A great many temples were confiscated and secularized, and were utilized by antitraditional officials as schools, offices, grain storage, or even as barracks, ammunition dumps, and asylums. At best the buildings were remodeled to suit the new functions, while at worse the unfortunate structures were put at the disposal of ill-disciplined and underpaid soldiers, who, for lack of proper fuel, tore down every removable part [...] for the cooking of their meals.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 219.

13 Meyer, 217.

14 Liang Ssu-ch'eng, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture: A Study of the Development of Its Structural System and the Evolution of Its Types*

Amidst confusion and self-doubt, traditional culture was increasingly seen as the blame for China's disadvantaged position against foreign powers and failures of the Republic to address the nation's problems. Albeit certain reports of Beijing residents who "resent[ed] the determined effort to reduce this ancient capital to the status of a drab and modernized provincial city," antitraditional sentiments prevailed as the official zeitgeist when Mao Zedong, leader of the Chinese Communist Party, proclaimed the founding of People's Republic of China in 1949.<sup>15</sup>

The peasant-rooted party ascended to power with an antiurban bias: it disdained cities – traditional elite societies – as centres of consumption that produced few commodities. This unjustly undermined cities as production sites for intangible heritage assets, as incubators, refineries, and storehouses of civilized culture. Yet, the intimate association between traditional culture and feudalist China was intolerable for the Communists, whose ideological objective was to transform the country's consumer cities into production cities and convert the agrarian feudal society of two millennia into an industrial socialist state.<sup>16</sup> With "Learn Everything from the Soviet Union" as the slogan for Communist China's First Five-Year Plan (1953–57), Beijing planners aspired after the Soviet destruction of historic Moscow

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(Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984), 36.

15 Hallett Abend, "OLD PEKING NAMES AID HABITS BANNED: Nationalists Order That All Trace of Imperial Influence Be Wiped Out. RULE EXTENDS TO FUNERALS Dead No Longer Will Be Borne to Grave With Paper Trappings for Their Ease Beyond. To Banish Imperial Ideas Funeral Pomp Erased," *New York Times*, August 13, 1928, <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/historical-newspapers/old-peking-names-aid-habits-banned/docview/104357615/se-2?accountid=14906>.

16 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 149.

for the reconstruction and industrialization of its own capital.<sup>17</sup> Disregarding regrets of the 1934 mayor who lamented the partial destruction and wounds in city's various walls, the 1950s leaders administered the unrelenting demolition of Beijing's imperial bulwark.<sup>18</sup> Memorial arches and marble bridges gave way to widened roadways; the traditional streetscape that gave the city its distinctive character was punctuated by alien modern buildings, out of scale and disharmonious. "Like Moscow, modern Beijing became a fractured environment of unrelated elements."<sup>19</sup>

In the late 1950s, the Soviet model was dismissed when Mao turned his interest to de-urbanization and industrialization of the countryside.<sup>20</sup> The shifted focus, however, did not spare urban artifacts from ill fate. To secure political hegemony, Mao instituted a series of ideological campaigns to rectify the cultural realm, which incrementally intensified grassroots anger towards traditional values with a determination that climaxed in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Buddhism and Taoism were denounced as sheer superstition; Confucian morals were rejected; art, literature, folk customs, and all that which associated with Old China were culprit for the country's backwardness and had to be purged. Intellectuals and voices of opposition were censured as counterrevolutionary and sent to the countryside to be "re-educated," or persecuted by pro-revolution civilian mobs. Tangible forms of old values – most conspicuously, architecture – was sentenced to death. "Put destruction first, and in the process you

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17 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 158.

18 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 224.

19 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 159.

20 Mihai Craciun, "Ideology: Shenzhen," in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 49.

have construction” was the preaching of Mao.<sup>21</sup> Instilled with the objective to eradicate the “Four Olds” – old customs, old habits, old culture, and old thinking that were symbols of pre-communist China – and establish “Four News”, the mass student-led Red Guards destroyed innumerable cultural, historic, and religious sites across the country from temples to imperial tombs, to the Cemetery of Confucius. Pity the structures which existed as the physical manifestation of civilized history, cultural memories were furiously erased as fervent youths cut the most tangible tie between the present and a past otherwise inaccessible. Cultural Revolution culminated in a cultural havoc.

Despite efforts to achieve social unity via the redrafting of grassroots values, Mao’s Communist China was visibly marked by instability, conflicts, and, to a certain extent, chaos at both governmental and civilian levels. To obliterate the last vestiges of traditional values, Mao’s “last ideological battle, the Anti-Confucian Campaign (1973–75), attacked the symbolism of traditional Chinese cities.”<sup>22</sup> Geomantic siting and layout of traditional city forms were denounced as “Nature’s domination over man and man’s desire to conform to Nature – a deterministic philosophy believed to be advocated by the Confucius school”; Mao pursued, instead, the Legalist school of thought, which “believed in man’s ability to conquer Nature, and upheld a more pragmatic approach in city planning.”<sup>23</sup> The campaign attempted to reframe Chinese

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21 “Circular of Central Committee of Chinese Communist Party (May 16, 1966),” in *Peking Review* 10, no. 21 (May 1967): 8.

22 Craciun, “Ideology: Shenzhen,” 59.

23 C. P. Lo, “Shaping Socialist Chinese Cities: A Model of Form and Land Use,” in *China: Urbanization and National Development*, 144, quoted in Craciun, “Ideology: Shenzhen,” 59.



Fig. 1.4  
Vandalism of a gate at the Tsinghua University in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution c. 1966.

history – manipulating social values at its origin – in favour of Mao’s political theories and to criticize his political opponents.

Most alarming in the Cultural Revolution, daresay, was Mao’s mobilization of grassroots iconoclasm. Whereas large-scale destruction in the imperial era targeted structures in associations with the vanquished ruler, generally sparing civilian architecture and culture itself, Communist ideological campaigns turned the people against their own heritage and cultural identity. Though, the necessity felt by Mao to launch the Anti-Confucian Campaign perhaps revealed the resilience of deeply rooted cultural values to survive the previous antagonistic attacks. Indeed, Confucianism, as well Taoism and Buddhism, sat at the pedestal of Chinese culture, planted and nurtured over two millennia of reciprocal existence with the people, and albeit wounded, demonstrated resistance against modern attempts of uprooting. While Mao “saw ‘culture’—the conventions arising from cities and their persistent clinging to values—as a quest for permanence and individualistic concerns that thwarted the goals of the revolution by imposing difference and dissuading unanimity,” China is, in fact, as proven by history, “a civilization unified by a literary culture and by philosophical and religious traditions whose origins lie deep in antiquity.”<sup>24</sup> The Communist emphasis on unity was thus ridiculed by its endeavour to shatter the exact values that unified the Chinese people as the world’s oldest living civilization.

The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao’s death in 1976 as the disoriented country saluted Deng Xiaoping in 1978 as its

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24 Craciun, “Ideology: Shenzhen,” 55; John Friedmann, *China’s Urban Transition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), xvi.

new paramount leader to correct the “cultural upheaval and economic stagnation” from the preceding decades.<sup>25</sup> In reversal of Mao’s ambitious shot for a self-sufficient, de-urbanized, and geographically-balanced industrial economy, Deng’s economic reform and Open Door Policy sought to absorb foreign investment and technology, restoring the economic powerhouse and consumer status in concentrated cities. “Socialism with Chinese characteristics” – in other words, state-monitored capitalism until the country accumulates enough material wealth to actually launch socialism – departed with the designation of a handful of coastal cities as Special Economic Zones – enclaved laboratories for accelerated economic growth, importation of foreign investment, and market-driven urbanization.

The 1989 Law of Transfer of Land-Use Rights in the Shenzhen Special Economic Zone stirred a wave of speculative real-estate development, which, soon rippling across other economic regions, fueled the wholesale destruction of large tracts of historic inner-city neighbourhoods. Constitutional ban on land ownership and land transactions during the Mao era nullified land value and commercial profit motives; new constructions tended to sprawl on vacant land outside urban cores to save the hassle of demolishing built-up city centres and relocating local residents, circumstantially sparing the vernacular urban fabric.<sup>26</sup> When Deng’s reform policies restored the commodity status of urban land, it became suddenly

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25 Yuyang Liu, “Chronology: Pearl River Delta,” in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 39.

26 Neville Mars and Adrian Hornsby, eds., *The Chinese Dream: A Society Under Construction* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2008), 298-299.

worthwhile – if not highly lucrative – to bulldoze the outcasted old neighbourhoods to fabricate fertile tabulae rasae.

The traditional fishing village that used to be Shenzhen four decades ago seems fictional in today's metropolitan concrete jungle of shopping malls, offices, and commodity condos. When dust settled from the 1992 detonation of 12,000 tons of dynamite that levelled Paotai Mountain, Zhuhai's brand-new airport emerged from the rubbles. Since the 1990s, seventeen million square metres of shikumen lilong lane houses nostalgic of Old Shanghai has been replaced by a skyline of skyscrapers whose vertical aspiration would manifest the ambition of New Shanghai to be a global financial centre.<sup>27</sup> Entire neighbourhoods of old-fashioned hutongs and courtyard residences that gave Beijing its distinctive character were cleansed away for starchitects' modern icons in the capital's pictorial statement as a re-emerging world superpower at the approach of the 2008 Olympic Games. What emperors' egos, foreign aggressions, civil wars, and Maoist ideologies could not eradicate, the (socialist) market economy endeavoured to consume. So it turns out, economic reform was just another guise under which to continue the Communist purge of urban heritage. As remarked by the architect and researcher, Mihai Craciun, "‘Destruction for Construction’ proves to be the most obstinate legacy of the Cultural Revolution."<sup>28</sup>

The obsession with fabricating physical tabulae rasae also effected a cultural blank slate. Demolished with the traditional cities are

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27 Xiaohua Zhong and Xiangming Chen, "Demolition, Rehabilitation, and Conservation: Heritage in Shanghai's Urban Regeneration, 1990-2015," *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism* 41, no. 2 (2017): 84.

28 Craciun, "Ideology: Shenzhen," 109.



Fig. 1.5  
Everyday life of the traditional lilong lane houses in Shanghai.



Fig. 1.6  
The skyline of Shanghai's new aspirations.

not only picturesque gray brick walls and clay tile roofs, but also a cherished and intimate way of inhabiting the city that fostered, encapsulated, and manifested the cultural epitome of a people. Civilization conceives itself in the symbiotic relationship of a people and its architecture. Architecture is simultaneously a product by the hands of man, as well the shaper, witness, archive, and expression of human civilization at its heightened and low points of development. It is a host of cultural values and rituals that transcends the human time scale. It is the communicator of a people with its ancestors, descendants, and the spiritual forces of the world. The developer assault on vernacular urban fabrics thus atrociously severs residents from the cultural lineage that defined their identity.

“In the 1960s and ’70s, we destroyed our culture angrily,” regretted the Chinese writer and cultural scholar, Feng Jikai, “In the 1980s to now, we’re destroying our culture happily.”<sup>29</sup> Perhaps humble in nature, considered dilapidating and squalid by some, and especially an eyesore for those who covet the land oozing of speculative profit, the old neighbourhoods safeguard the spirit of the community and provide a site for exchange for local people. The aged walls lightly dressed in moss echo the laughter and footsteps of their endearing residents; the curve of the roof ridge speaks of ancestral aspirations; the patterned shadow of the carved wood lattice window reminisces of a fading craft. Destruction of these mundane neighbourhoods also erases valuable cultural memories and the richness of the local realm in its cherished mediocrity. The exhilaration of restarting from tabula rasa is surely

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29 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 176.



Fig. 1.7

A “cold alley” (*leng xiang* 冷巷) shared by adjacent dwellings in a village in suburban Foshan; the typology is vernacular to the Lingnan geographic-cultural region in southern China. The aged walls lightly dressed in moss echo the laughter and footsteps of their endearing residents; the curve of the roof ridge speaks of ancestral aspirations.

an act of self-deception – humanity is undeniably an inherited entity of its past – that will soon enough deflate into a sore longing for cultural roots.

Construction cranes waved in the air like magic wands. Delirious sweeps of airborne dirt were the modernist fairy dust from which rose an instantaneous landscape of repetitive arrays of apartment blocks, competing landmark high-rises, and commercial micro-cities in alien megastructures. As Mao envisioned, China's urban landscape has become an "ocean of smokestacks" – except not of factory exhausts pipes but instead gleaming glass towers that are the new engines of modern consumer lifestyles.<sup>30</sup>

Chinese city governments daydreamed after the "Modern Utopia" vision of the "PPT City," in the terms of the architectural and urban researcher and critic, Zhou Rong. Lacking a clear set of principles, it encompasses a "grand vision of inventive city wonders" to "convey 'the sense of modern' in the physical environment, with skyscrapers, extra-wide roads for automobile traffic, cloverleaf junctions, and brand-new buildings" as shown in Power Point presentations to dazzle bureaucratic guests.<sup>31</sup> To enhance the attractiveness and economic competitiveness of each city and site, officials and developers embarked on the universal quest to be individually iconic, which, stemming from the same visionary recipe, unsurprisingly resulted in collectively generic and anonymous cityscapes. The unrelenting construction spree of modern China hastily traded the distinctive characters of its

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30 Mars and Hornsby, *The Chinese Dream*, 250.

31 Zhou Rong, "Upon the Ruins of Utopia," *Volume 8: Ubiquitous China* (June 2006): 44-46.



Fig. 1.8  
The “ocean of smokestacks” of post-reform China.



Fig. 1.9  
The ubiquity of modern China.

ancient cities for identical urban pictures in the Chinese phrase “*qian cheng yi mian*” 千城一面 – a thousand cities with one face. Zhou lamented, “After decades of hard work to build and build, is so sad to observe that we have harvested building after building, while losing city after city.”<sup>32</sup>

Craciun speculated that the entitlement of “Special Economic Zones” slyly used the word “zone,” as it “imposes limits, but not spatial content”; while “city” is imbued with social ideological connotations, “zone” is “conceptually blank.”<sup>33</sup> The market-driven real-estate cult easily dissociated architecture from the traditions of meaningful human inhabitation and equated it with commodity, investment, profit, urban residency status, and the glories of being rich.<sup>34</sup>

Arguably, certain old practices, such as feng shui, survived beyond the erased slate, reinventing themselves in the capitalistic status quo. Departing from its original role as a set of geomantic principles to determine favourable siting conditions for human settlement, feng shui is now “used to fabricate ideal conditions from scratch” in order to advertise, predict, and insure the “inevitable success of commercial development.”<sup>35</sup> This phenomenon on one hand reveals people’s rooted desire to resort to tradition in times of uncertainties and great ambitions, on the other hand witnesses the market-contamination of cultural heritage.

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32 Zhou, “Upon the Ruins of Utopia,” 46-47.

33 Craciun, “Ideology: Shenzhen,” 87.

34 Nancy Lin, “Architecture: Shenzhen,” in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 163-177.

35 Kate Orff, “Landscape: Zhuhai,” in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 389.

It is, however, difficult to criticize deviated rituals as definitively offensive given that cultural resilience connotes the organic evolution and mutations of traditions in every historic epoch. Nonetheless, it is woeful to watch the rich Chinese landscape tradition whereby “each mountain and body of water is spiritually infused with motion, meaning, and dynamism” as a microcosm of the universe reduced to a feng shui “handbook for constructing ideal conditions and increasing real-estate values.”<sup>36</sup> It will only be a matter of time before China wakes in shock to the cultural desert it has created.

The only question: will it happen before the last vestige is deprived?

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36 Orff, “Landscape: Zhuhai,” 389-390.



## A Lethal Immortality

Perhaps in a wishful parallel universe, there exists a Modern Beijing that could tolerate an alternative fate for its majestic city walls. This Beijing coexists with Old Beijing. The pseudo-1953 master plan constructed the new administrative centre outside the walled old city, whose mammoth fortification was converted into an elevated urban park that surrounds the city. At dusk, citizens stroll the ten-metre wide terreplein – now a pedestrian promenade furnished with flower beds, fragrant of lilacs and ramblers roses, or lush grass lawns, as well as garden seats – as they take in the vast cityscape against a backdrop of rolling mountains in the northwest and endless plains in the southeast.<sup>37</sup>

Such was the proposal Liang Sicheng and his colleague, the British-educated Chinese architect, Chen Zhanxiang, submitted to the Communist party in the countdown to the doomed fate of Beijing's city walls. Liang, who studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1920s, was amongst the first group of Western-educated Chinese scholars and one of the first architects in China at a time when architecture was still neither an academic discipline nor a recognized profession in his own country.<sup>38</sup> His Western-influenced perspectives made him keenly

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37 Liang Sicheng 梁思成, “Guanyu Beijing chengqiang cunfei wenti de taolun” 关于北京城墙存废问题的讨论 [Discussion on the Question of Keep or Discard regarding Beijing's City Walls], in *Liang Sicheng quanji* 梁思成全集 [Collection of Liang Sicheng's Writings], vol. 5, ed. Yang Yongsheng 杨永生 (Beijing: China Architecture & Building Press, 2001), 86, originally published in *Xinjianshe* 新建设 2, no. 6 (July 1950).

38 Building was seen as a mere matter of masonry and carpentry in most of China's history, with little worth for artistic appreciation. This topic is elaborated in Liang Su-cheng, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture: A Study of the Development of Its Structural System and the Evolution of Its Types* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984), 36-37.

aware of the endangered heritage in his motherland. Together with his wife, the Chinese architect, Lin Huiyin, he travelled extensively, often to remote areas, to document, exhaustively, some of China's oldest extant wood structures, pioneering historical research on ancient Chinese architecture.<sup>39</sup>

In 1950, Liang lobbied against the demolition of historic Beijing in a proposal that would not only save the city walls in a physical sense, but spiritually reintegrate them as an active component of urban life – an innovative gesture that surpasses many preservation efforts even today. The Communists, however, did not share his enthusiasm and instead endorsed the Soviet advisors' plan to raze the old city. Liang believed that “[his] generation bore the responsibility towards ancestors and descendants to protect heritage architecture and its physical context, a responsibility not to be evaded.”<sup>40</sup> On many occasions, he reiterated to Beijing's leaders, “As we become more knowledgeable in the future, we will come to know increasingly of the value in historic cultural relics; on this point, I undertake to persuade you over a long time.”<sup>41</sup> Liang's fixation was incomprehensible in the antitraditional zeitgeist of

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39 Liang's documentation drawings were “lost” in the mail in 1957 and rediscovered in 1980, after Liang's death. They were ultimately published by Wilma Fairbank, a close friend of Liang and Lin, under Liang Ssu-cheng, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture: A Study of the Development of Its Structural System and the Evolution of Its Types* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1984).

40 Lin Zhu 林洙, *Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin yu wo* 梁思成、林徽因与我 [Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin, and I] (Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2004), 205. Original quote, “我们这一代对于祖先和子孙都负有保护文物建筑本身及其环境的责任, 不容躲避。” Translated by author.

41 Lin, *Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin yu wo*, 205. Original quote, “我们将来认识越高, 就越知道古代文物的宝贵, 在这一点上, 我要对你进行长期的说服。” Translated by author.

the time. For the remaining years of his life, he fought a “lonely, losing battle to save Beijing’s architectural heritage.”<sup>42</sup>

Preservation is humanity’s reaction to an irrecoverable loss – or, the recognition of an imminent extinction. When, under what circumstances, and with what motives the loss comes to consciousness is subjected to both sentimental intuition and sociopolitical maneuvers. The architect, urbanist, and theorist, Rem Koolhaas, ascribed preservation as a recent human invention. First emerged in the West in eighteenth century, Koolkaas listed it as an innovation of modernity, amongst steam engine, photography, Portland cement, railroad, gas lighting, and others.<sup>43</sup> It was at this moment of fast-paced technological and social progress, or perhaps because of it, that humanity caught a fever to secure memorabilia of the vanishing past.

The concern to preserve, according to the historian, David Lowenthal, arose from the recognition of the past as a condition different from the present. As this dissimilar past approaches extinction, or is realized to be already extinct, the unbearable sense of loss urged for its protection. It was a significant moment of revelation that came rather late in human history.<sup>44</sup> China’s sociopolitical and antitraditional climate for most of the twentieth century kept preservation outside its gates for even longer. The scrutiny of preservation would thus benefit from a broader examination of both Chinese and Western phenomena.

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42 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 275.

43 Rem Koolhaas, *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, ed. Jordan Carver (New York: GSAPP Transcripts, 2014), 14.

44 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country: Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 413.

Since antiquity, man-made artefacts and built structures, in whole and in components, were constantly repurposed to suit the status quo of each historic present or neglected when they lacked utility, absent of the notion to protect ephemeral traces of the past. Ancient temples were mined for their marble as construction material for new buildings; medieval Rome saw the Colosseum intruded by a handful of radical changes of use; historic ruins spoke of obsolescence and were remorselessly left to the voracity of time.

Proto-preservation statutes can be traced back to Rome in late antiquity. In 458, Majorian, Western Roman emperor, decreed severe fine and corporal punishment on those who quarried imperial monuments for their stone. In 500, Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths, delighted by the Rome's buildings which boasted as the "image of the empire's power and witnesses of its grandeurs and glory," reinstated the ancient Roman *curator statuarum* and instructed architects to preserve and restore the statues and buildings of the imperial city.<sup>45</sup> Neither the menace of chastisement nor the allure of ancient splendour deterred popular damage of historic structures at the time or in posterity; monuments lacking utility continued to decay. Despite the emergence of antiquarian pursuit during the Renaissance, much of early interest in ancient fragments stemmed from the desire to revive and emulate exemplar works of predecessors rather than to preserve an artefact for its own sake.<sup>46</sup>

China's routine destruction of built heritage reflected a similar neglect for the material expression of its culture, which baffled

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45 Tung, *Preserving the World's Great Cities*, 36.

46 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 414-415.

the longevity of this oldest living civilization. As the writer and sinologist, Simon Leys, pointed out, the ancient state presents a paradox of simultaneous material absence of the past and unbroken spiritual presence of traditional values and rituals.<sup>47</sup> Albeit deprived of ancient exemplar works, the indigenous system of construction in China retained its principal characteristics for more than four thousand years.<sup>48</sup> Observing this phenomenon during his multi-year stay in China in the early twentieth century, the French archeologist and writer, Victor Segalen, made an epiphanic revelation in his poem “For Ten Thousand Years”:

Nothing immobile escapes the ravenous teeth  
of the ages. To endure is not the fate of the  
solid. The unchanging does not dwell in your walls,  
but in you, slow man, constant men.<sup>49</sup>

Segalen reproached the “barbaric” and foolish Western attempt to build eternal structures by constructing with stone, which, despite being the strongest natural material, only delays the erosion of time but does not overcome it. He praised admiringly the Chinese wooden construction, which, employing a perishable material, respected and pacified the natural process of material decay by time by transferring the task of perpetuation from the building to the builder. In the process of periodic reconstruction, be it chanced by

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47 Simon Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 286-287.

48 Liang, *A Pictorial History of Chinese Architecture*, 8.

49 Victor Segalen, “For Ten Thousand Years,” in *Stèles*, 古今碑錄, vol. 1, trans. and eds. Timothy Billings and Christopher Bush (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), 101. Simon Leys’ essay and perspective were also influenced by this poem of Segalen.



Fig. 1.10  
Aging timber structure of an ancestral temple in a traditional village in suburban Foshan, 2018.



Fig. 1.11  
Timber structure, periodically repaired and repainted by villagers, at an ancestral temple in a traditional village in suburban Foshan, 2018.

imperial devastation or organic decay, permanence – of technical, social, and spiritual wisdom – is not bestowed to the immutability of the physical structure but to the people. Architecture becomes the noble medium through which cultural continuity is achieved in successive generations.

Chinese antiquarianism developed in the Song dynasty (960–1297), “a time of artistic and scientific flowering and political and military weakness.”<sup>50</sup> Persistent menace from the northern tribes and considerable territorial loss triggered a cultural identity crisis in the Song Chinese. Desiring reassurance, intellectuals resorted to their glorious antiquity for “spiritual shelter and moral comfort.”<sup>51</sup> Antiquarian pursuits almost uniquely prized calligraphy and painting, excluding architecture from its repertoire. It is, however, hardly a coincidence that the *Yingzao Fashi* 营造法式, *Building Standards*, the oldest extant Chinese technical manual on buildings and craftsmanship, was published at this time – insecurity impelled the people to document the inherited traditions of builders and craftsmen, which, all of the sudden, seemed vulnerable. The *Building Standards* specified construction principles from moats to buildings to ornaments, covering structural patterns, timber sizing, bracket proportions, mathematical formulae, cost estimates for sub-trades, material expense, carpentry details, wood carvings, recipes for decorative paints... altogether reiterating that cultural endurance prevails not in the built work but in the people through the active ritual of building.

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50 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 276.

51 Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” 290.

This intuition of eternity embodied in mankind is reflective of the ancient Chinese notion of *chuan cheng* 传承, to impart and inherit, a core concept that stresses on the succession – of skills and teachings – through a lineage – from father to son, master to disciple. The Chinese civilization from a very early stage, as noted by Leys, recognized that “there could be only one form of immortality: the immortality conferred by history. In other words, life-after-life was not to be found in a supernature, nor could it rely upon artefacts: man only survives in man.”<sup>52</sup> Within this traditional framework, the idea of preservation of physical structures was essentially unnecessary and irrelevant for the Chinese people.

Globally, scholars generally ascribed the nascence of preservative consciousness for relics to the French Revolution. The “acute sense of loss” aroused by “vandalized monuments and pillaged art treasures” inspired the 1790 Commission of Monuments in France – the first law of preservation ever defined.<sup>53</sup> Followed in close proximity, the Napoleonic Wars intensified both the degree of destruction and sentimental yearning for material heritage. In effort to reinforce national identity in the aftermath of the Wars,

“Nascent nationalism also promoted preservation: vernacular languages, folklore, material arts, and antiquities became foci of group consciousness in post-Napoleonic Europe’s emergent – and perennially beleaguered – nation-states. Prominent relics lent continuity to tradition and became guarantors of national identity.”<sup>54</sup>

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52 Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” 295.

53 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 417; Koolhaas, *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, 14.

54 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 415.

Historic remnants gained new significance as the evidence of one's genealogical roots and a source of self-reassurance.

Another crucial moment in the history of preservation was the Industrial Revolution. The mechanized mode of production brought about economic and social changes as well as radical transformation of the built environment, altering almost every aspect of daily life. As more Europeans were sundered from familiar scenes, nostalgia for bygone times sought solace in vestiges of the olden days. The nineteenth century witnessed unprecedented efforts in protecting historic remains from damage, decay, and expropriation.<sup>55</sup>

It was at this exact moment of Western longing for rooted identity when China launched its most aggressive series of assaults on its historic legacies. The ancient state, at the end of the nineteenth century, was still lush of the vernacular architecture that likened to the cityscape inhabited by ancestors. In a frenzy of modernization, ideological reconstitution, industrialization, and urban redevelopment, the twentieth century torn up the historic fabric that weaved together the accretion of cultural expression refined over five millennia. The undertone in the redefinition of national trajectory was to simultaneously catch up to – and perhaps surpass – the developed West whilst liberating the country from its influence. Foreign harassment in the previous century mutilated the Far Eastern empire and left its people with an identity crisis, which, this time, instead of seeking reconfirmation from antiquarianism, bred a resentment towards

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55 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 417.

its past. The iconoclastic zeitgeist suppressed instinctive nostalgia and discounted European preservation trends in China's newest efforts to triumph the West.

Beneath the surface observation of material loss as the driver of preservation – destruction has been recognizably a reoccurring phenomenon in the memory of mankind without rousing sentiments of regret until recently – the fundamental impact of industrialization on heritage protection perhaps had more to do with its core pursuit: speed. This is relevant for both the West and the East, albeit asynchronously. Lowenthal noted, “Until a few centuries ago most people lived under much the same circumstances as their forebears, were little aware of historical change, and scarcely differentiated past from present. [...] Few sought to preserve, if only because the sense of the past as a time no longer existing had not yet emerged”<sup>56</sup> For changes which occurred over long periods, slow evolution secured continuity between successive generations; descendants lived similarly to direct ancestors; the present and the past did not seem different. The speed of change since the Industrial Revolution, however, accelerated transformations to a state of blatant visibility that rendered even the recency of yesterday unrecognizable. For the nineteenth century historian, Frederic Harrison, the amplitude of change in human life in the industrial era appeared greater than occurred in the preceding millennia.<sup>57</sup> For the first time in history, humanity saw the past as a circumstance distinct and extinct from

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56 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 413.

57 Frederic Harrison, “A Few Words About the Nineteenth Century” (1882), in *The Choice of Books and Other Literary Pieces* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1886), 424.

the present. For the first time in history, humanity panicked at the losing grip of yesterday.

In Lowenthal's observations,

“The urge to preserve is triggered by the pace of evanescence. [...] Interest in each remnant mounts as it threatens to disappear – [artefacts] inspire affection seldom elicited when still plentiful. Nothing so quickens preservative action as foreboding of imminent extinction, whether of a bird, a building, or a folkway.”<sup>58</sup>

Speed, still accelerating, propelled human progress onto a trajectory that simultaneously sprinted in opposing directions: at one end, modernization eagerly discards the retrograde past; at the other, nostalgia frantically scrambles for keepsakes of bygone times, dotingly polishing the formerly-declared obsolete.

While the West panicked at the pace of change, China was elated. It was perhaps not that China did not recognize the sweeping speed with which its vast urban and rural landscapes were reconstituted, rather, official sentiments – especially through Mao's ideological campaigns and the market economy's intoxication with instant profit – preached the people to delight in the blatantly visible change. This brought about an alarming, unprecedented situation for the Chinese civilization: where as destruction of physical structures did not formerly pose a threat to cultural continuity because traditions inherit in the people, cultural disruption is now occurring in the populace. In China's building history, destruction

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58 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 28.



Fig. 1.12  
High-rise developments encroaching on old urban dwellings in Shanghai.



Fig. 1.13  
High-rise developments peering from behind a neighbourhood of old lilong houses in Shanghai.

and reconstruction, broadly speaking, happened gradually and sporadically, allowing successive creation to take place in the presence of some former memories, so as to not break the cultural lineage. The reciprocally mnemonic relationship between the Chinese people and its architecture entails that people and building intertwine in a cyclical process. The pace of change in the twentieth century, however, first of all, interrupted the cycle, and, secondly, reconfigured the physical and cultural landscape with a sudden totality that concurrently severed the people from the material and intellectual vestiges of its past. An unignorable cultural chasm emerges. Preservation of architectural relics is suddenly a relevant and pressing concern.

In opposition of the demolition of Old Beijing in the 1950s, Liang exhorted the Communist leaders, “In fifty years, someone will regret.”<sup>59</sup> It did not take fifty years for official regrets to emerge. In 1982, the national government implemented the Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics

“with a view to strengthening the protection of cultural relics, inheriting the splendid historical and cultural legacy of the Chinese nation, promoting scientific research, conducting education in patriotism and in the revolutionary tradition, and building a socialist society with cultural, ideological and material progress.”<sup>60</sup>

The law seeks to protect cultural relics in two broad categories:

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59 Lin, *Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin yu wo*, 205. Original quote, “五十年后，有人会后悔的。” Translated by author.

60 Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics, Article 1.

Immovable cultural relics, such as sites of ancient culture, ancient tombs, ancient architectural structures, cave temples, stone carvings and murals as well as important modern and contemporary historic sites and typical buildings [...].

Movable cultural relics, such as important material objects, works of art, documents, manuscripts, books, materials, and typical material objects dating from various historical periods [...].<sup>61</sup>

The statute outlines the legal framework for the designation of protected sites and objects but does not provide specific measures for the protection of the heritage. As a result, “a great deal of inappropriate historical restorations and redevelopment has taken place.”<sup>62</sup> Nonetheless, the recognition of historic relics as “unrenewable cultural resources” marks significant progress in China’s preservation efforts.<sup>63</sup> It also removed the seal on the door for scholars and the general populace to re-evaluate their relationship with history and speculate appropriate actions for preservation.

At the national, provincial, and municipal levels, governmental offices subsequently designated protective status to tiered lists of National Famous Historical and Cultural Cities (国家历史文化名城), Chinese Famous and Historical Cultural Towns (中国历史文化名镇), Chinese Famous and Historical Cultural Villages (中国

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61 Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics, Article 3.

62 J. W. R. Whitehand and Kai Gu, “Urban conservation in China: Historical development, current practice and morphological approach,” *The Town Planning Review* 78, no. 5 (2007): 643, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42744740>.

63 Law of the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Cultural Relics, Article 11.

历史文化名村), Historical Cultural Conservation Areas (历史文化保护区), and Historical Cultural Street Neighbourhoods (中国历史文化街区), within which, the number of approved sites grew from a few dozens to several hundreds in the past forty years since the enactment of the 1982 law. In China's emerging economy, the expanding list is often not the result of an innocent admiration of history for its own sake, but an incentive "driven by expectations for potential economic return, through raising property prices as well as attracting investment and tourists."<sup>64</sup> Concerning the designated historical protection sites, the journalist, Wang Jun, after ten years of research on the urban transformation of Beijing in the second half of the twentieth century, pointed out that "where the line of demarcation is planned, demolition will take place right up to that line." Outside of the protected zone, destruction rips apart the contextual fabric integral to the historic site, stranding it like a confused island in the sea of modern developments; within the boundaries, "protection engineering' also rely on the techniques of heavy destruction and rebuilding to construct reproductions of ancient structures."<sup>65</sup> Ultimately, the multiplying numbers of heritage designation did not prevent historic inner-cities from being gnawed away by the unleash of speculative real-estate development in the 1990s, of which Liang – fortunately, for the pain would have been unbearable for him – did not live to know.

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64 Ren Xuefei, "Forward to the Past: Historical Preservation in Globalizing Shanghai," *City & Community* 7, no. 1 (March 2008): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6040.2007.00239.x>.

65 Wang Jun, "City Lost," *Volume 8: Ubiquitous China* (June 2006): 77. The results of Wang's research has been published under the title *Beijing Records* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2011).



Fig. 1.14

The Donghuali district in Foshan's inner-city was once an exemplar neighbourhood of Qing-dynasty Lingnan dwellings. In the 2000s, large extents of the old residences were demolished and replaced by high-rise developments. Although a small cluster was preserved as a "Major Historical and Cultural Site Protected at the National Level", the highest level of heritage protection in China, the building shells were restored while the interiors were inserted with commercial-leisure programs, together branded as Lingnan Tiandi. High-rise developments press closely against the commercialized historic houses.

Since its invention in the late eighteenth century, preservation enjoyed enduring popularity. In a ubiquitous quest for modernity and rooted identity, national preservation programs multiplied exponentially at the global expanse, as with their archives of heritage designations. In examining the characteristics of the growing number of preserved structures, three prevailing trends surfaced. Firstly, the typologies diversified noticeably: primeval efforts to protect ancient monuments and religious buildings soon expanded to structures, as Koolhaas pointed out, with “more and more” but “also less and less” sacred substance, as well as sociological substance. In the status quo where “concentration camps, department stores, factories, and amusement rides” are being preserved, it can only be expected that every humble structure inhabited by mankind “is potentially susceptible to preservation.” A second observation noted that the scale of listed sites grew relentlessly: initial designation for single structures now includes building complexes, urban districts, and even entire landscapes. Thirdly, it is worthwhile to mention that the age of newly listed relics is increasingly young, as “each new preservation law [...] moved the date for considering preservation-worthy architecture closer to the present.” At this pace, humanity may enter into a moment where “preservation is no longer a retroactive activity but becomes a prospective activity,” in which structures are built to be preserved. Koolhaas summed up the phenomenon in his epigram: “We are living in an incredibly exciting and slightly absurd moment, namely that preservation is overtaking us.”<sup>66</sup>

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66 Koolhaas, *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, 15-16.

To a certain extent, the quantity of preservation is perhaps not so absurd as the act of “preservation” itself. In the very effort to perpetuate is more often than not the exact opposite effect. To safeguard an authentic remembrance blights its integrity. The sociologist, Diane Barthel, noted, “While people are drawn to historic site in the hopes of an immediate encounter with authentic, physical remains, this encounter is never unmediated.” Instead, historic sites are invariably selectively presented, recontextualized, and interpreted by a curator.<sup>67</sup> Margaret Farrar, an academic of political science, echoed that “preservation is always a choice about whose memories are considered worthwhile and whose places are given preference.”<sup>68</sup> Because relics embody an accretion of history and preservation is bias towards a static frame of time, curation of the past is inherently exclusive. Selective erasure becomes a precondition for preservation.

Protective actions are also intrinsically contradictory. To prevent further damage – by forces of nature or will of man – to a site, physical interventions must be made, which necessarily alters its substance or perception, often to its detriment. The spectacular expanse of the unearthed Terracotta Army at the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor is trivialized by its protective curved roof, whose steel trusses are awkwardly juxtaposed with the clay warriors and shroud the awe of the underground army as part of a much larger necropolis. “The iron clamps that kept Acropolis

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67 Diane Barthel, “Getting in Touch with History: The Role of Historic Preservation in Shaping Collective Memories,” *Qualitative Sociology* 19, no. 3 (1996): 345, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02393276>.

68 Margaret E. Farrar, “Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Place Memory,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2011): 729, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1065912910373553>.



Fig. 1.15  
The steel truss roof overwhelms the field of terracotta warriors and subdues the awe of their presence in a vast landscape as part of a much larger necropolis.

columns and caryatids from collapsing became, with expansive corrosion, a major agent of destruction.”<sup>69</sup> Velvet cords and glass cases sharpened the dilemma between candid experience of the material past and protection from a caress that destroys. The attempt to make the relics immutable in effect damages them. Yet, none of these disconcerting gestures seemed to have diminished, if not intensified, the affection of modern man for his mediated tangible past.

When simple protection was not satisfactory, preservation summon its accomplice, restoration, whose promise to return vestiges to the acme of their existence disguises its opportunistic motive to alter the past. The architectural conservationist, William Morris, dubbed restoration a “double process of destruction and addition.”<sup>70</sup> Its procedures foremost proclaim one moment in history as more valid and “original” than all others. As a frame of reference, any changes postdating the “original” must be reversed; all damaged elements up to the “original” must be reinstated. Morris, also found restoration to be “a strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of its history – of its life that is – and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.”<sup>71</sup> In a perplexing case like the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba, argued the preservation architect and theorist, Jorge Otero-Pailos, the

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69 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 422-423.

70 William Morris, “Manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price, M. Kirby Talley JR., and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 320.

71 Morris, “Manifesto of the Society,” 319-320.

sixteenth century consecration of the eighth century mosque into a cathedral superficially ruined the original structure, but it also saved it from destruction at a moment in Spanish history when the cultural spirit permitted, even encouraged, the demolition of mosques.<sup>72</sup> To reinstate to a prioritized past condition is hence to deliberately undermine the entirety of history as integral to the value of the relic.

For Lowenthal, “Restoration at best approximate or suggest what once was. And every restoration is filtered through and tintured by irremediably modern minds, making anachronism unavoidable.”<sup>73</sup> Not only is interpretation subject to inaccuracy, the restored product also effectively becomes a creation of the present rather than an artefact of the past. Eugène Violet-le-Duc, the nineteenth century French architect who has restored many prominent medieval structures in France, furthered, “Restoration ... Both the word and the thing are modern. To restore an edifice [...] means to reestablish it in a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at any given time.”<sup>74</sup> Because buildings are seldom built overnight or resistant to posterior modifications that cumulated into their characteristic essence, restoration, as a quest for the “original”, is an invalid pursuit from the start. Discerning the manifold of impossibilities, the philosopher and art critic, John Ruskin, disparaged restoration as “a destruction

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72 Koolhaas, *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, 87-88.

73 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 473.

74 Eugène Violet-le-Duc, “Restoration,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Stanley-Price, M. Kirby Talley JR., and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 314.

accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed” and “a Lie from beginning to end.”<sup>75</sup>

The most ironic consequence of preservation perhaps has to do with its instigator: the recognition of the past’s difference. Because the past-present continuum exists on the basis that today is practiced like yesterday, the conspicuous distinction between past and present admits to a discontinuity in human history, which the modern man seeks to mend with preservation. Yet, the very designation as historic heritage asserts this unequivocal disruption. As Lowenthal pointed out,

The past displayed is thus displaced. [...] The very act of display, like that of protection, detaches surviving past from present-day setting. Ongoing change around them leaves protected relics less and less at home in their surroundings. [...] The preserved antiquity is ultimately adrift in a modern sea, an isolated feature that stands out because it *alone* is old.<sup>76</sup>

Preservation can secure the past’s stationary position in the course of time, but it cannot stop time’s arrow from its obliged trajectory forward. In particular for the Chinese civilization, whose pre-twentieth century agrarian society and construction traditions honoured cyclical time, preservation halted the cycles and accelerated the nation on a linear vector. A past made stationary is thus a past doomed to distance away into an exacerbated foreignness.

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75 John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 194, 196.

76 Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, 438.

In many cases, endowing a fragment of the past with immortality fails to re-engage it with the living. Mark Wigley, a scholar and educator of architecture, planning, and preservation, recognized that “preservation is always suspended between life and death.”<sup>77</sup> Protected ruins, restored edifices, and museumized urban cores leave historical sites in a state of limbo: they stand as mnemonic devices of the history they tell but are neither alive in that history nor partaking in the present. Although exempt from perishing, they become too precious for further meaningful human interactions beyond the zealous gaze. Tourists at the Forbidden Palace, like sardines in a can, photograph the imperial halls tirelessly behind the velvet cords because noble preservation puzzled them as to what else to do in front of petrified history. As the motley assortment of spiritual and utilitarian practices traditionally hosted by the architectural relics is reduced to a homogenized experience of visual appreciation, its memories are also pre-decided onto appended plaques. The seeming immutability of cherished artefacts jeopardized their own cultural essence.

Farrar furthered,

More often than not, preservationists want to freeze time and limit the possible interpretations of a given space. Rather than the intermingling of past and present, our current situation often finds historic districts segregated from the rest of town, creating temporal as well as spatial boundaries so

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77 Mark Wigley, introduction to *Preservation is Overtaking Us*, by Rem Koolhaas, ed. Jordan Carver (New York: GSAPP Transcripts, 2014), 7.



Fig. 1.16  
Tourist crowds in front of the Hall of Supreme Harmony at the Forbidden City.



Fig. 1.17  
Like sardines in a can, tourists squeeze behind the barricaded front door to photograph the interiors of the Hall of Supreme Harmony at the Forbidden City.

that the place memory ceases to be integral to the fabric of our everyday lives.<sup>78</sup>

The effort in immortalizing the physical remains of local heritage simultaneously positioned them in a non-participatory role in the modern city. Nothing quickens human forgetfulness more than the absence of everyday relevance. In all good intentions, the shroud of preservation exacerbated the obsolescence of historic remains and accelerated their death.

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78 Farrar, "Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics," 730.



Fig. 1.18  
Locked doors with a banner on which writes “Sealed.”



## Nostalgia | Amnesia

Amidst the maelstrom of modernization and market-driven urbanism, China, beginning at the turn of the century, witnesses a schizophrenic behaviour: the unrelenting devastation of vernacular urban fabrics concurs with a sudden and fervent restoration of historic cityscapes. Residues of nearly obliterated monuments are eagerly repaired with bricks deprived of other relics; existing neighbourhoods are replaced with new master plans that reiterate traditional urban layouts formerly condemned; “brand new, ‘pseudo-antique’ buildings [rise] on the very site of the recently demolished city legacies.”<sup>79</sup> This reconstruction – perhaps better distinguished as “pseudo-reconstruction” – is not an exciting revival of the traditional Chinese practice of cyclical reconstruction that perpetuates architectural and folk customs, but a superficial imitation that effectively accelerates the deterioration of age-old cultural essence.

It is certain that these conducts were triggered by the unfading mirage of exotic, ubiquitous jungles of concrete, steel, and glass that dissolved the familiar old city districts with which the people identified. What remains ambiguous, however, is whether woes for the loss of cultural identity is a direct nostalgic reaction, a desire for the distinctiveness needed to compete for financial investments, a search for psychological comfort and ideological justification when stakes are high on the market, or the recognition of an exploitable commodity realized too late. If the rejection of traditions in preceding decades came from confusion and self-doubt in the

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<sup>79</sup> Zhou, “Upon the Ruins of Utopia,” 46.

redefinition of cultural and national identity, the recent restoration of urban material heritage under the experimental socialist-market economy reveals to be a new series of disoriented gestures that puts cultural legacies through another bitter ordeal.

Demolition of Beijing's city walls in the 1950s dismantled the nation's symbolic guardian of civilized culture and left it defenseless against subsequent decades of violent abuses. As an uncanny fulfillment of Liang Sicheng's prophecy that someone will regret in fifty years, a meagrely surviving scrap of the mammoth fortification was restored in 2002 as the new anchor for China's reconciliation with its material urban history.<sup>80</sup> Yet, rebuilding of the 1.5-kilometre portion of the bulwark demanded the relocation of two thousand homes and sixty businesses that had settled at the foot of the wall. To make a restoration "truthful" to the wall's Ming origins, the government further solicited the "donation of bricks" from city residents – a campaign that reclaimed two hundred thousand of the original Ming era bricks that had been repurposed in other folk structures.<sup>81</sup> Whilst the resultant Ming City Wall Ruins Park was a welcomed reappreciation of the

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80 The segment was spare because the subway's inner loop line (which circumscribed the city following the footprint of the demolished walls) turned into the Beijing Railway Station, built just inside of southeastern corner of the walled Inner City. The trains did not need to run beneath the walls at this location, thus nullifying the necessity to demolish this segment. As part of the restoration, the dilapidating remains were rid of their vegetated overgrowth, rebuilt to 1.5 kilometre of intact presentation, and reintroduced as the Beijing Ming City Wall Ruins Park. Pitiful of Liang's proposal of an engaging elevated park, the new park is an island bordered by railways on the north and a multi-lane vehicular road on the south; its wide terreplein is inaccessible except for a stingy portion at the eastern end; the ground-level green space featured an uneventful paved path that snaked along the bluntly standing bulwark. Demolition of the surrounding old residences removed the environmental context of the restored wall, exacerbating its alienation from modern society.

81 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 291.

capital's ancient monument, it revealed a distorted evaluation of historic values in urban relics, namely, the worth of organically evolved neighbourhoods and ambience of everyday life of ordinary citizens. If restoration of the wall must occur at the detriment of the material city and immaterial culture they endeavour to protect, what is left for the intact fortification to defend?

In the same period, the winning bid for the twenty-ninth Olympiad granted China a much sought-after occasion to narrate its national identity and ambition as a re-emerging superpower on the world stage. Beijing yearned to be a modern metropolis backed by historic roots. To be modern, “acres of centuries-old neighborhoods [were replaced] by a series of spectacular architectural icons” designed by foreign architects.<sup>82</sup> To legitimize power with history, the Beijing Olympic Park posited itself as the northern extension of the fourteenth-century imperial axis, aligning with the cosmic order in traditional Chinese geomancy and declaring itself as a continuation in the lineage of some of China's most historically significant monuments, including the Forbidden Palace and the Temple of Heaven. In fact, situating at the northern brim of the city foremost proclaimed the Park's elevated status, echoing “the Confucian understanding that what is superior is northernmost of what is inferior.”<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, the feng shui principles – denounced as sheer superstition during the Cultural Revolution – were revived to dictate the massing

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82 Anne-Marie Broudehoux, “Images of Power: Architectures of the Integrated Spectacle at the Beijing Olympics,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 63, no. 2 (2010): 52.

83 Carolyn Marvin, “All Under Heaven’—Megaspaces in Beijing,” in *Owning the Olympics: Narratives of the New China*, eds. Monroe E. Price and Daniel Dayan (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 249, Project MUSE.

geometry, building placement, and landscape composition of the Park's master plan. Presented with the unparalleled opportunity for global showcasing, it would seem that the high stake and burden of national ambition impelled authorities to resort to traditional practices for ancestral blessings, self-justification, and alleviation of psychological anxieties.

Superficially, Beijing's Olympic Park celebrates Chinese cultural history with its gestural reference to ancient legacies. De facto, irony besets this renewed devotion to traditions as it foremost denied local residents and the vibrancy of their old-fashioned living as integral to the heritage of a civilization. In recognition that cultural customs developed from and thrived in the ordinary populace, vernacular neighbourhoods – the totality of the people, the architecture, and the social relationships that allowed them to flourish – are the core of a civilization. A proclaimed connection to cultural heritage without its core would thus see no cultural continuation.

Yet, the delusion continues. As traditional hutongs and courtyard houses – increasingly viewed as overcrowded, dilapidating, and outdated dwellings of the low-income population in recent years – disappear from Beijing's urban core, self-proclaimed “authentic” replicas appear in the inner suburb's upmarket villa estates. An epitome of its type, Cathay View, completed in 2008, features a gated residential compound of repeated modules of single-family luxury homes with architectural elements reminiscent of Ming and Qing courtyard houses. The imitation, however, appears to be primarily cosmetic application to otherwise Western villas. From the exterior, the material and colour palettes

lend to a picturesque – albeit abnormally orderly – render nostalgic of Old Beijing. Within the residences, spatial relationships make little acknowledgement of the ideological microcosm that reflects natural and familial harmony embodied in the traditional layouts. Even less do the Western furnishings adored by China’s nouveau riche recall the humble but no less vibrant modes of life of ordinary citizens. While developers claim to offer an “authentic” cultural experience and owners enjoy the house as a showcase of their social status – as elites, somewhat ironically, and not the proletariat residents of the demolished hutongs – the “authentic” imperial-era villas disremember the traditionally lived courtyard houses.<sup>84</sup>

The phenomenon is pervasive in China’s latest urban developments. It would seem that, as ubiquitous tower blocks and mega malls overwhelm the city, topical application of historic aesthetics on copy-paste core buildings becomes enshrined as the panacea for the monotony of modernity. Indeed, when modern icons are universal, only bygone history is unique. In this forward – but also strangely backward – looking era, developers’ supply of antique distinctiveness appeals perfectly in line with consumers’ demand to counteract visual and sentimental anonymity. The architect and architectural writer, Kok-Meng Tan, offers insight on this matter:

There is an identity that comes with tradition: an innocent, unconscious way to see oneself as a part of timeless cosmology. If this identity is destroyed by outside forces, or re-embedded in a larger whole, we may call this process modernity. Identity is dissolving in a generic system of change for change sake, made

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84 Weiping Wu and Piper Gaubatz, *The Chinese City* (London: Routledge, 2013), 170.

compatible with other identities, commodified and ultimately sold – until modernity bites its tail. Then, suddenly, identity can be seen not as a hindrance to economy, but as a vital asset: for profiling, for grounding, for regionalizing, for branding.<sup>85</sup>

Tan furthered,

China Style: a quick fix way toward identity – where iconic traditional forms, spaces, elements, motifs are applied onto buildings. Vernacular Jiangnan dwellings suddenly become the epitome of Chinese classiness. Identity is here marketed as a recombination of identity-coded elements: walls, courtyards, patterned screens, koi ponds, bamboo groves, and timber pavilions, black and white.<sup>86</sup>

Because overnight modernization transforms the urban landscape faster than a new identity can develop organically, it must be deliberately created. Architecture, as the mediator between self and the city, is again conjured to define China's new generation of urbanites in a foreign-looking built-scape right at home. Historical garnish on undifferentiated building masses becomes the million-dollar answer – quite literally – to being globally contemporary but confidently Chinese. It seems to matter little that the arbitrary daubing of disjoint antique fragments fails to encourage a continued understanding of cultural significance embodied in classical Chinese architecture; it suffices to announce that sophistication exists. Here, the irony deepens: if appreciation for

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85 Tan Kok-Meng, "The Big Shift," *Volume 8: Ubiquitous China* (June 2006): 90.

86 Tan, "The Big Shift," 92.

the representation forgets the substance it connotes, representation diminishes to a hollow, stand-alone element. Identity founded on such representation is, thus, rooted in nothingness. No wonder cravings for history – even with paddies after paddies converted into pseudo-antique builtscapes – could not be satisfied.

Beyond a spiritual absence, these new landscapes of instant history also lacked the depth of time and memory. The sentimental yearning associated with bygone times returns awareness back to the layered values withheld in mundane old city districts – now an urban scarcity. As large extents of the inner-city continue to be replaced by instantaneous concrete jungles, the alarming rupture of cultural ties urged for the reintegration historic urban fragments in the contemporary city. Already skilled at the commodification of consumer sentiments, developers' new tactic sold nostalgia via the redevelopment of aged building clusters into a commercial-touristic spectacle.

That nostalgia is so readily commodifiable and even progressive for urban development in contemporary China is a rather particular condition that emerged from the country's economic reform. Hanchao Lu, an academic of modern East Asian history, argues that while an emotional longing for the past may seem illogical for a nation striving for modernization, for China in the 1990s it surfaced as a reflection of the relaxed political climate, especially towards the previously condemned old society, and the desire to reinstate its run-down cities to their heyday. In Shanghai, for example, nostalgia became its essence in the reform economy. On one hand, capitalist forces physically destroy the old city, providing the source for nostalgia. On the other, Shanghai's nostalgia rooted

in its past cosmopolitanism and commercial prosperity resonates with China's new economic aspirations, hence justifying its ideological restoration. Although most characteristic of Shanghai, this "indulgence of reminiscence" is observed nationwide. In contrast to the typical perception of nostalgia as a sickly longing for the past and a discontent protest towards the present, the Chinese nostalgic culture is joyful, forward-looking, and stimulating for development towards a modernizing future.<sup>87</sup>

Happy nostalgia as a marketable asset spurred a fervent trend of historic redevelopment projects in Chinese cities. Officially, these gestures are campaigned as heritage preservation. Behind their guise, the endeavours are more often than not an opportunistic occupation of historical buildings that does not hide a prioritized intention to extract economic profit from their time-honoured shells. In Beijing, Qianmen Avenue – situated on the imperial axis between the Forbidden Palace and the Temple of Heaven, where automobiles once joined rickshaws and trams as citizens on foot visited the flanking local businesses – has been converted into a pedestrian big-brand shopping street in 2008. Starbucks and Swatch, amongst other international names, are cloaked in wood columns, lattice windows, and dougongs with painted pigments restored to a level of saturation that perhaps never existed in history. Shanghai's Xintiandi redevelopment confiscated a cluster of traditional shikumen lilong lane houses from local residents, which it then gutted and re-inserted into the colonial-era crusts a series of high-end boutiques and fashionable dining

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87 Hanchao Lu, "Nostalgia for the Future: The Resurgence of an Alienated Culture in China," *Pacific Affairs* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2002).



Fig. 1.19  
Starbucks inserted into a historic building with super-saturated colours on Qianmen Avenue in Beijing.



Fig. 1.20  
Inside the Starbucks at Qianmen Avenue in Beijing. The interior speaks minimally to the original appearance, usage, and history of the building, apart from hints given by the window lattice pattern.



Fig. 1.21  
Neighbourhood atmosphere in Shanghai's century-old lilongs.



Fig. 1.22  
Neighbourhood atmosphere in Shanghai's century-old lilongs.



Fig. 1.23  
Xintiandi commercialized historic redevelopment in Shanghai, with modern high-rises encroaching in the background.



Fig. 1.24  
Xintiandi commercialized historic redevelopment in Shanghai, with the American Häagen-Dazs inserted into the building on the right.

venues.<sup>88</sup> Upon its completion in 2002, nowhere were the original residents or traces of their native mode of life to be found in the “preservation.” Nonetheless, the success of Xintiandi – in the eyes of capitalist developers and government officials who enjoy the fiscal numbers – inspired cities across the country to replicate its model. Lingnan Tiandi in Foshan was a vernacular neighbourhood redeveloped in 2008 as one of its sequels.<sup>89</sup> The stone-paved alleys and gray brick walls are intrinsically nostalgic to even the younger generations born into the tower-block era, but of what they are reminiscent has been forgotten by the self-concerned commercial functions. To their fortune or detriment, these commercialized historic zones receive enduring popularity.

Although these efforts are generally praised for preserving the tangible relic, they often limit to a perennially new shell that suppresses the intangible heritage integral to the value of the physical manifestation. The urbanist, Xuefei Ren, regrets, “Social preservation—a practice of not only preserving historical buildings but also consciously preserving the lifestyles of residents—is rarely seen in Chinese cities.”<sup>90</sup> In developer’s capitalist defense, many of these old dwellings and modes of life – from Beijing’s hutong

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88 “Xintiandi” literally translates to “new” (xin), “sky” (tian), and “earth” (di). The combination of “sky,” or “heaven,” and “earth” is the Chinese expression for the universe or world. The shikumen lilong houses are a typology of rowhouses that blended traditional Chinese architectural characteristics with Western styles. They were mostly built in the 1920s and 1930s, a period in Republican China in the presence of Western concessions. It was a period of entrepreneurialism and commercial prosperity often identified as Shanghai’s golden age.

89 “Lingnan” refers to a cultural-geographical region in southern China, broadly covering the Guangdong and Guanxi provinces.

90 Ren, “Forward to the Past,” 31. Ren draws upon the concept of “social preservation” from the article of Japonica Brown-Saracino, “Social Preservationists and the Quest for Authentic Community,” *City & Community* 3, no. 2 (June 2004): 135-156.



Fig. 1.25  
Lingnan Tiandi commercialized historic redevelopment in Foshan.



Fig. 1.26  
Lingnan Tiandi commercialized historic redevelopment in Foshan.

courtyards to Shanghai's lilong houses, to Foshan's vernacular residences – are obsolete. They suffer deterioration from the lack of repair and overcrowding, especially during the socialist era, and typically lack adequate infrastructural amenities such as individual built-in sanitary facilities. The upgrade of these aged houses is costly and generates little financial return. They are altogether decrepit eyesores on land oozing latent profit.

Yet, while a certain state of disrepair is irrebuttable, especially in comparison with today's modernized living standards, these time-honoured neighbourhoods undeniably host a set of vibrant customs and social atmosphere, which modern developments fail to regenerate. Michael Meyer, the travel writer who lived in Beijing's Dazhalan hutongs for several years in the early 2000s, shares,

Outsiders often called *hutong* neighborhoods slums, but the neighborhoods did not cause pathologies or problematic behavior. Our neighborhood was not a pit of despair; you heard laughter and lively talk and occasionally, tears and arguments, just like anywhere else. People treated each other with something I missed the minute I set foot outside the *hutong*: civility.<sup>91</sup>

Jason Ho, an urban researcher who rented and lived in Shanghai's lilong houses in order to integrate in the neighbourhood, observed that 80% of the social encounters, interactions, and gossips happens with a chamber pot in hand. The absence of private washrooms brings residents out from their homes several times a day to clear their containers at the end of the lanes, effectively

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91 Meyer, *The Last Days of Beijing*, 162.

fostering a close relationship amongst neighbours. Chamber pots are the trendy accessory essential for engaging in a good conversation.<sup>92</sup> In the dwellings of Lingnan, and similarly in every place of human inhabitation, the scenes of laundries hanging from bamboo poles extending from second-floor windows or spanning between buildings are intuitively heartwarming. They reflect level of comfort with which neighbours display publicly their domestic life; they portray the living soul of the house. With original residents regularly exiled to the city outskirts because their relocation compensation often did not match the skyrocketing prices of their redeveloped former neighbourhoods, the chances for cultural regeneration are even slimmer. Evidently, the values of living vernacular culture does not convert well in developer's evaluation governed by numbers.

In a study of the redevelopment of the historic Wide and Narrow Alleys in Chengdu, Martijn de Waal, a writer and researcher with interests in public space, makes a revealing point about the Chinese attitude towards preservation:

The watermelon vendor whose façade is made of broken wood panels, the improvised street cafes with bamboo tables and plastic garden chairs, the brightly neon lit mah job salons in decayed brick buildings, they did not fit the tourist image of an authentic historic neighborhood. The old streets were to be redeveloped to realign themselves with what tourists, most of

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92 Jason Ho, "Chengshi genzongzhe" 城市跟踪者 [City Tracker], filmed March 2018 in Shanghai, Yixi speech, 36:47, <https://www.yixi.tv/h5/speech/620/>.

them Chinese, consider to be “authentic China.” The authentic had to be removed and sanitized to become “authentic.”<sup>93</sup>

The scenes of “daily, working class life in the margins of modernization” do not meet the conventional expectation of Chinese “beauty” for the new middle-class and elite frequenters, both domestic and international.<sup>94</sup> Yet, further to the irony of outsiders who disdained the authentic old districts, a local shopkeeper expresses,

I don't like the modern Chengdu. Ten years ago, we lived here very comfortably. We enjoyed the neighborhood. We drank tea in our garden. But now it's a mess. Everyday when I walk inside I feel bad. Everything is so dirty now – it used to be clean. I've lived here for over twenty years.”<sup>95</sup>

How pitiful it seems that living history can only cash out its value from behind its sealed coffin.

Albeit deviating from the genuine image, governments happily use the romanticization of historic districts to brand their ideological aspirations. Plácido González Martínez, an academic of heritage architecture and urbanism, makes his observation from the Wulixiang Museum in Xintiandi, which selectively curates the past to align with Shanghai's cosmopolitan ambitions. Wulixiang features the display of everyday domesticity inside a restored shikumen lilong house. The recreated “original” conditions display “personal objects and furniture [that match] the cosmopolitan

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93 Mars and Hornsby, *The Chinese Dream*, 567.

94 Mars and Hornsby, 567.

95 Mars and Hornsby, 566.



Fig. 1.27  
Scenes of everyday life in Beijing's traditional hutongs that would not match the tourist expectation.



Fig. 1.28  
Scenes of everyday life in Shanghai's traditional lilongs that would not match the tourist expectation.

background of an imagined owner, an employee of a foreign company, and of the children, who are receiving an international education at Western religious institutions.”<sup>96</sup> The presentation wholly excludes the recent history of lilongs as densely populated low-income neighbourhoods and instead emphasizes on an idealized narrative of colonial Shanghai in its golden days in the 1930s. The sanitized shikumen evokes a nostalgia that, as Lu previously disclosed, resonates with the Shanghai’s most recent globalizing aspirations. The genuine truth does not seem to matter for Chinese cities; the key is to put on sufficient pretense that even the self is convinced that it is veritably living in the image it paints of itself, because it has always lived that way.

Surface-application and surface-display seem to be the fashion for China’s approach in mediating with its material past. On this pattern, the architect and academic, Yung Ho Chang, draws connection with the

Chinese placement of prosperity as a priority in life [which associates with] a more abstract notion of success that may be manifested in numbers and sizes, in titles and facades with little behind, rather than in the enjoyment of life. We live for our faces. [...] Chinese cities are inundated with face projects. This particular value preference also further explains the current popularity of iconic, symbolic, and sometimes extravagantly expensive, architecture.<sup>97</sup>

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96 Plácido González Martínez, “Curating the selective memory of gentrification: The Wulixiang Shukumen Museum in Xintiandi, Shanghai,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 27, no. 6 (June 2021): 546, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2020.1821237>.

97 Yung Ho Chang, “The Necessity of Banality,” *Volume 8: Ubiquitous China* (June 2006): 88.

Commercialized historic redevelopments in the recent decades also fit into the catalogue of face projects.

The trend also echoes the image-saturated consumer culture condemned by the French intellectual, Guy Debord, in this 1967 *The Society of Spectacle*. The prescient indictment criticized a then-imminent phenomenon of intensive commodification of culture and false satisfaction manipulated by mass media, in which capitalist-driven visual display reduces directly lived reality to mediated representational fragments. Economic domination of social life, executed by means of commodified symbols and images, leads to a degradation of “being” into “having,” then from “having” to “appearing.”<sup>98</sup> Applied onto China’s spectacularized redevelopment of historic inner-cities, authentic vernacular modes of life have been reduced to commodified disjoint encounters with the urban relics, accessible via capitalist-curated consumptions in the high-end boutiques, through which a quasi-historical revival is simulated. How pitiful it is to imagine that drinking an overpriced imported tea next to a perennially new historic-style building could equate the satisfaction of sipping from a clay tea set after making a checkmate move against a neighbour of thirty years, on a makeshift chessboard raised on a blue plastic pail, in the middle of an alley flanked by naturally-discoloured brick facades and potted plants, surrounded by an audience of passerby from adjacent houses, as a voice from behind the windows shouts that dinner is set... The commercialized spectacle paralyzes history and memory, falsifying the consciousness of cultural significance in an

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98 Guy Debord, *La Société du Spectacle* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), Thesis 17, first published 1967 by Éditions Buchet-Chastel.

increasingly homogenized urban landscape. Its most triumphant achievement is intoxication and hypocrisy.

In its optimistic intents, commercialized preservation bestows on historical urban relics a seeming immutability that effectively jeopardizes its cultural essence as it foremost dissociates the architecture from its past functions and embodied values. The unitized shops plugged into a historic shell forbid the cultural rituals initiated by and visitor interaction with the architectural elements, symbolic spatial sequence, material significance, geometric implication, and ornamental expression. It also disconnects the present with the hands that tactfully crafted each component and the traces of wear left by those who occupied the space yesterday. Romantic official publicity to “Search for traces of history” sneers behind the billboard as it knows too well none would be found.

Physical occupation of the building – generic concrete and plaster insertion, brand-specific design, or a pseudo-antique style that conceals the original interiors with mismatched classical elements – is often gesturally and spiritually severed from its architectural essence. Instead of allowing for a dialogue between the present and the past, the spectacular approach to historic structures creates a barrier between people today and the ancestors. The architecture no longer communicates the narratives it passed down from bygone times. The popular desire to experience “authentic” culture in these historical remakes only asserts such cultural absence in the authentically lived everyday life. The effort in immortalizing the physical remains of urban heritage simultaneously positioned it in a non-participatory role



Fig. 1.29  
Romanticized and muted historical shells at Foshan's Lingnan Tiandi. Modern high-rises peer out from behind.

in the contemporary city. The traditions once hosted by the relic are collectively forgotten; the presence of the building no longer evokes the memories of its past. Immersion in the commercialized hyper-historical settings only intensifies a collective nostalgia that is, in fact, collective amnesia.

With the vernacular urban fabric under continual threat both physically and ideologically, it is a race against time to investigate into fading local heritage and devise approaches to remedy the exacerbating cultural discontinuity between the past and the present from the last vestiges of material memory. Dilapidating old city neighbourhoods await an intervention that can communicate the embodied meanings of their architecture in a contemporary language that can be perceived by people today and cue continuing cultural rituals. Their aspiration, yes, longs to be freed from a non-participatory state of limbo and reengage in the modern city with an active role in hosting living traditions.

The past century has been an unprecedented turmoil for the Chinese civilization. Destruction left its cities in a landscape of ruins. Preservation, in its most sincere intents, is inherently fallacious. Urban historic redevelopment cannot untangle itself from hypocrisy. How do we then, with the last remains of vernacular inner-cities, save the ruins from eroding to an irrecoverable cultural void?



Fig. 1.30  
Nearly forgotten shophouses (*qi lou* 骑楼) in Foshan.



示



Fig. 2.1  
拆 chāi

拆 chāi  
dismantle, take apart, demolish, tear down

*(De)Constructing the Qilou*



## New Year, New Era

In the few days leading up to Chinese New Year 2022, Chopsticks Street in Foshan's old city was livelier and more vibrant than in the memories of many living citizens today. Flanking the 300-metre-long street, the dull and dilapidating shophouse qilous, largely vacated for over a decade, were coated with festive red paper banners, on which were written, with brush in gold or black ink, calligraphic blessing phrases for the new year.

财源广进

生意兴隆

Wealth enters from all expanse;

Business will prosper and thrive.

春夏秋冬行好运

东南西北遇贵人

Good fortune is met in spring, summer, autumn, winter;<sup>1</sup>

Noble<sup>2</sup> people are encountered from east, south, west, north.<sup>3</sup>

和顺满门添百福

平安二字值千金

Harmony for the entire household adds a hundred bliss;

The word "safety"<sup>4</sup> is worth a thousand gold.

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1 In Chinese culture, spring marks the important beginning of the year; Chinese New Year is also referred to as the "Spring Festival."

2 "Noble," here, emphasizes on someone virtuous and benevolent who will lend aid to personal or familial endeavours.

3 The four cardinal directions, by extension, connote the concept of "everywhere" or "from all directions" in Chinese culture.

4 "Safety" includes both the security and good health of family members.



Fig. 2.2  
Chopsticks Street five days before Chinese New Year 2022.



Fig. 2.3  
Elderly calligrapher on Chopsticks Street before Chinese New Year 2017.

Beneath the age-stained qilous, dozens of calligraphers, typically retired elders, from behind their makeshift stalls, waved their brushes gracefully across the red papers. *Dian, heng, shu, pie, na*, their brushstrokes were composed with vigor, spirit, and harmonious balance.<sup>5</sup> The antithetical couplets conveyed blessings imbued with China's rich literary references. Merry citizens, old and young, crowded around the booths to spectate the masters' agile performance and to purchase a pair of propitious phrases to hang on either side of their front doors – an age-old Chinese tradition to bless the household with good fortune, health, wealth, and familial harmony for the new year.<sup>6</sup> Inked on the paper were the joys of greeting the New Year; imparted to the people were the flavours of New Year unique to Foshan.

The ephemeral transformation of Chopsticks Street into the popular “New Year Couplet Street” is a local ritual that evolved organically only in the past decade. Two weeks before the Lunar New Year, calligraphers, all self-initiated individuals, set up their stalls between the qilou colonnades. The informal market is unorganized yet orderly. As many of the masters returned year after year, the sporadic stalls grew into a popularly expected phenomenon, attracting more and more calligraphers and visitors every spring. In contrast to the digitally mass-printed couplets of

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5 The eight basic strokes of Chinese writing are *dian* (dot), *heng* (horizontal stroke), *shu* (vertical stroke), *pie* (left-throw), *na* (right-drag), *ti* (lift), *zhe* (bend), and *gou* (hook).

6 Calligraphic works enjoyed a long tradition of artistic and literary appreciation in Chinese history; it is ever so mesmerizing to see a master at work today as the traditional writing medium disappears from the everyday life of the modern society. For an in-depth discussion of the New Year couplet tradition, Ronald G. Knapp writes comprehensively on the topic in his book, *China's Living Houses: Fold Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999), 90-99.

modernity, handwritten couplets embody the shared New Year aspirations and mutual blessings between individual calligraphers and customers, instantly fostering sentimental bonds between anonymous citizens. In some cases, local residents return to seek the same master that wrote their couplet in the previous year. The quiet and forgotten qilous, once again, are filled with chatters and becomes a site of exchange that joins urban strangers in conviviality. For a brief moment, it appears as if time rewinds, as the Chopsticks Street that renders helpless nostalgia on a normal day revives and echoes the social vibrance of its heyday.

Although unplanned, it is unlikely a coincidence that the New Year Couplet Street settled on Chopsticks Street. Calligrapher's stalls, likened to street vendors, migrate across the city from year to year. The desirable location is characterized by a balance of strong pedestrian traffic, local familiarity, and loose authority control. Old districts in the inner-city typically satisfy the infrastructural requirements for the informal stalls to thrive. In the vicinity of Chopsticks Street, altogether Foshan's historic urban core, New Year calligrapher's stalls variably occupied street corners and sidewalk spaces in front of vacant shops.

As urban redevelopment erodes the old city at the turn of the twenty-first century, Chopsticks Street lingers as one of the last old streets of Foshan. Imminent redevelopment, nonetheless, vacated most of its qilous, except for a few ground-floor businesses, by 2010. At this time, urban policies turned official and investor interests towards the development of a new urban core in the peripheral suburbs south of Old Foshan. In the same period, growing emphasis on heritage protection – be it for the appreciation of cultural history



Fig. 2.4  
Chopsticks Street before Chinese New Year 2017.



Fig. 2.5  
Chopsticks Street on a normal day, April 2022.

or a re-evaluation of its latent commercial value – braked further demolition of vernacular neighbourhoods. Redevelopment of Chopsticks Street was suspended indefinitely.

The undecided fate and dubious commercial value of the uninhabited Chopsticks Street were accompanied by relaxed official concern and absent proprietary control, which, on one hand, left it to dilapidation, on the other, made it a haven for calligrapher's informal stalls. Chopsticks Street also boasts the largest concentration of original qilous remaining in Foshan, the architectural characteristics of which further to the favourable conditions for stall-keepers: the rhythmic spacing of the columns demarcate a convenient width for each writing table; the recessed ground floor shelters the masters from the weather, while forming a casual alcove to frame each stall; the vacant storefronts, many now infilled with bricks, become a perfect backwall for the display of calligraphic works. Although calligraphers occupied the usual pedestrian walkway, the lack of businesses in operation, in addition to the narrow and bending nature of the street, discouraged thoroughfare vehicular traffic, rendering the roadway friendlier for visitors on foot.

Like the previous years, the last days of 2021 gathered beneath the discoloured qilous joyous citizens who hoped for good fortune in the new year and a smooth journey through a new era.

Yet differently, after this New Year, Chopsticks Street will finally confront its predestined fate: redevelopment. What the word entailed was ambiguous. Popular impression defaulted it to the demolition of the old and construction of a new; disappearance



Fig. 2.6  
Chopsticks Street before Chinese New Year 2017.



Fig. 2.7  
Chopsticks Street before Chinese New Year 2017.

of historic districts in recent years has approximated an inevitable natural phenomenon for the populace. Meanwhile, official accounts on social media circulated an agenda to “protect” and “upgrade” remnants of Foshan’s old city, including Chopsticks Street, by “restoring the buildings to their original historic appearance” as part of the new “Foshan old city tourist route”; no explicit plan or visual proposal has yet been found via public sources.<sup>7</sup> What appears unanimous is the presumption that the New Year Couplets Street will not be returning to Chopsticks Street next year.

Calligraphers, customers, spectators, and photographers, the old and the young all alike, congregated to indulge in the last savours of Chopsticks Street of this era. Apart from the usual elderly masters, this year, behind the colonnades also stood a group of youths who offered their calligraphic couplets with a cup of coffee. Another stall featured the next generation of calligraphers, on their elementary school winter break, who twirled their brushes

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7 Huashuo Foshan 话说佛山 [Speaking of Foshan], “Liansheng pianqu huohua gaizao, zuikuai yu mingnian chunjiehou donggong” 莲升片区活化改造, 最快于明年春节后动工 [Revitalization and redevelopment of Lian-Sheng area will begin as soon as after the Spring Festival next year], Wechat article, December 12, 2021, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LJ1mBjdlXuHVWvcf6E3YEw>; Wenshalu yizhong tuzhu 文沙路一中土著 [Wensha Road No. 1 Middle School Indigenous], “Jijiang gaobiao zhun gaoqidian fuyuan Chancheng lao jie Kuaizilu qilou lishi fengmao” 即将高标准高起点复原禅城老街快子路骑楼历史风貌 [Imminent high-standard starting point for the restoration of qilous on Chopsticks Street in the Chancheng District to their original historic appearance], Wechat article, November 11, 2021, [https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yBumDwZ\\_u2KDtFxsjtXpFQ](https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/yBumDwZ_u2KDtFxsjtXpFQ); Wenshalu yizhong tuzhu 文沙路一中土著 [Wensha Road No. 1 Middle School Indigenous], “Jijiang qidong! Liansheng pianqu jiang fen 8 qi fenbu shishi gaizao” 即将启动! 莲升片区将分8期分步实施改造 [Coming soon! Lian-Sheng area will be redeveloped in 8 phases], Wechat article, January 5, 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/LK5NoFXknWt7DZzsNdWbQQ>; Lian-Sheng area refers to the neighbourhoods delimited by Lianhua Road and Shengping Road in Foshan’s historic inner-city.

under the guidance of their elderly teacher. Chatters and laughter pervaded the air.

“May your business prosper, Master!”

“Yes, yes, by your noble words! Wish you good health!”

Both knew well, the calligraphers did not write for wealth, but to share the joy and tradition.

“Master, your writing is beautiful! Why do you not run your own classes?”

“I’m getting old! It’s enough to teach my grandchildren!”

Ink stone, bamboo brush, and the spirit of calligraphy, albeit obsolete in the eyes of modernity, can be passed down from generation to generation. Can Chopsticks Street impart what it embodied – past and present – to posterity?

Chopsticks Street is a vestige of the vernacular urban fabric exemplar of old city districts devastated by China’s intensive urban redevelopment in the recent decades. It presents a fitting occasion for the re-examination of intangible heritage hosted by aged neighbourhoods and the exploration of strategies to re-engage urban relics meaningfully into the contemporary city. While Chopsticks Street seems intrinsically ready to initiate new rituals, many of its collective memories locked in the past are quickly waning with the older generations of local residents, especially if political-economic incentives force a state of “protective” limbo on it. This thesis thus endeavours to uncover the historic cultural value and social ambiance of Chopsticks Street, and propose a design intervention to reconstruct a cross-generational continuity

between citizens of the past, present, and future, curated by a set of living qilous.

The mottled bricks and plaster walls of the qilous on Chopsticks Street whisper mysteries of their early history, layered with bittersweetness of their flowering and decline, dangerously fading from living memory as they are detached from the people who sustained their breath. The fleeting tales, embodied in these material witnesses of Foshan's bygone times, urge for a reconnection with their heyday. Yet, pressing redevelopment threatens to turn urban relics into another muted puppet of impostor capitalist manoeuvre. Concurrently, newly evolved local rituals pose a dilemma, in which equally valid modern traditions seem to have been able to thrive only in the despair of the old. Gathering all the propitious New Year blessings, this thesis embarks on a quest in search of alternative possibilities for Chopsticks Street and its qilous in a New Era.



Fig. 2.8  
Chopsticks Street, April 2022.



## Foshan

Foshan is a historic town located in the Pearl River Delta, with traces of settlement dating as far back as the Late Neolithic period. Subtropical climate and plentiful rainfall in this southernmost part of China prospered the region as a “land of fish and rice” (*yu mi zhi xiang* 鱼米之乡) – conceptually synonymous to wealth and abundance for the traditional agrarian society – since ancient times. The old town of Foshan, gradually formed from a congregation of local settlements, thrived as a commercial and handicraft town during the Tang and Song dynasties (618–1279). Ceramics, metal casting, textile, embroidery, papercutting, woodcarving, rattan weaving, and sculpted lanterns are amongst the lengthy repertoire of Foshan’s prided handicrafts, distributed via the Pearl River tributaries domestically and abroad. The Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1912) witnessed the most prosperous period of the ancient town, during which Foshan was celebrated as one of the “Four Assemblies of the World” (*tian xia si ju* 天下四聚) – the four most important commercial centres of Qing-dynasty China, amongst Beijing in the north, Suzhou in the east, and Hankou in the west.<sup>8</sup>

Up until the twentieth century, the vernacular neighbourhoods that constituted Foshan concentrated within natural boundaries

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8 Liu Xianting 刘献廷, *Guangyang zhaji* 广阳杂记 [*Miscellaneous Notes of Guangyang*]. Liu Xianting (1648–95), alias Guangyang, was a well-read scholar in the early Qing dynasty. His *Miscellaneous Notes* recorded everyday affairs of the Ming and Qing dynasties, with topics as broad as geography, hydraulics, calendar systems, mathematics, music, and medicine. Original text, “天下有四聚，北则京师，南则佛山，东则苏州，西则汉口。” Translated by author, “Beneath the sky there are four assemblies, Beijing in the north, Foshan in the south, Suzhou in the east, Hankou in the west.” “Assemblies” is interpreted as the gathering or concentration of people and goods production, as in a commercial or trades centre.

demarcated by the Fenjiang River on the north and a series of meandering canals on other sides. In the second quarter of the twentieth century, local commercial activities declined during the Second Sino-Japanese War and Civil War. Following the founding of People's Republic of China, communist mandates discouraged traditional handicrafts and set course for Foshan to become a light industrial city. The encircling canals on the east, south, and west sides were rechanneled or filled in for the construction of a ring of vehicular roads.<sup>9</sup>

Economic reform of 1978 accelerated economic development and urban transformation in Foshan, in transition to becoming a modern city with industry, commerce, and culture.<sup>10</sup> The surrounding expanse of farmlands and fish ponds seen from within the ring road was quickly consumed by a sprawling concrete forest. At the turn of the century, the expanded urban area of Foshan was designated as a prefecture-level city, amalgamating surrounding former-counties as districts under its administration, with an area of 3,800 square kilometres, thousandfold that of the historic town after which it took its name. As the modern manufacturing city it is today, Foshan continues to pride itself on a culture of supreme craftsmanship rooted in its handicraft history, which it sees as the “soul” of the city.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Huang Lihua, Jiao Zheng, and Tian Yisheng, “Fringe-Belt Phenomenon in a Historic Chinese City: The Case of Foshan,” *Journal of Urban Planning and Development* 145, no. 3 (September 2019): 05019008-5.

10 Huang, Jiao, and Tian, “Fringe-Belt Phenomenon,” 05019008-3.

11 Shi Yuqiu 石玉秋, “Gongjiang pinzhi wenhua shi Foshan zhizao zhi ‘hun’” 工匠品质文化是佛山制造之‘魂’ [Craftsmanship Culture is the ‘Soul’ of Foshan’s Manufacturing Industries], *Foshan Daily*, February 17, 2022, [http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-02/17/content\\_43469\\_212679.htm](http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-02/17/content_43469_212679.htm).



Fig. 2.9  
Foshan located on map of China.



Fig. 2.10  
Map of Foshan and its administrative districts.

The celebrated diversity and sophistication of Foshan's handicraft are reflective of the greater spirit of Lingnan, a geographic-cultural region in southern China, broadly comprising the provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi.<sup>12</sup> "Lingnan" literally means "south of the Nanling Mountains," in reference to the mountain range which separates the southern Pearl River Basin from the Central Plain that was the cradle of Chinese civilization. Distance and geographic isolation from main political and cultural regions in the north resulted in relaxed imperial control and relative freedom for Lingnan since ancient times. Local governance and artistic expression flourished with its own flare.

Coastal conditions of the region also meant prolonged historic contact with foreign groups, through the exchange with whom Lingnan's artistic and architectural cultures absorbed elements of Western styles. Particularly with Guangzhou, the provincial capital adjacent to Foshan, as a major port on the Maritime Silk Route and at one point the sole authorized port for foreign trade with Europe under the Qing-dynasty "Sea Ban," local merchants often adapted their goods stylistically to suit Western taste for export. Cantonese porcelains, for example, were often decorated with flamboyant colours, perhaps seen as vulgar by the imperial court, who favoured the restrained nobility in monochrome wares with subtle carving and glaze effects like celadons.<sup>13</sup> The maritime network also bred a number of overseas Chinese communities, the

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12 "Guangdong" and "Guangxi" literally mean "eastern expanse" and "western expanse," respectively.

13 Cantonese culture broadly refers to the vernacular culture centred on the Guangdong region, by extension also shared by Guangxi province, Hainan province, Macau, Hongkong, and some overseas Chinese communities with the same ancestral roots. Cantonese culture is sometimes synonymous to Lingnan culture.



Fig. 2.12  
Mountain ranges and the “Four Great Ancient Capitals” of China.

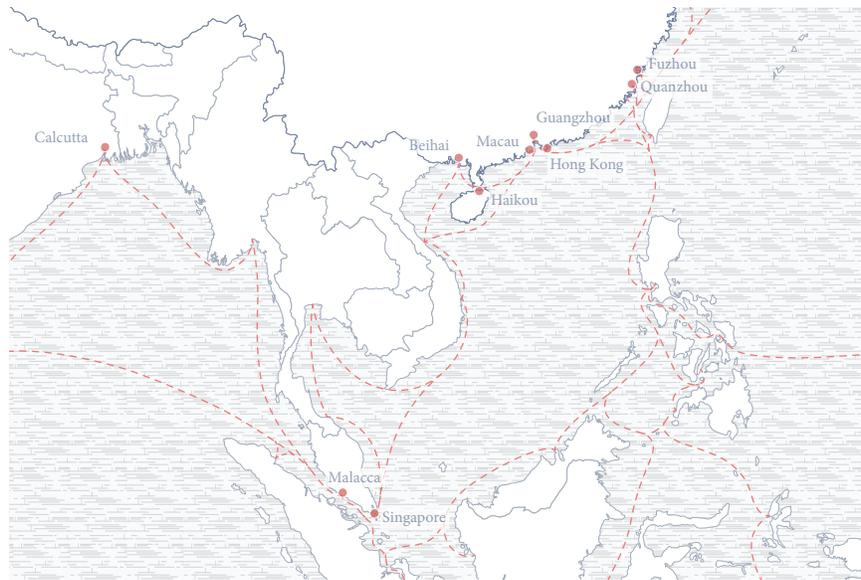


Fig. 2.11  
Maritime Silk Route around the South China Sea.

members of which, through their ancestral connection, imported foreign fashions back to their hometowns. The exotic Western facades of the qilous are a prime example of this phenomenon. Altogether, the people of Lingnan generally possessed an open receptiveness and flexibility towards creative experimentation.

Yet, Lingnan's deviation from official court culture led to its reputation as somewhat barbarous in the eyes of the pristine Central Plain.<sup>14</sup> As the landscape architect and urban design academic, Kate Orff, remarked, Lingnan was "synonymous with 'tasteless and unrefined'—culturally bankrupt—to those in the north." Given its geographic remoteness and historic contact with the West, "Guangdong is viewed by northerners as an uncivilized frontier, to which disgraced officials were exiled as punishment."<sup>15</sup> The architect and researcher, Mihai Craciun, furthered, "Located far from China's political and cultural centers, Beijing and Shanghai, the Pearl River Delta had been derided during the past centuries as a 'cultural desert'—a prejudice made clear against the Chinese merchants dealing with the West."<sup>16</sup>

In a twist of fate, Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy of 1978 suddenly elevated the Pearl River Delta from outcast to China's

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14 In traditional Chinese ideologies, the pursuit for superiority was an inward pursuit; the most elevated and pure position worthy of reverence was that which was located at the centre; things remote from the centre and beyond the imperial national boundaries were seen as savage and inferior. This was the root for Imperial China's dislike for foreign contact, the strict sea bans, and abandonment of maritime exploration when it, at one point in history, possessed highly advanced naval fleets. Mark Knapp offers an elaborate discussion on this topic in "Chinese Culturalism: The Underlying Factor," *Navigating the Great Divergence* 3 (2010): 94-103.

15 Kate Orff, "Landscape: Zhuhai," in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 353-355.

16 Mihai Craciun, "Ideology: Shenzhen," in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 111.

“bright pearl on the palm.”<sup>17</sup> The incentives were certainly not innocent. The ideological shift and new desires to import Western investments re-evaluated Lingnan’s disparaged qualities as highly capitalizable assets. As noted by Craciun, “The area’s notorious disregard of the central government’s authority could be exploited as *entrepreneurial spirit*, needed to activate the market reform.”<sup>18</sup> The architect and researcher, Yuyang Liu, further speculated,

[...] there were still major concerns about the potential for foreign capitalist contamination or even imperial invasion as the result of any opening to Western influences. The selection of the first coastal location to open to foreigners thus became highly strategic; the place had to be as nonthreatening—or as dispensable—to Beijing as possible, yet it also had to have the potential to succeed in order to prove that the reforms could work.

[...]

Guangdong, with almost 80 percent of overseas Chinese originating from the region, had enormous potential to attract overseas investment. Furthermore, many Beijing reformers who had served in Guangdong were convinced that the Guangdong cadres were more daring and receptive to trying new strategies.<sup>19</sup>

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17 *Zhang shang ming zhu* 掌上明珠, translating to “bright pearl on the palm,” is a Chinese expression for parents’ fondly loved daughters.

18 Craciun, “Ideology: Shenzhen,” 111.

19 Yuyang Liu, “Policy: Guangzhou,” in *Project on the City I: Great Leap Forward*, ed. Chuihua Judy Chung et al. (Köln: Taschen, 2001), 433.

Adjacency to Hongkong and Macau – Western concessions that were formerly seen as a disgrace to China – also anticipated an overflow of foreign capital, which the Pearl River Delta now makes itself ready to absorb. Already a conceptual tabula rasa in the eyes of Chinese officials, this remote southern coast is only steps away from being a physical blank slate and a truly fertile ground for new ambitions.

Although not an independent special economic zone, Foshan constitutes one of the nine cities of the Pearl River Delta Economic Zone – the most economically dynamic region in China since the economic reform and altogether a megalopolis firing on all cylinders. The historic core of Foshan retained much of its Ming-Qing appearance up until 2000; construction in the old town densified rare open plots or redeveloped sporadic singular sites. The early real estate market yielded greater economic efficiency from the development of peripheral rural lands. Large-scale inner-city redevelopment inaugurated with the new century. The Yong'an subdistrict of Foshan's historic core, expectant of infrastructural connectivity with Guangzhou, was notably razed for the construction of the Oriental Plaza shopping centre. Six roads and 148 streets and alleys of the Qing-dynasty commercial hub gave way to a state-of-the-art megamall that would materialize official ambition of creating an “international tourism zone” and the “aircraft carrier” of Foshan's economic development in a new era.<sup>20</sup>

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20 Yang Jianbo 杨俭波, Li Fan 李凡, and Huang Wei 黄维, “Lishi wenhua mingcheng gaizaozhong chengshi gengxin gainian de yansheng, xiangxiang he renzhi juxianxing: yi Foshan Lingnan Tiandi ‘sanjiu’ gaizao wei anli” 历史文化名城改造中城市更新概念的衍生、想象和认知局限性——以佛山岭南天地“三旧”改造为案例 [Evolution, Mechanism and Restriction of Utilizing the Conception of Urban Renewal for Famous Historical and Cultural Cities: A Case Study of the Transformation of “the Three Olds” in “Lingnan Tiandi” of Foshan], *Tropical Geography* 35, no. 2 (2015): 172.



Fig. 2.13

Baihua Plaza, shopping mall and offices, at the south-west corner of Foshan's old town, constructed in 1996, the grandest and most popular modern commercial shopping complex in the city at the time; a sea of tower block developments in the background, on land that served agricultural functions only a decade earlier.

Following the completion of Oriental Plaza in 2003, inner-city redevelopment stagnated at the protest of local residents and criticism of the loss of local distinctiveness; investment efforts shifted towards outer suburbs with less developmental resistance. Yet, aging old districts did not match Foshan's aspired image as "a high-end, modern business core and a development system for modern industries" that would uphold the city's competitiveness in the Pearl River Delta.<sup>21</sup> In 2007, the Foshan municipal government launched the "Three Olds" Redevelopment Program as a sly workaround to "upgrade" and redevelop broadly "old towns," "old factory buildings," and "old villages" around the city. Under the new scheme, the Zumiao-Donghuali historic subdistrict was redeveloped into the popular Lingnan Tiandi commercial-leisure zone.

Consisting of the Ancestral Temple Complex and the most exemplar cluster of Lingnan residences of Ming-Qing Foshan, the Zumiao-Donghuali subdistrict was formerly declared as a core protection area of Foshan's historic-cultural old town under various heritage protection policies in the 1990s. Prior to the redevelopment, however, official reference to the area shifted from "Zumiao-Donghuali Historic-Cultural Area" to simply "Zumiao-Donghuali Area"; the "historic core" was diluted as "old town neighbourhood." The academics, Yang Jianbo, Li Fan, and Huang Wei, speculated that, while "historic core" intrinsically declares a need for protection, which imposes strict limitations for redevelopment, the identity as an "old neighbourhood" clears the conceptual obstacles for what can be done physically to the

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21 Yang, Li, and Huang, "Lishi wenhua mincheng gaizao," 172-173.

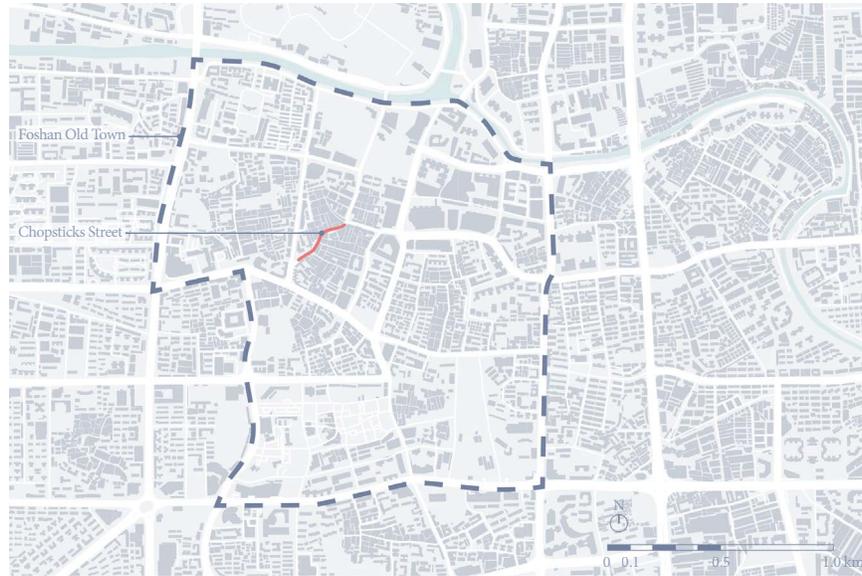


Fig. 2.15  
Old town of Foshan.

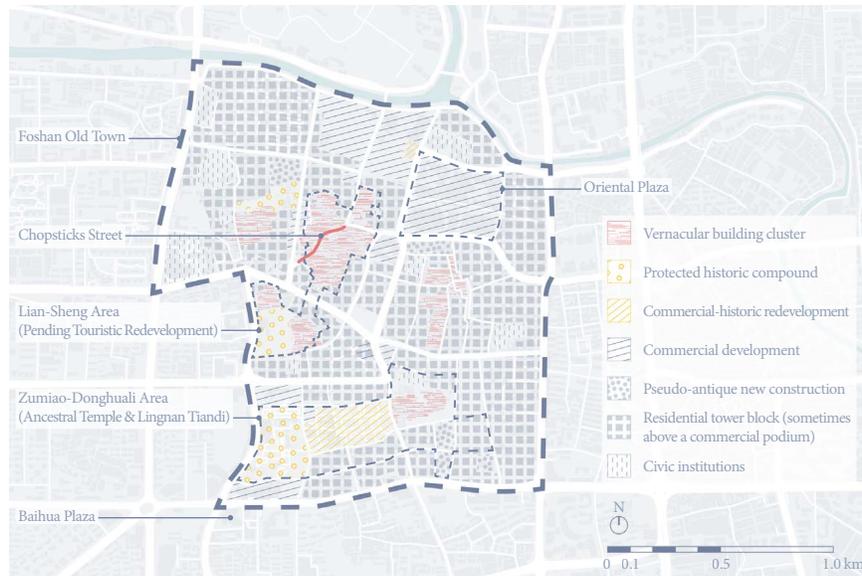


Fig. 2.14  
Old Town of Foshan, redevelopment status, c. 2022.

buildings.<sup>22</sup> As one of the “Three Olds,” Foshan’s old districts could be cleansed, redeveloped, and romanticized to improve the city’s image without controversial demolition and without official burdens of heritage preservation.

The local government and developer prided Lingnan Tiandi as a fusion of Lingnan characteristics, local traditions, and present-day commercial spirit, altogether a fashionable landmark representative of Foshan’s prosperity, fine taste, economic strength, and cultural competitiveness.<sup>23</sup> It is, however, unconvincing from the heritage preservation perspective, from which the commercialization of old neighbourhoods is a ruthless act of distorting and homogenizing local history. Yang, Li, and Wei remarked that the emphasis on “Lingnan” was foremost an attempt to elevate Foshan to a status of greater regional importance at the sacrifice of distinctiveness specific to Zumiao-Donghuali. Globalizing incentives invited high-end and brand-name shops, which not only dispelled the traditional ambiance of local small businesses, but also rendered the area unaffordable for the average citizen. With the original residents expelled from the old dwellings, local rituals and modes of life that characterized the neighbourhood also fell apart. Lingnan Tiandi no longer emanates the small town feel of its traditional existence; it has become a modern landmark concentrated with the government’s new economic aspiration and real-estate evaluation.<sup>24</sup> While younger citizens and tourists are typically charmed by Lingnan Tiandi’s quaintness, long-time residents mourn the lost cultural significance of Zumiao-Donghuali.

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22 Yang, Li, and Huang, “Lishi wenhua mincheng gaizao,” 173-174.

23 Yang, Li, and Huang, 174.

24 Yang, Li, and Huang, 174-175.

In the first days of 2022, Foshan's Chancheng district, encompassing the old town of Foshan, announced during the local people's congress its goals in the new year: enhance urban quality, renew the city, reinvigorate cultural depth, improve urban image and functions, accelerate innovative development, multiply the charms of the city, and raise Chancheng brand awareness. A significant part of these grandiose vague goals translates to the "boutique-style renovation of old city districts" and "revitalization and upgrade of historic architecture," with the Lian-Sheng area – a neighbourhood cluster in Foshan's old town, comprising Chopsticks Street – as the focus of redevelopment.<sup>25</sup> If that does not already make a sensible reader cringe, the congress further publicizes its enthusiasm to "polish cultural branding," "play up the 'cultural card,'" "return the sheen to the identity as one of the 'Four Great Assemblies,'" "create new landmarks to breed new hotspots for cultural experience," and "strive to create a national tourism demonstration area, developing old town tours, rural village tours, kung fu tours, and industry tours."<sup>26</sup> It is hard not to question if these do not sound like a theme park proposal.

Furthermore, officials declared,

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- 25 Lin Xiaoping 林晓平等, "Juliao Chancheng erhui: Quancheng jianshe 'siyi' chengshi tuxian 'zuizhongxin' pinzhi" 聚焦禅城二会——全域建设'四宜'城市 凸显'最中心'品质 [Focus on the Second Session of the Fifth People's Congress of Chancheng District: Full-region Construction of a 'Four-suitable' City, Highlighting the 'Most Central' Quality], *Foshan Daily*, January 5, 2022, [http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-01/05/content\\_42725\\_209611.htm](http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-01/05/content_42725_209611.htm).
- 26 Feng Dong 冯栋, "Jujiao Chancheng erhui: Buji 2022, Chancheng ruhe shixian beizeng?" 聚焦禅城二会——布局2022, 禅城如何实现倍增? [Planning 2022, How Will Chancheng Realize Multiplication?], *Foshan Daily*, January 5, 2022, [http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-01/05/content\\_42710\\_209563.htm](http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2022-01/05/content_42710_209563.htm).

[...] to make better use of Lingnan's profound cultural heritage, the [adjacent] Zumiao Street will borrow from the Lian-Sheng redevelopment as a forerunner [...] to bring in new business formats, utilize traditional celebratory events to awaken the city's memories, create a first-class business environment, and promote economic development in the area.<sup>27</sup>

Alas, cultural memories – sometimes newly fabricated “traditional” celebrations to attract consumers – are but candy wrappers for the government's capitalistic ventures. All the grand reasons and moving speeches to protect Foshan's thousand-year-old heritage bloodline aim to saturate Lingnan culture onto the city's slick “business card,” with little actions or concerns for a genuine continuation of local rituals.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps in the former mention of “tourism” alone predetermined the target visitors as someone other than those who authentically lived and flourished with the age-old traditions. It can only be hoped that these amusement park rides and funhouse attractions will be more than a new series of “Internet celebrity punch card spots.”<sup>29</sup>

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27 Lin et al., “Jujiao Chancheng erhui.”

28 Feng Dong 冯栋 et al., “Yiwensucheng huanfa Lingnan Guangfu wenhua xinhuoli” 以文塑城 焕发岭南广府文化新活力 [Using Culture to Shape the City, Radiate the New Vitality of Lingnan Cantonese Culture], *Foshan Daily*, November 30, 2021, [http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2021-11/30/content\\_41863\\_206397.htm](http://epaper.fsonline.com.cn/fsrb/html/2021-11/30/content_41863_206397.htm).

29 “Internet celebrity punch card spots,” *wang hong da ka dian* 网红打卡点, is an Internet-era expression in China for trendy, visually rich tourist site to check-in to on social media platforms, with little indication of content or experiential worthiness of the site.



Fig. 2.16

New signage on Chopsticks Street, installed in late 2021, formalizing the site as an attraction on the new “Foshan old city tourist route,” embarrassingly spelt incorrectly.



## Chasing Fleeting Lore

Unprecedented global circumstances over the past two years necessitated imaginative methods for social connectivity hampered by restricted mobility and physical encounters. A thesis is no exception. The indefinite inability for a site visit exacerbated the remoteness of Chopsticks Street in space and in time. The disadvantage of not being able to interact physically with the qilous appeals for alternative approaches to retrieve the folklore they embodied.

Because architecture and the people are inherently intertwined in a symbiotic evolution, distant architecture can be accessed through the people with whom it forged its stories. Having been vacated for over a decade, the Chopsticks Street of today inevitably presents a generational chasm with citizens currently in their youth. Conversations with middle-age and elderly local residents make the last effort to construct a bridge to the islet of past memories eroding away by the churning moat of time. Through dialogues with senior family members and extended family friends who frequented Chopsticks Street in its prosperity, bygone lived experiences and disremembered tales resurface and prolong into collective memory for both the speaker and the listener. Social media accounts of local community groups are also scouted as informal allies who, from time to time, unearth archival fragments ranging from rare photographs, to lost stories, to historic records. These sporadic frames of olden days clue towards unveiling a larger picture. The scattered spirit of Chopsticks Street begins to take form again.

Drawing is another significant process in understanding Chopsticks Street and its qilous from afar. Drawing is a simultaneous process of documentation, analysis, and speculation, through which Chopsticks Street and its qilous are observed, deconstructed, and re-constructed. In his treatise *On Painting*, the Italian Renaissance polymath, Leon Battista Alberti, writes,

The principal parts of the work are the surfaces, because from these come the members, from the members the bodies, from the bodies the 'historia', and finally the finished work of the painter. From the composition of surfaces arises that elegant harmony and grace in bodies, which they call beauty.<sup>30</sup>

Alberti furthers,

So one must observe a certain conformity in regard to the size of members, and in this it will help, when painting living creatures, first to sketch in the bones, for, as they bend very little indeed, they always occupy a certain determined position. Then add the sinews and muscles, and finally clothe the bones and muscles with flesh and skin. [...] there will perhaps be some who will raise as an objection [...] that the painter is not concerned with things that are not visible. They would be right to do so, except that, just as for a clothed figure we first have to draw the naked body beneath and then cover it with clothes, so in painting a nude the bones and muscles must be arranged first, and the covered with the appropriate

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30 Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin Classics, 1991), 71.

flesh and skin in such a way that it is not difficult to perceive the positions of the muscles.<sup>31</sup>

Although focused on painting living creatures, Alberti's principles are perfectly translatable to the study of buildings through drawing. To draw entails a process of understanding the drawn subject inside out. It thus becomes a mechanism for deciphering the narratives of Chopsticks Street and the typological essence of its milieu beyond the superficial, from social patterns to spatial proportions, ornamentation, materials, structures, construction sequences, usage patterns, symbolic expressions, and unexpected observations.

The pictorial studies draw from web mapping street views, recent and archival photographs, and conversations with local residents, presenting visual observation and illustrated interpretation in a consolidated narrative. Drawing with the pen on paper is foremost a bodily re-enactment of the buildings through the gestural retracing of its contours and reliefs, bringing to consciousness details that would have otherwise evaded the visual gaze. Whereas a site visit risks turning visitors into passive observers, matching conventional knowledge with what is presented before the eyes, drawing in absence of the physical subject prompts active interpretation and investigation of what is visible versus unseen in photographs and verbal descriptions. To a certain extent, it is perhaps the precise inaccessibility to the physical site that opens an access deeper into the contemplative realm, in attempt to fill in the missing picture, in space and in time.

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31 Alberti, *On Painting*, 72.

Reconstruction of the unseen also leads new direction of research and initiates further conversations with the local residents. Blanks on the canvas translate into questions, which act as cues to activate archived memories. Drawing thus becomes an interactive medium between the interviewer and distant interviewees, through which the drawer gains the clairvoyance to perceive Chopsticks Street in physical and temporal dimensions.

The architect and writer, Simon Unwin, identifies drawing as a “manual-intellectual activity” and “a medium for analysing architecture.” Analyzing the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Unwin points out the role of drawings as not an artefact but a method of acquiring knowledge that can be translated to later creations. Through the act of drawing, the drawer learns the language and syntax of the drawn subject, which can then be used and manipulated by the drawer in future conceptions. Drawing for design and drawing for analysis are thus inseparable processes.<sup>32</sup> In accordance with Unwin’s remarks, this thesis will make use of drawing as a prequel to the design proposal.

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32 Simon Unwin, “Analysing architecture through drawing,” *Building Research & Information* 35, no. 1 (2007): 101-110, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09613210600879881>.

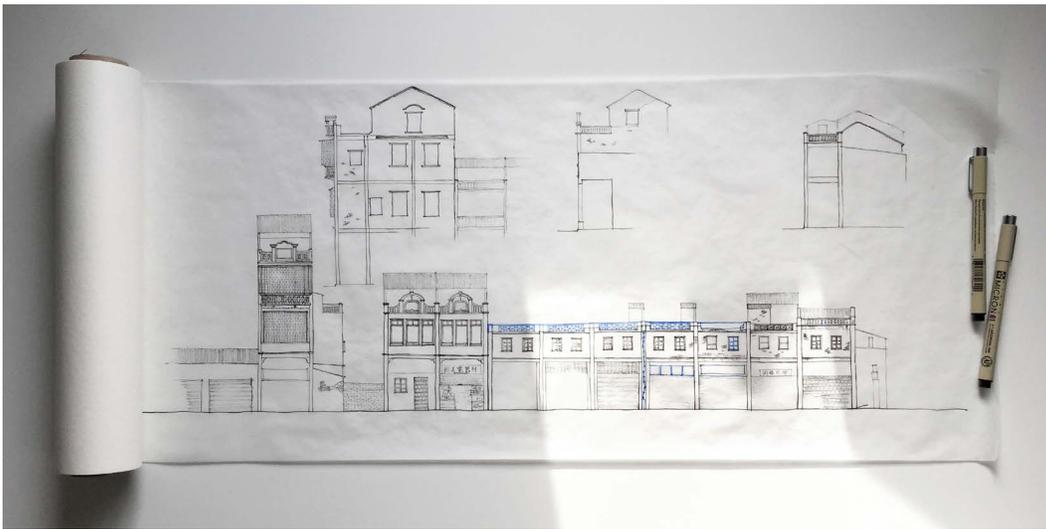


Fig. 2.17  
Drawing as a method of research.



## Chopsticks Street: Rise and Decline

Chopsticks Street, *kuai zi lu* 筷子路, once gathered craftsmen and merchants who made and sold chopsticks. Although this early history belongs in the memories of few living citizens today, it is most resiliently remembered in the name of the street.

Early mentions of Chopsticks Street could be traced as far back as the *Chorography of Foshan Loyal Township* from Year Ten of the Qing Emperor Daoguang (1830). The encyclopedic record listed five streets bearing the name “Chopsticks”: Chopsticks Straight Street (*kuai zi zhi jie* 筷子直街), New Chopsticks Street (*kuai zi xin jie* 筷子新街), Chopsticks Main Street (*kuai zi zheng jie* 筷子正街), Chopsticks Upper Street (*kuai zi shang jie* 筷子上街), and Chopsticks Avenue (*kuai zi da jie* 筷子大街).<sup>33</sup> The Chinese character *kuai* 快, conventionally meaning “quick,” was historically used to identify “chopsticks,” as in the word *kuai zi* 筷子 used in the *Chorography*. The radical *zhu* 竹, meaning “bamboo,” in reference to the common material used to make chopsticks, was later added to the character to differentiate 筷, “chopsticks,” from 快, “quick.” Official reference to Chopsticks Street wavered between 筷子路和 筷子路 in different time periods.

The series of Chopsticks Streets interconnected as segments of a longer winding road and its branching alleys. During the Qing dynasty, Foshan’s thriving handicraft industry concentrated various crafts in respective, loosely defined neighbourhoods,

33 Wu Rongguang 吴荣光, *Foshan zhongyixiang zhi* 佛山忠义乡志 [Chorography of Foshan Loyal Township] (1830), juan 1, 20, <https://c.text.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=107696&page=113&remap=gb>. The edition of 1830, Year Ten of the Qing Emperor Daoguang, was revised and expanded from the edition of 1753, Year Eighteen of the Qing Emperor Qianlong.

often named after the dominating trade in each locality. Tinworks Street, Fermented Bean Alley, Dyed Fabric Drying Place, Incense Stick Street, Paper Box Street, Basket Alley, Leather Case Street, and Yarn Street were a few others from the list.<sup>34</sup>

As a historic handicraft and commercial town, Foshan was not a formal city, in the sense that cities in imperial China were strictly administrative centres whose urban forms were laid out as spatial expressions of spiritual beliefs. These traditional cosmic cities were preconceived to follow ritualistic grid patterns, axial alignments with the cardinal directions, and enclosure within defensive walls. The mercantile town of Foshan, however, developed organically from the aggregation of local residents. Without grids or city walls, its urban grain evolved along the patterns of neighbouring building clusters, intricately weaved, seemingly unsystematic, yet fluid and orderly with its own logics.

During the Republic era (1912–49), Chopsticks Street accommodated handicraft industries including iron woks, copperware, and chopsticks. Various martial arts, medical, and winery establishments were also found on this street. In 1934, as part of Foshan's urban development and road construction agenda, segments of the former Chopsticks Streets and other linearly connected alleys were consolidated and widened into a vehicular road. The new road formally adopted its name from the longest segment: Chopsticks Street. Most of the qilous on Chopsticks Street were built in this period.

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<sup>34</sup> *Foshan zhongyixiang zhi*, 14-28.



Fig. 2.18  
Chopsticks Street site map.

Following the founding of People's Republic of China (1949), industrialized production replaced handcrafted chopsticks. Chopsticks ateliers and shops disappeared from the street. With the launch of communist China's ration system for basic necessities, various fuel and foodstuff stores occupied Chopsticks Street. Registered citizens exchanged specific ration coupons – likened to paper bill currencies – for honeycomb briquette, firewood, rice, various grains, beans, and cooking oil. Local residents also remember a fishmonger and general stores selling products such as bamboo sleeping mats.

The ration system was abolished around the mid-1980s. At this time, Foshan's economic shift towards light industries began to reflect in the emerging concentration of hardware and electronics stores on Chopsticks Street. Odd gadgets and peculiar electronic components, from latch slide lock, light bulbs, pull switch, to air conditioner remote control, could be sourced from the qilou shops, relieving ordinary and unexpected agonies of local residents.

At the turn of the century, merchandises diversified on Chopsticks Street. Shops offering everyday items from socks to towels, clothing retail, eateries, photography and portrait service, and a handful of the electronic components stores were established in the 1980s. Meanwhile, urban expansion began to lure away local residents to the newly constructed, modernized condominiums outside the old town. Inner-city redevelopment pressure, intensifying in the 2000s, further vacated residents and shopkeepers from the qilous. By 2010, sealed second-floor windows and bricked ground-street frontage retired Chopsticks Street to the past.

In spite of the uncertainties weighed by imminent redevelopment, Chopsticks Street today still sees a few time-honoured shops in business, insistent on serving old neighbourhood customers who, albeit having moved away, continues to return. Likened to nature reclaiming abandoned ruins, organically evolved local rituals sprouted on Chopsticks Street. The New Year calligraphy market brings festivity to the dilapidating qilous several weeks each year, with pedestrian traffic joined by the Spring Festival flower market hosted on the connecting Pine Breeze Road (*song feng lu* 松风路). The street name “Chopsticks” in Chinese, *kuai zi* 筷子, hyped by the Chinese adoration of puns, is an auspicious homophone of *kuai zi* 快子, literally “quick son,” hence breeding the local custom for wedding convoys to pass through as a blessing for the new couple to soon bear children.<sup>35</sup> All the spontaneous revelry on Chopsticks Street, however, at dusk, sunsets into a sad, lonesome serenity.

The following pages unroll the street frontage of Chopsticks Street in elevation, in partial sections, and in temporal anecdotes. It is both a process and presentation of the uncovering of architectural and social narratives on the street from vestiges and extant conditions.

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35 Chinese traditions highly value descendants as a continuation of family lineage.



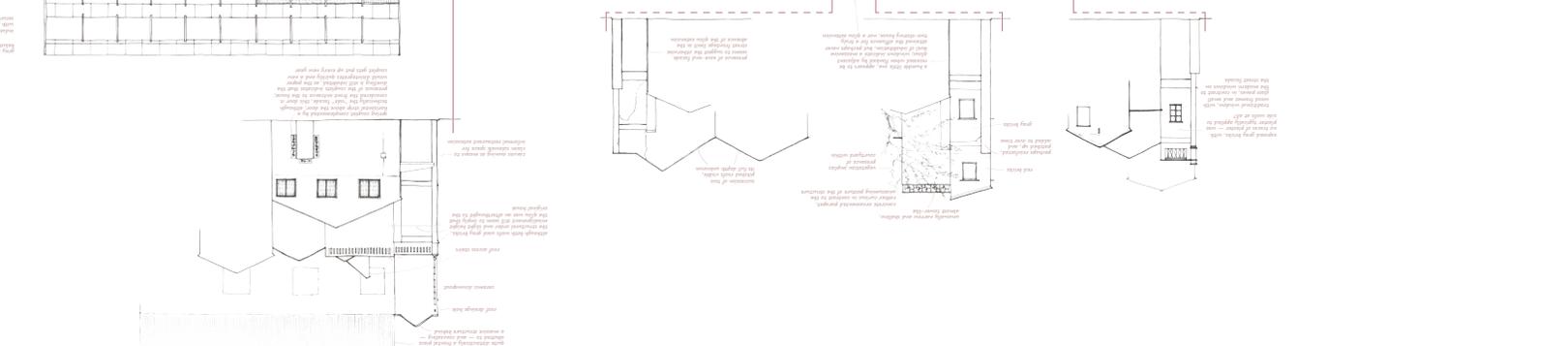
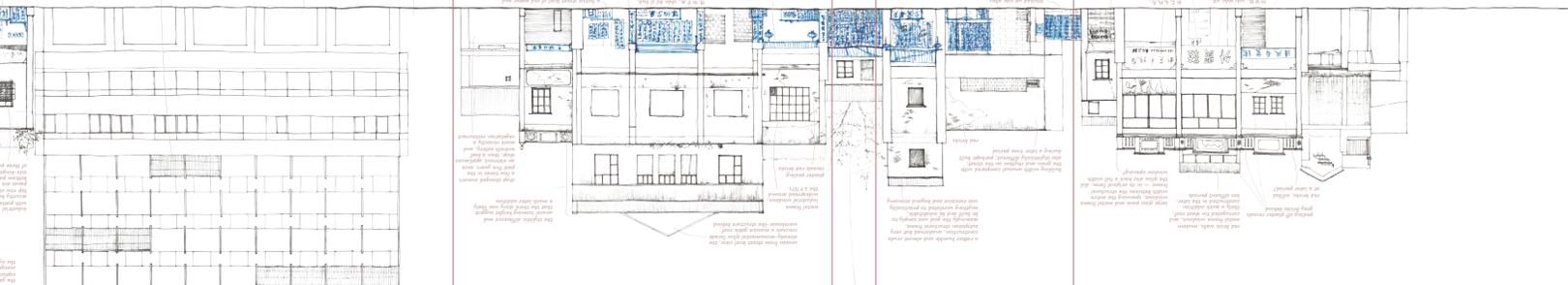
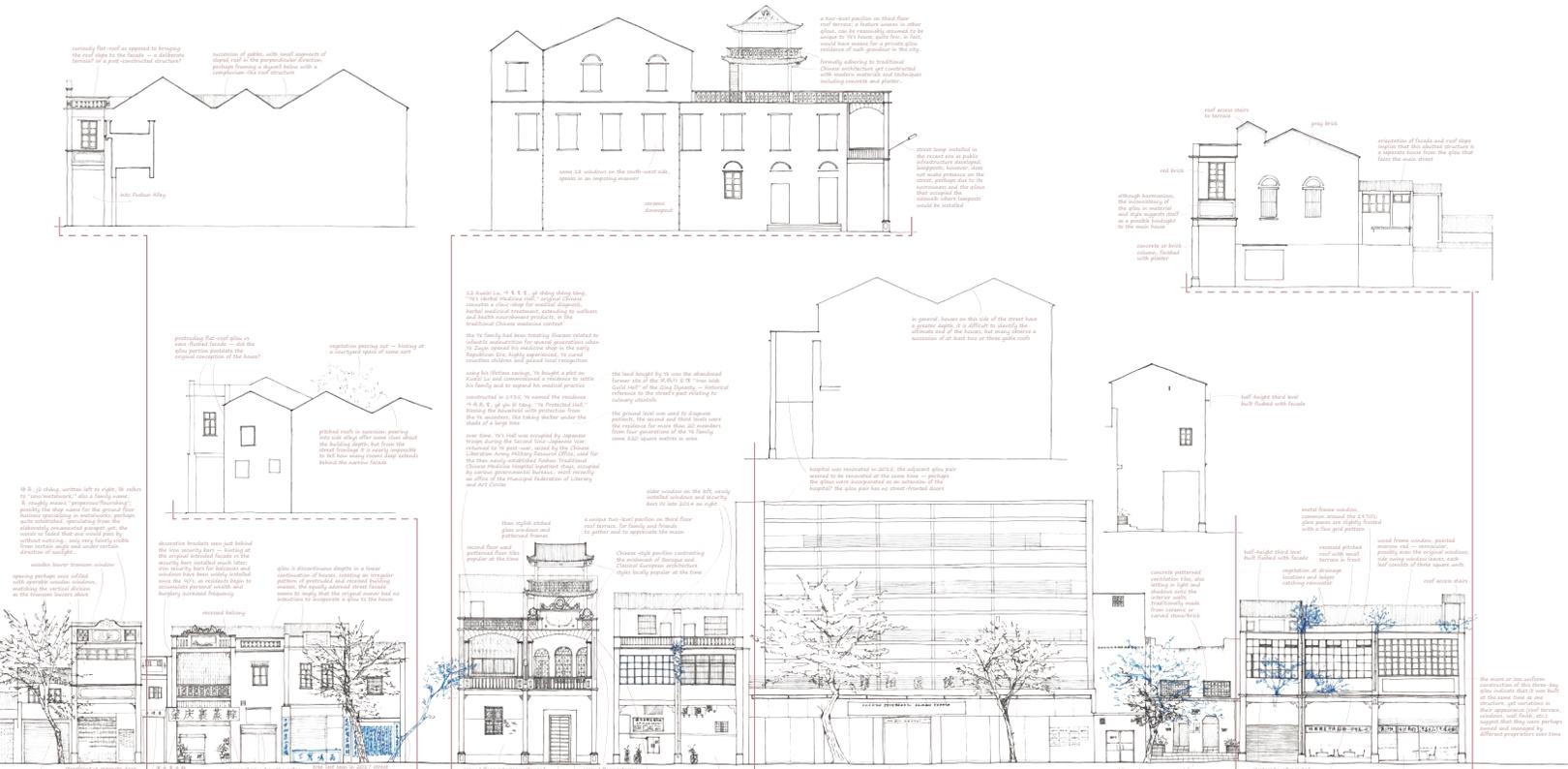




Fig. 2.21  
Chopsticks Street site map - west side.



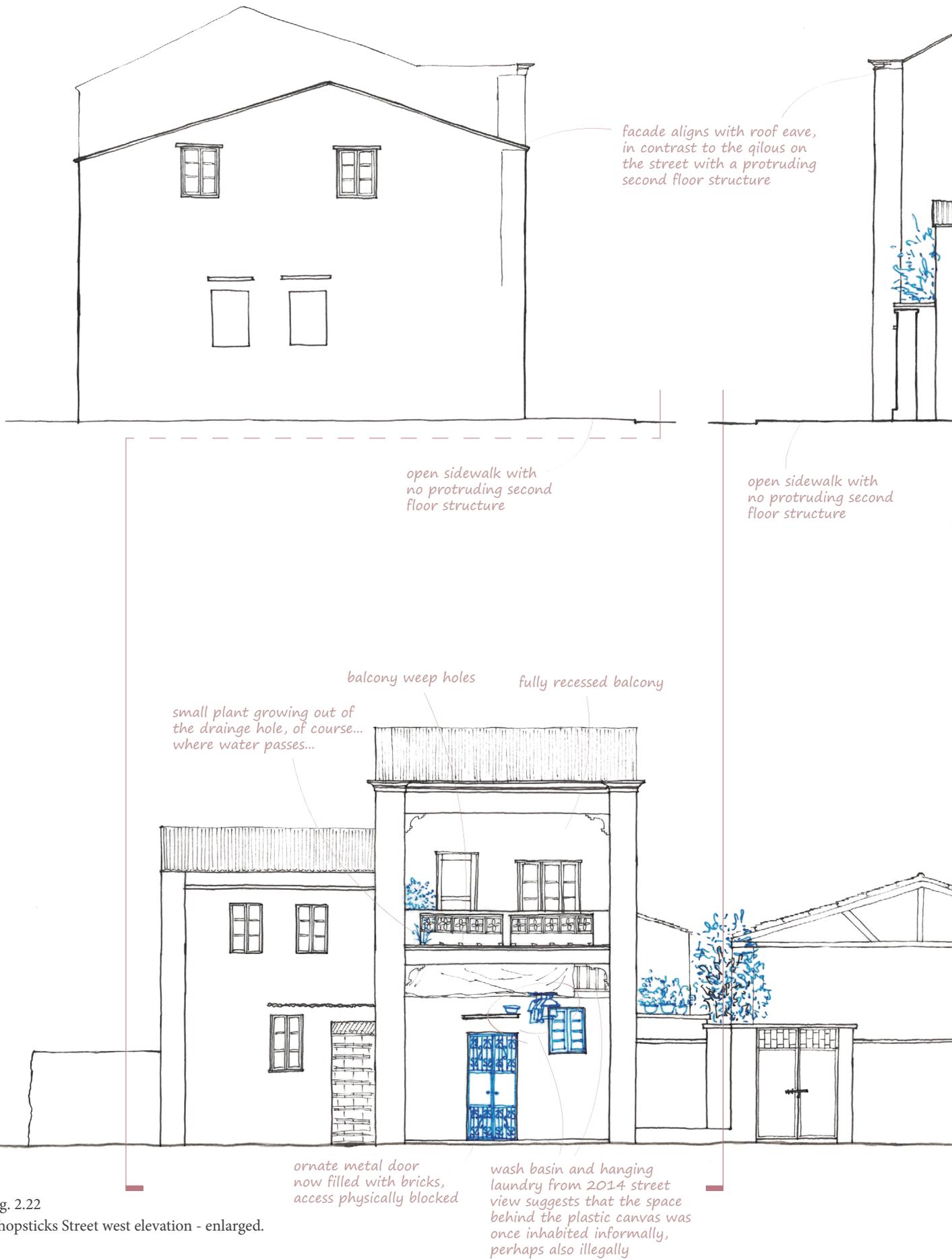


Fig. 2.22  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

Republican Era — 兴义武馆, xīng yì wǔ guǎn, "Xingyi Martial Arts Hall," training in 洪拳, hóng quán, "Hung Kuen" martial art, belonging to the southern Shaolin styles; member of the 众义国术体育会, zhòng yì guó shù tǐ yù huì, "Collective 'Yi' Chinese Martial Arts Association"; ~1930's was the golden age for martial arts in Foshan, with dozens of martial arts styles practiced widely throughout the city

post-Liberation — martial arts hall around Foshan were closed down

1958 — Club of Foshan Overseas Chinese Federation moved into the building; a place for social gatherings, ballroom dancing, pool tables, fitness, and other recreational activities open to the general public

1968 — Club of Foshan Overseas Chinese Federation ceased operation

1972 - Foshan Library moved onto the site

1981 - Foshan Library moved out and the site was returned to the Club of Foshan Overseas Chinese Federation; in this period, the building also served as a ticket selling point for Chinese civil aviation, as well as a daycare for the overseas Chinese in the Chancheng District (covers the historic centre of Foshan today)

龙道华艺馆, lóng dào huá yì guǎn, "Dragon's Way Chinese Arts Hall"; martial arts and recreational hall; timeline relationship with the Club of Foshan Overseas Chinese Federation is ambiguous; ceased operation in the early 2010's; arch over gate no longer seen in 2016 street view photos

gated side alley

former metal gate filled up with bricks, closing off access; building is reduced to a backdrop

yard enclosure walls become a new plane of action — host for hanging calligraphy couplets during lunar new year, when local calligraphers set up booths to write and sell blessing calligraphic couplets for the new year

48 Kuazi Lu, 佛山市侨联俱乐部, fó shān shì qiáo lián jù lè bù, former site of "Club of Foshan Overseas Chinese Federation"

received status and plaque of "Foshan Heritage Architecture" in 2015

relief sculpture of red-crowned crane, symbol of longevity, immortality, nobility, and uprightness in Chinese culture

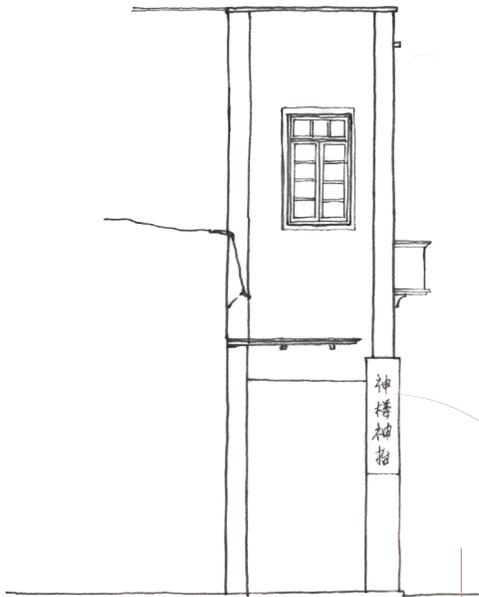


Fig. 2.23  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

column as host for signage  
and conspicuous display

"shrine altar cabinet,  
altar table"

"Kuaizi ceramics general store;  
Buddhist ritual items, charcoal photo,  
porcelain photo, old brand name"

"charcoal photo" is, in fact, a  
handdrawn portrait using charcoal,  
achieving the likeness of a  
photograph, hence earning its name;  
charcoal photos were popular locally  
~1990's; prized for its durability in  
contrast to the fading of a  
photographic print, charcoal photos  
are often used for funerary purposes,  
but also for those who want a  
keepsake of one's prime years

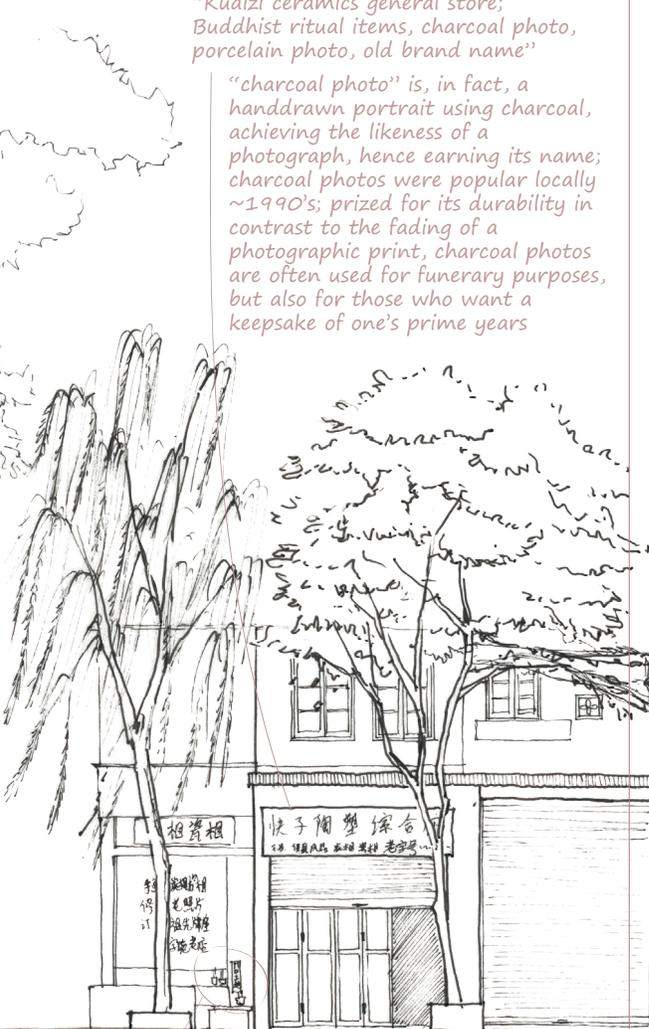
"old brand name,  
charcoal photo,  
porcelain photo"

this qilou structure of three bays,  
symmetrical facade, and single door  
entrance suggest that the building served  
wholly as a residence, likely for a wealthy  
family; it contrasts the shophouse qilous  
which typically occupy a single bay with  
a storefront that spans the entire width  
of the bay at ground level

narrow protruding balcony

roof terrace access  
stairs enclosure

peeling stucco coating  
reveals bricks beneath



门口土地财神, mén kǒu tǔ dì cái shén,  
"God of Wealth and Soil-Ground at the Door,"  
tutelary deity generally associated with the  
conference of wealth and prosperity; typically  
placed outside on the ground beside the front  
door or entrance; seat is usually marked by a

spirit tablet of golden calligraphy words  
written vertically on red paper, with an  
incense holder; more elaborate forms can  
include a small shrine or altar evoking  
the shape of a house and/or statues.

bricked up door and  
windows; street facade  
becomes a dead surface

roof terrace access  
stairs enclosure

uniformity of the street-fronted  
cantilevered structure and covered walkway,  
contrasted against the posterior core building  
which seems to speak as a separate mass...  
the qilou appears as though a later added  
structure abutted to an existing building,  
reclaiming inhabitable space over the sidewalk  
and redefining its relationship with the street



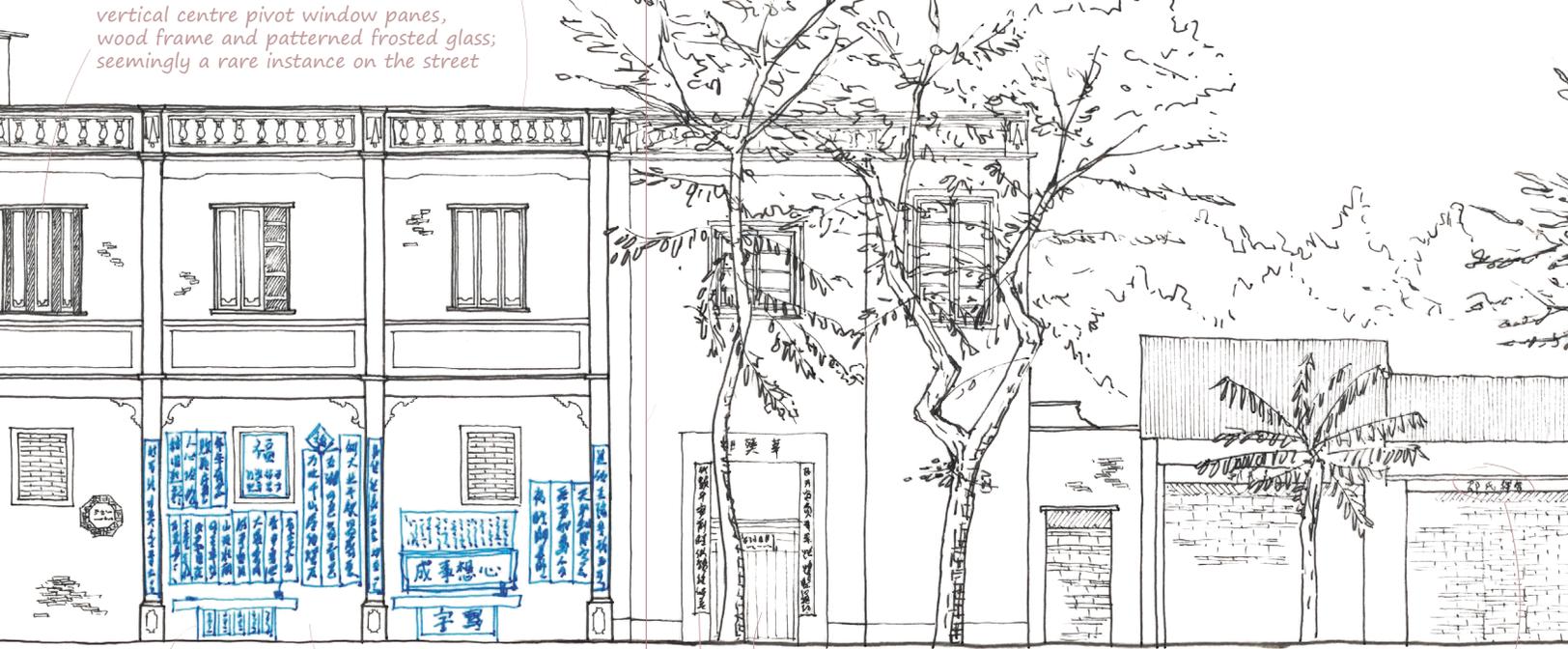
into Xinkui Alley

X危险勿近

X危险勿近,  
"danger, do not approach";  
crudely spray painted in red

vase-shaped ceramic balusters; adopted from  
Baroque balusters and gained popularity locally;  
in Chinese, sometimes called 宝瓶, bǎo píng,  
puns with 平, as in 平安, píng ān, "safe";  
it is popular Chinese practice to use pictorial  
depiction of objects that are homonyms of  
propitious words to bless the household

vertical centre pivot window panes,  
wood frame and patterned frosted glass;  
seemingly a rare instance on the street



Chinese redbud tree

the "dead" street wall  
becomes a host for festive  
calligraphy display and  
writing stalls; paradoxically,  
because devoid, thus can host

no street-facing entrance  
door; entrance of residence  
likely from the side or  
back the alley

辛葵里, xīn kuí lǐ, top written from  
right to left, "Xinkui Alley," gateway  
through building restricting public access  
from entering the more private alleyway

vertical calligraphy couplets on two sides of  
gateway wish for prosperity and safety

邵氏挥春, shào shì huī chūn,  
"Shao's calligraphy couplet,"  
written on the lintel, leftover  
traces of Shao's calligraphy stall  
from another time

curiously flat-roof as opposed to bringing the roof slope to the facade — a deliberate terrace? or a post-constructed structure?

succession of gables, with small segments of sloped roof in the perpendicular direction, perhaps framing a skylight below with a compluvium-like roof structure

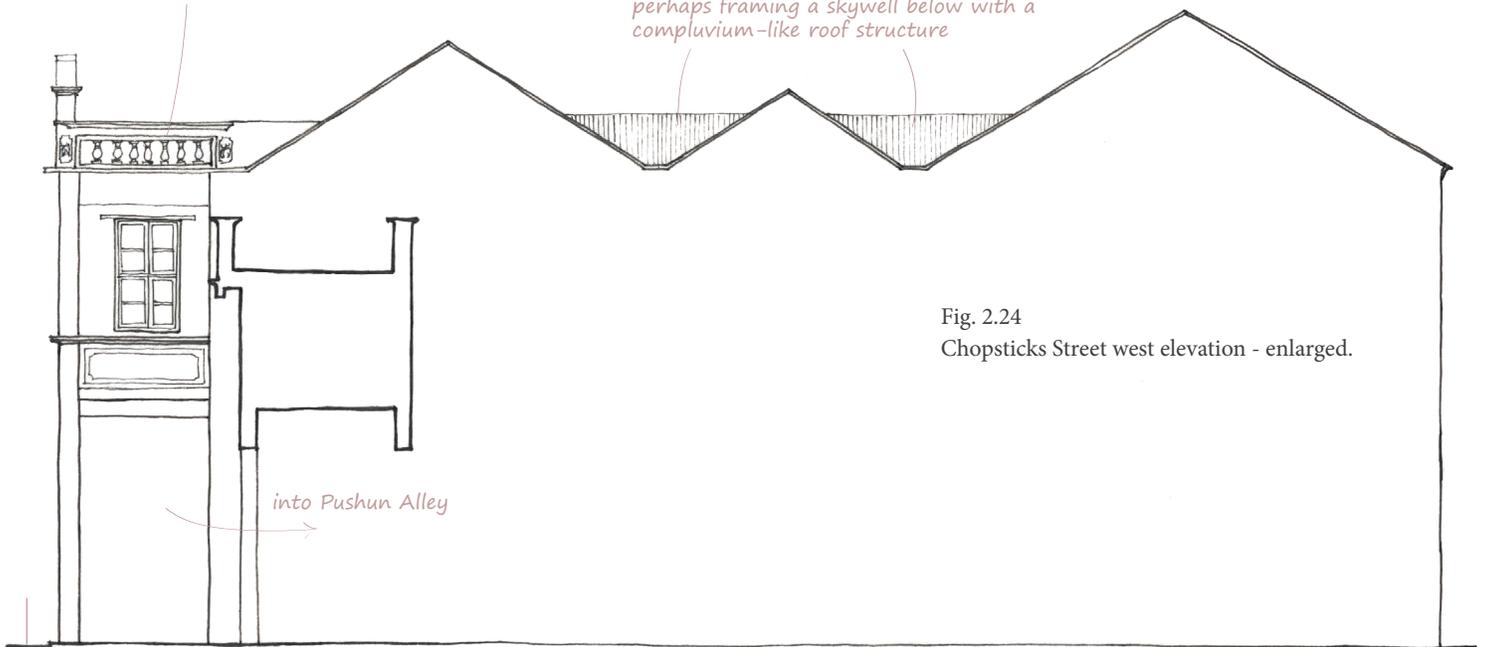


Fig. 2.24  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

锯昌, jù chāng, written left to right, 锯 refers to "saw/metalwork," also a family name, 昌 roughly means "properous/flourishing"; possibly the shop name for the ground floor business specializing in metalworks, perhaps quite established, speculating from the elaborately ornamented parapet; yet, the words so faded that one would pass by without noticing... only very faintly visible from certain angle and under certain direction of sunlight...

decorative brackets seen just behind the iron security bars — hinting at the original intended facade vs the security bars installed much later; iron security bars for balconies and windows have been widely installed since the 90's, as residents begin to accumulate personal wealth and burglary increased frequency

qilou is discontinuous despite in a linear continuation of houses, creating an irregular pattern of protruded and recessed building masses; the equally adorned street facade seems to imply that the original owner had intentions to incorporate a qilou to the house

opening perhaps once infilled with operable wooden windows, matching the vertical division as the transom louvers above

wooden louver transom window

recessed balcony



storefront vs separate door to residential quarters?

window opening spans full width between structural frame, contrasting qilous with infilled brick walls and casement windows

肇庆裹蒸粽, zhào qǐng guǒ zhēng zòng, "Zhaoqing-style steamed rice dumplings"

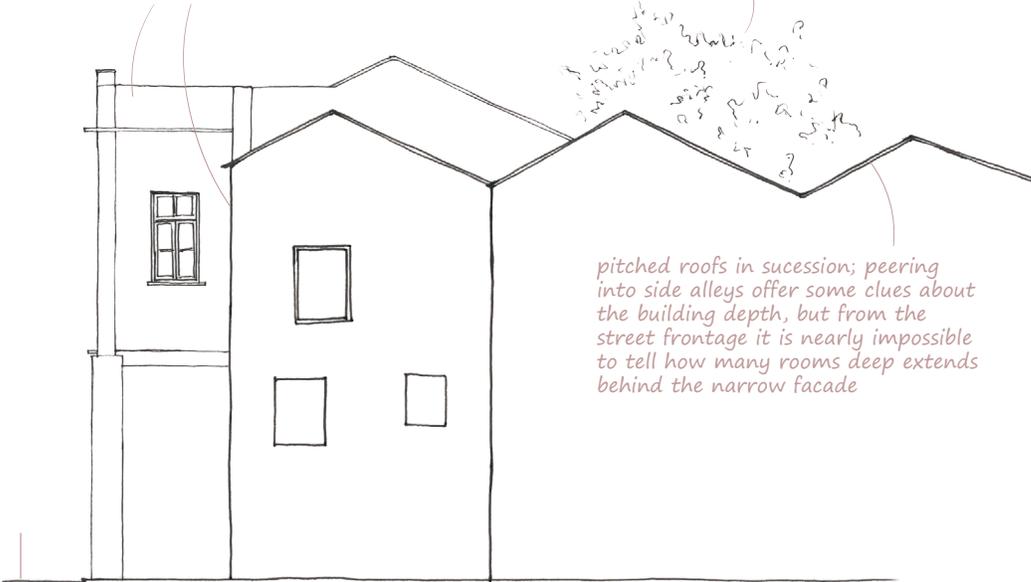
from right to left, 普顺坊, pǔ shùn fāng, "Pushun Alley"

same shop; when the roller shutter doors are down, spray painted in black words read 门前请勿停车 "please do not park in front of door" and 门前出口 "door for exit"; a plea for no parking? or an assertion that the shop is still in business and occupied, unlike most of its neighbours?

protruding flat-roof qilou vs eave-flushed facade — did the qilou portion postdate the original conception of the house?

vegetation peering out — hinting at a courtyard space of some sort

pitched roofs in succession; peering into side alleys offer some clues about the building depth, but from the street frontage it is nearly impossible to tell how many rooms deep extends behind the narrow facade



tree last seen in 2017 street view; likely cut as it infringed on the adjacent structure

formally adheres to traditional Chinese architecture, yet constructed with modern materials and techniques such as concrete and plaster



Fig. 2.25  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

12 Kuaizi Lu, 叶生生堂, yè shēng shēng táng, "Ye's Herbal Medicine Hall," original Chinese connotes a clinic-shop for medical diagnosis, herbal medicinal treatment, extending to wellness and health nourishment products, in the traditional Chinese medicine context

the Ye family had been treating illnesses related to infantile malnutrition for several generations when Ye Zuyin opened his medicine shop in the early Republican Era; highly experienced, Ye cured countless children and gained local recognition

using his lifetime savings, Ye bought a plot on Kuaizi Lu and commissioned a residence to settle his family and to expand his medical practice

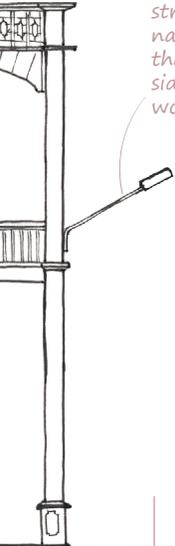
constructed in 1935, Ye named the residence 叶荫庇堂, yè yīn bì táng, "Ye Protected Hall," blessing the household with protection from the Ye ancestors, like taking shelter under the shade of a large tree

over time, Ye's Hall was occupied by Japanese troops during the Second Sino-Japanese War, returned to Ye post-war, seized by the Chinese Liberation Army Military Resource Office, used for the then newly-established Foshan Traditional Chinese Medicine Hospital inpatient stays, occupied by various governmental bureaus... most recently an office of the Municipal Federation of Literary and Art Circles

the land bought by Ye was the abandoned former site of the 铁锅行会馆 "Iron Wok Guild Hall" of the Qing Dynasty — historical reference to the street's past relating to culinary utensils

the ground level was used to diagnose patients, the second and third levels were the residence for more than 20 members from four generations of the Ye family; some 820 square metres in area

street lamp installed in the recent era as public infrastructure developed; lampposts, however, does not make presence on the street, perhaps due to its narrowness and the qilous that occupied the sidewalk where lampposts would be installed

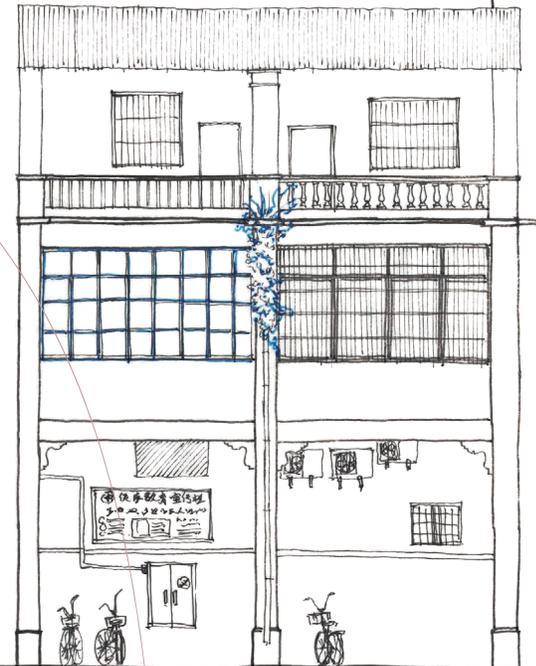
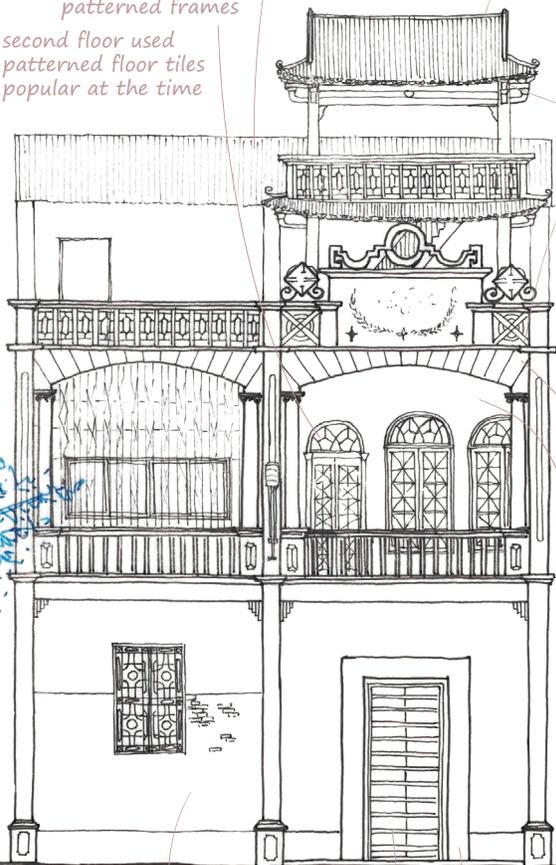


then stylish etched glass windows and patterned frames

second floor used patterned floor tiles popular at the time

a two-level pavilion on the third floor roof terrace; a feature unseen in other qilous, can be reasonably assumed to be unique to Ye's house; quite few, in fact, would have means for a private qilou residence of such grandeur in the city

Chinese-style pavilion contrasting the mishmash of Baroque and Classical European architecture styles locally popular at the time



ground floor exterior walls used gray bricks — the highest tier of construction material commonly used in local historical architecture

second floor exterior walls used red bricks

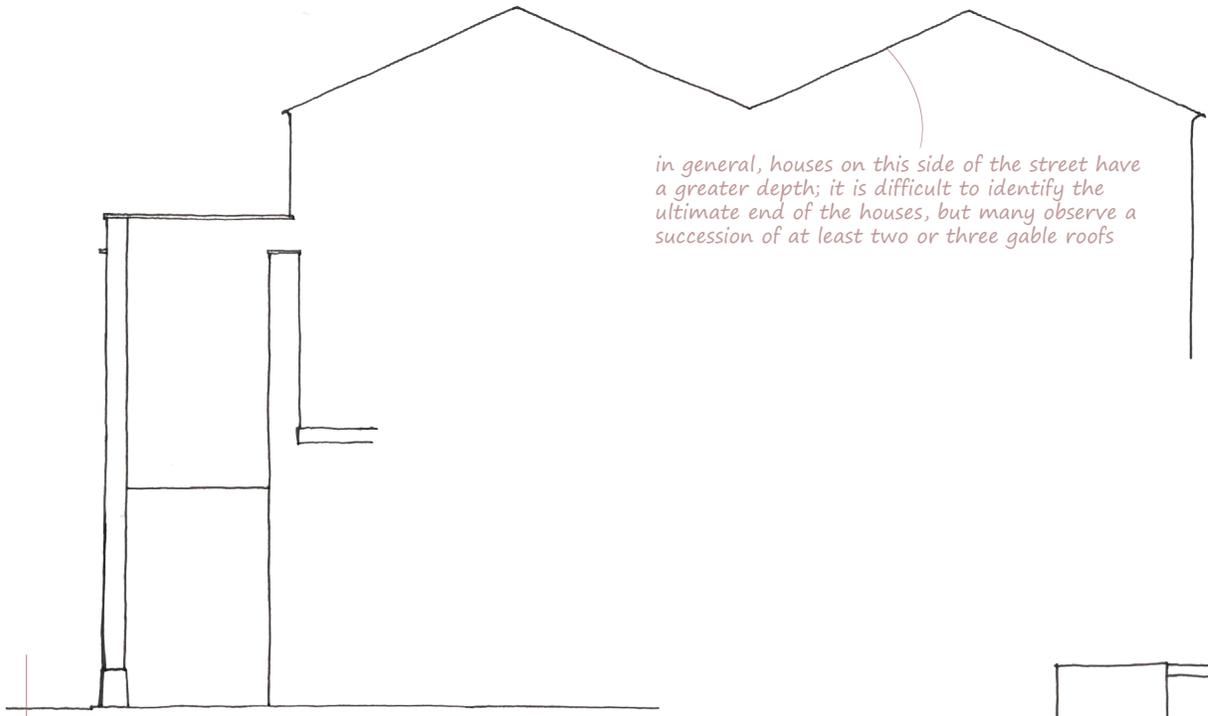
granite door frame

parapet-pediment, arches, columns, railings, and various ornaments constructed from concrete or plaster

Lingnan indigenous 趟栊门, tàng lóng mén, exterior gate of horizontal wooden bars that slide into sockets in the door frame, allowing airflow to the interior whilst limiting outsider access



Fig. 2.26  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

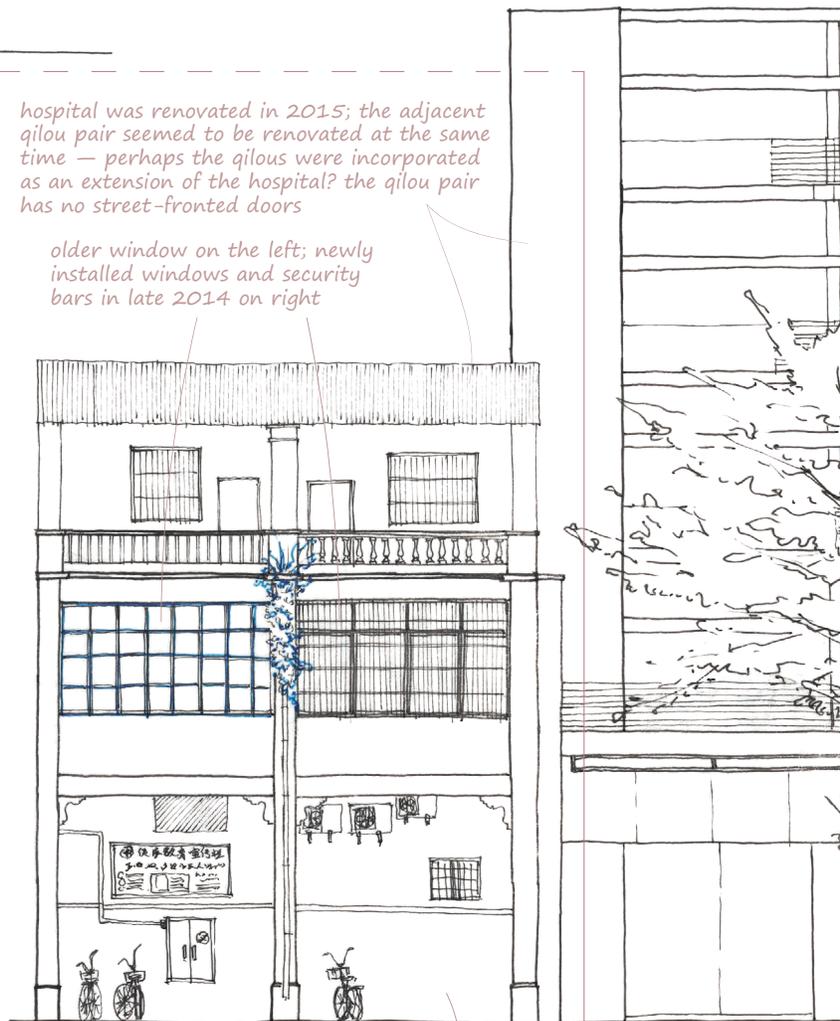


*in general, houses on this side of the street have a greater depth; it is difficult to identify the ultimate end of the houses, but many observe a succession of at least two or three gable roofs*



*hospital was renovated in 2015; the adjacent qilou pair seemed to be renovated at the same time — perhaps the qilous were incorporated as an extension of the hospital? the qilou pair has no street-fronted doors*

*older window on the left; newly installed windows and security bars in late 2014 on right*

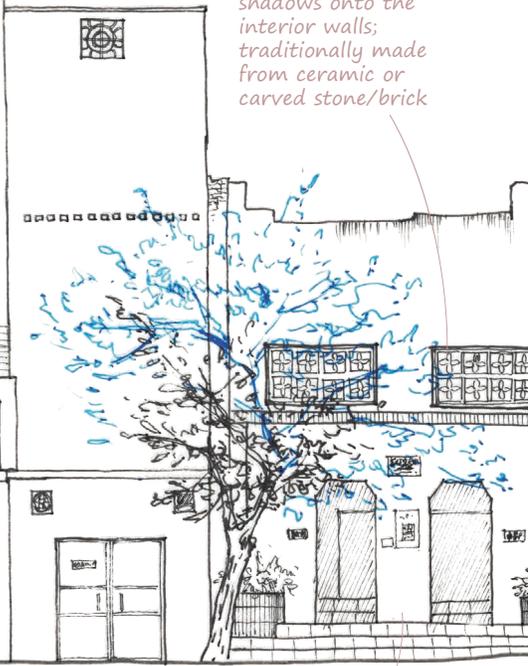
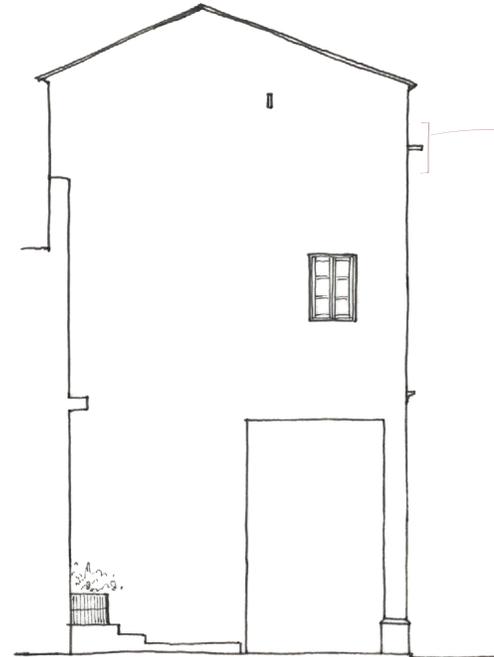


*renovated around 2015 and re-plastered in an off-white colour; newer appearance, but also lost the richness in its original materiality and age*

Fig. 2.27  
Chopsticks Street west elevation - enlarged.

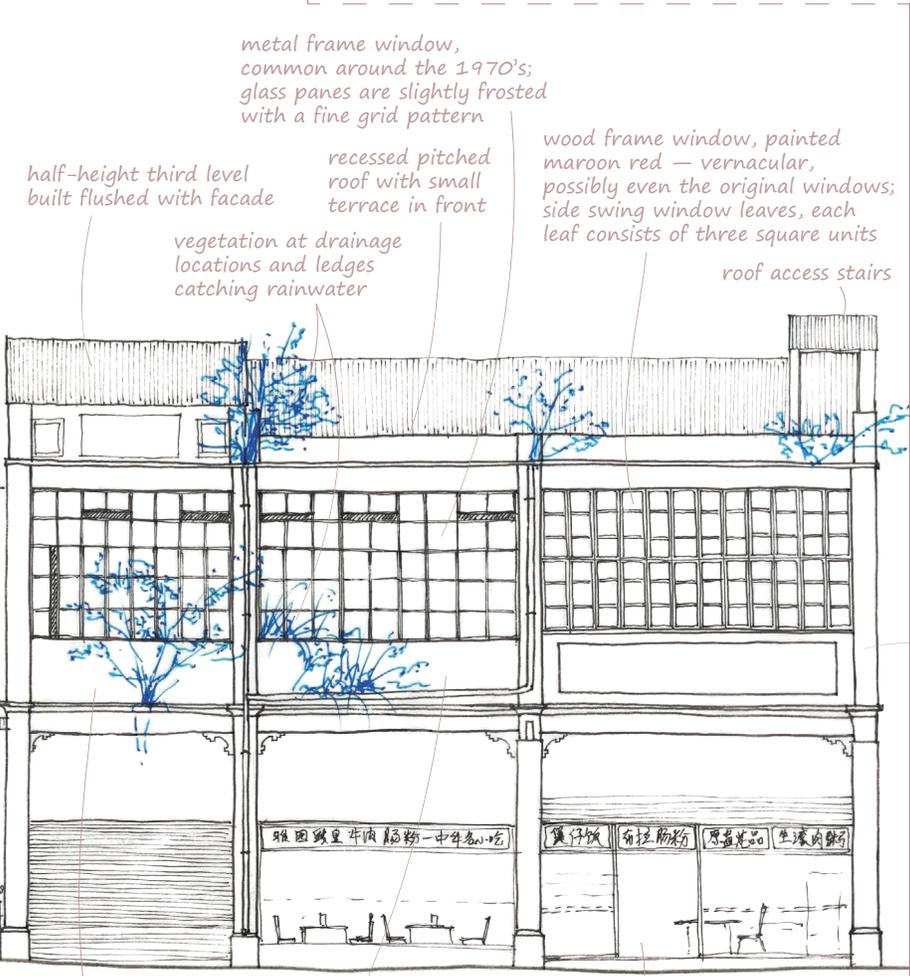


10 Kuaizi Lu, 朝阳医院, chāo yáng yī yuàn,  
"Chaoyang Hospital," constructed in 1954; evolved  
from a humble street-side clinic to a full-scale  
general hospital with support from the government



concrete patterned  
ventilation tiles; also  
letting in light and  
shadows onto the  
interior walls;  
traditionally made  
from ceramic or  
carved stone/brick

public washroom, separated for men  
and women; renovated and  
reconstructed over the years; in the  
early days, houses may not all be  
equipped with sanitary facilities and  
residents must use public washrooms



the more or less uniform construction of this three-bay qilou indicate that it was built at the same time as one structure, yet variations in their appearance (roof terrace, windows, wall finish, etc.) suggest that they were perhaps owned and managed by different proprietors over time

plastered wall painted ochre yellow

plastered wall in natural gray colour

an eatery serving traditional Cantonese congee, rice noodle roll, clay pot rice, double boiled soup in ceramic jar, and other classic local small dishes



Fig. 2.28  
Chopsticks Street site map - east side.

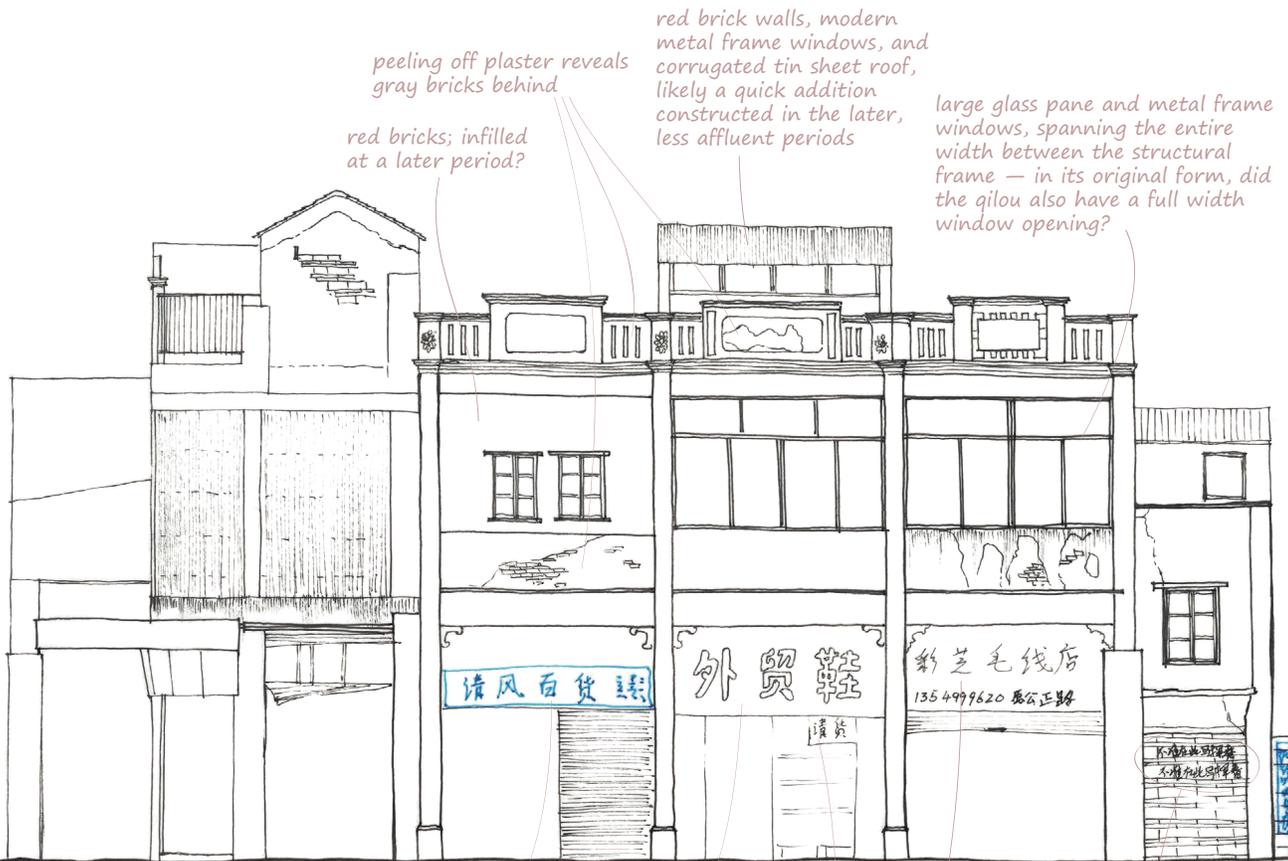


Fig. 2.29  
Chopsticks Street east elevation - enlarged.



exposed gray bricks, with no traces of plaster — was plaster typically applied to side walls at all?

traditional window, with wood frames and small glass panes, in contrast to the modern windows on the street facade



peeling off plaster reveals gray bricks behind

red bricks; infilled at a later period?

red brick walls, modern metal frame windows, and corrugated tin sheet roof, likely a quick addition constructed in the later, less affluent periods

large glass pane and metal frame windows, spanning the entire width between the structural frame — in its original form, did the qilou also have a full width window opening?

清风百货, qīng fēng bǎi huò, "Qingfeng Department Store"

外贸鞋, wài mào xié, "Export Shoes," shoes made in China for export and foreign sales

清货, qīng huò, "clearance"

彩芝毛线店, cǎi zhī máo xiàn diàn, "Caizhi Yarn Shop"

不准在此写挥春  
不准在此写挥春  
bù zhǔn zài cǐ xiě huī chūn, "not allowed to write spring couplets here" x2;

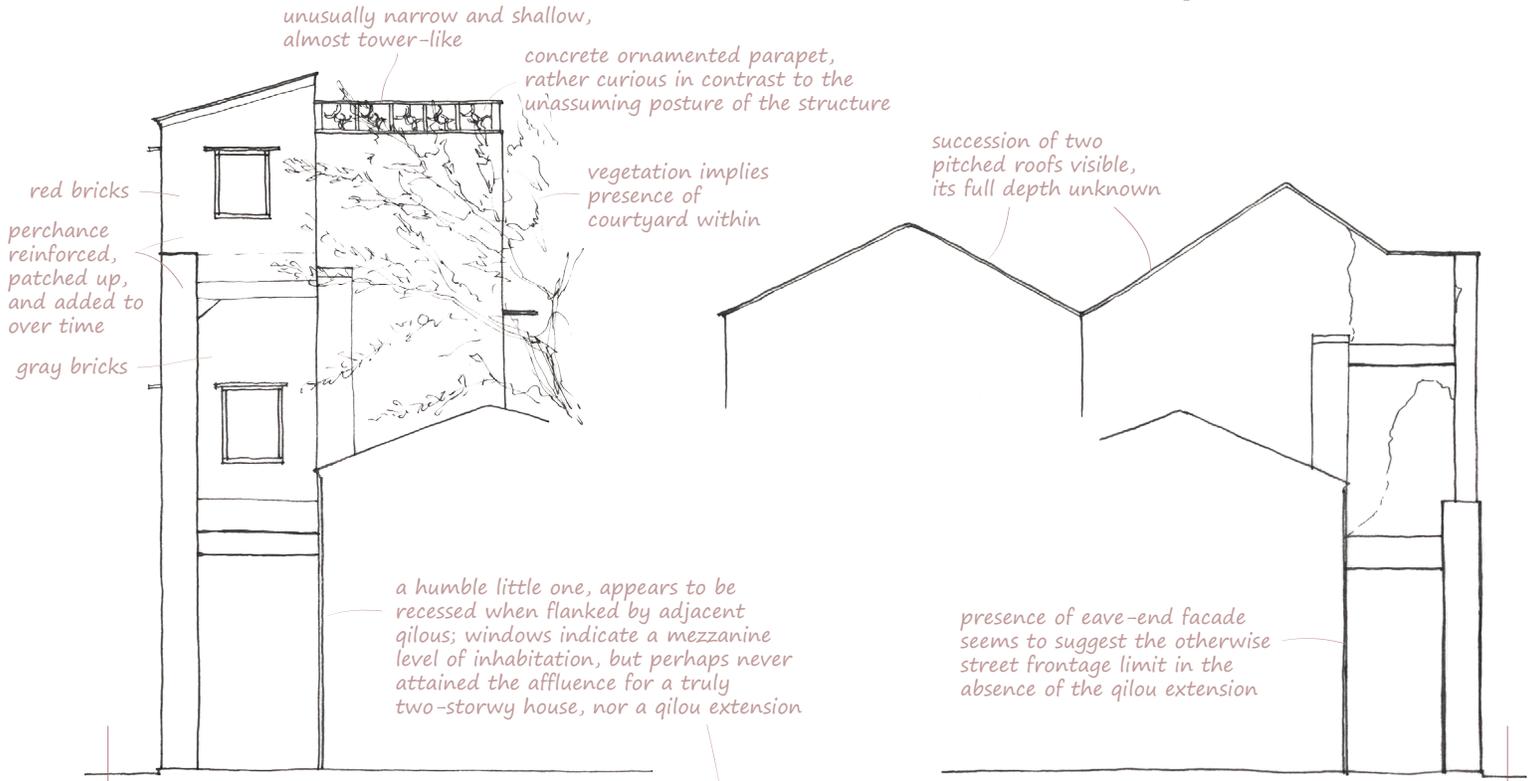


Fig. 2.30  
Chopsticks Street east elevation - enlarged.

quite distinctively a frontal piece abutted to — and concealing — a massive structure behind

roof drainage hole

ceramic downspout

roof access stairs

although both walls used gray bricks, the structural order and slight height misalignment still seem to imply that the qilou was an afterthought to the original house

canvas awning as means to claim sidewalk space for informal restaurant extension

unseen from street level view, the already-monumental qilou facade conceals a massive gable roof warehouse-like structure behind

spring couplet complemented by a horizontal strip above the door; although technically the "side" facade, this door is considered the front entrance to the house; presence of the couplets indicates that the dwelling is still inhabited, as the paper would disintegrate quickly and a new couplet gets put up every new year

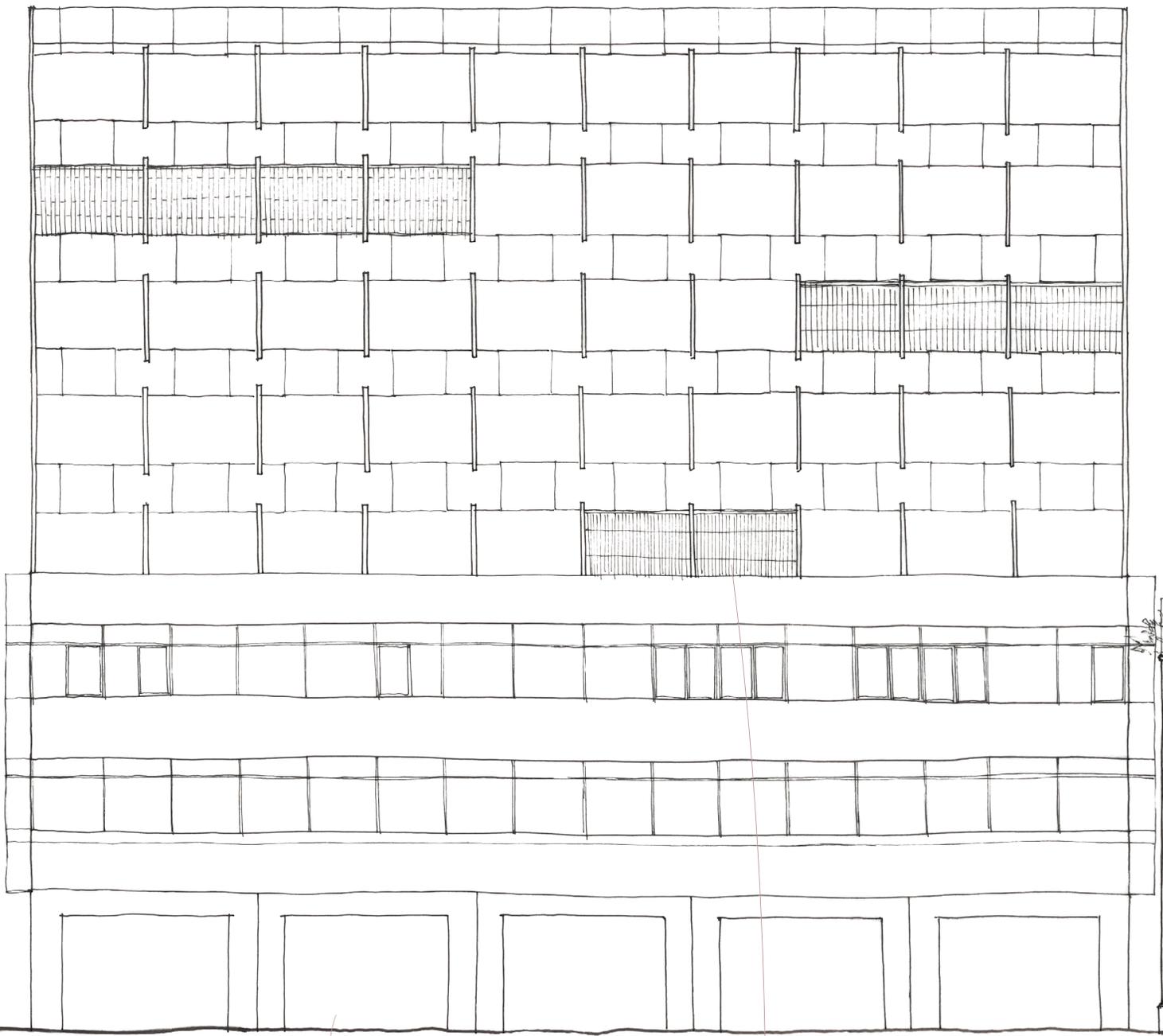
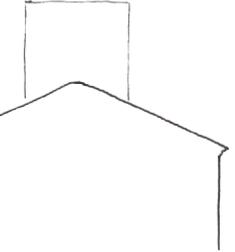
the stylistic difference and unusual looming height suggest that the third story was likely a much later addition

perhaps a new year coincided with rainy weather, calligraphers put up makeshift awnings of bamboos and nylon canvas; creative and resilient are how these structures find niches and support in the absence of intentional infrastructure

陈伯宇画, chén bó yǔ huà, "Uncle Chen's Calligraphy and Painting"

columns as perfect hosts of display; four-sided showcasing visible to different incoming directions

shop changed owners a few times in the past five years; once an electronic appliances shop, then a beef entrails eatery, and more recently a vegetarian restaurant

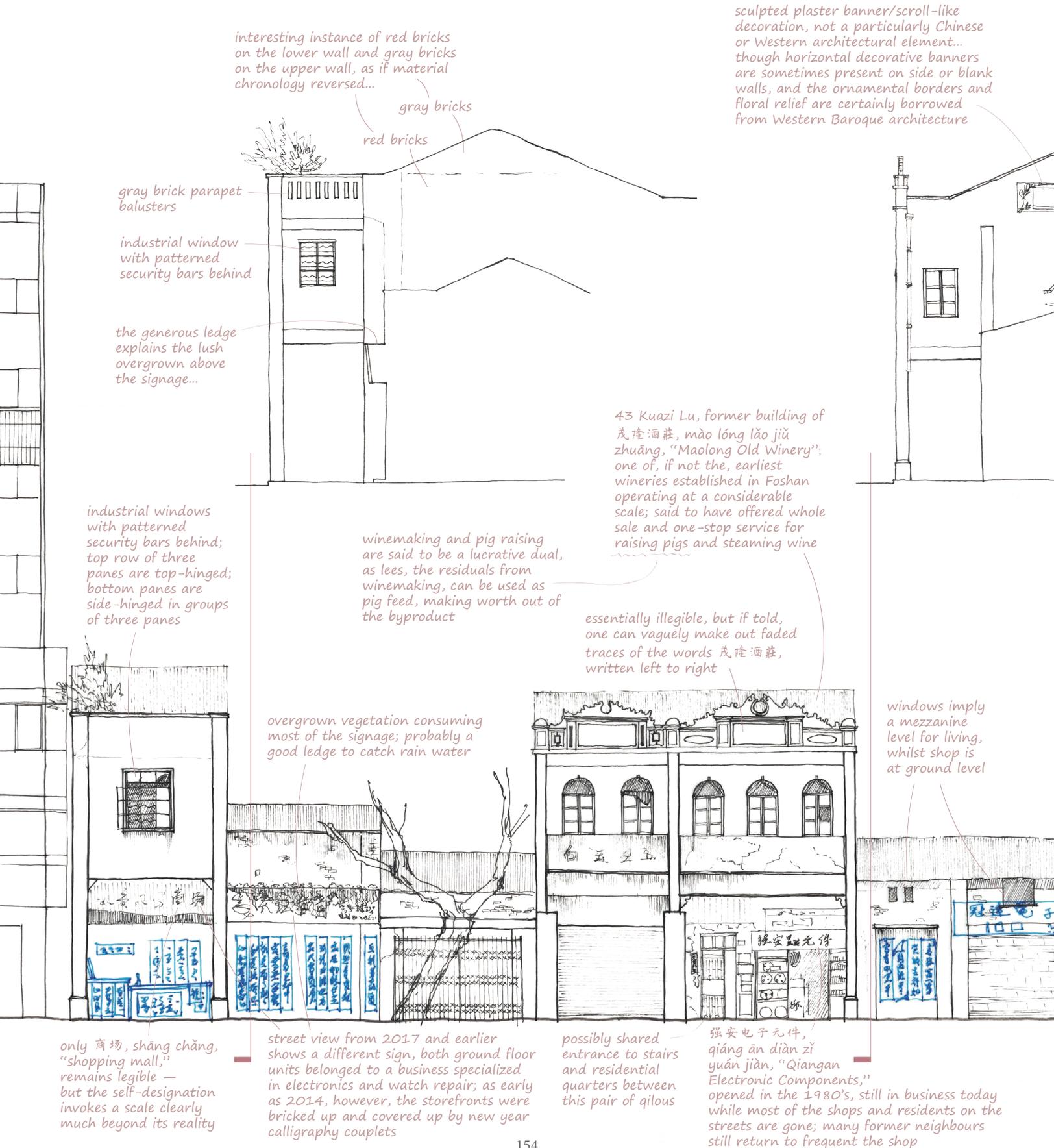


side alley

*mixed-use with ground floor retail, podium offices, and upper apartments; likely built around the 1970's or 1980's; occupancy seems rather low*

*residential occupancy indicated by the units with security bars, potted plants, and hanging laundry on the balconies*

Fig. 2.31  
Chopsticks Street east elevation - enlarged.



the uniformity of the construction seems to suggest that the qilou portion and roof terrace were conceived in this massing form in the initial construction (as opposed to a later addition); it would seem that local qilous may have started as an addition abutted to an existing house, but soon crystallized into a typology, perhaps coincidentally satisfying local liking of roof terraces

protruding security bars to claim more air space for private use

semi-recessed balcony

corbels

articulated concrete structural frame, walls infilled with gray bricks — the concrete structure and imposing height suggest that the structure was built in a later time period, but the presence of gray bricks... may have been reclaimed from a previously demolished building, or acquired at a costlier expense

front facade of adjacent house, facing onto the alley; confirms the end and shallow depth of the taller qilou building

evoking a window pediment... and misligned brick pattern of a filled up window — the adjacent structure was perhaps much lower or not present at all when the house was first constructed

the imposing height suggests that it was constructed at a later time period, when the widespread use of concrete made possible taller structures

metal security bars

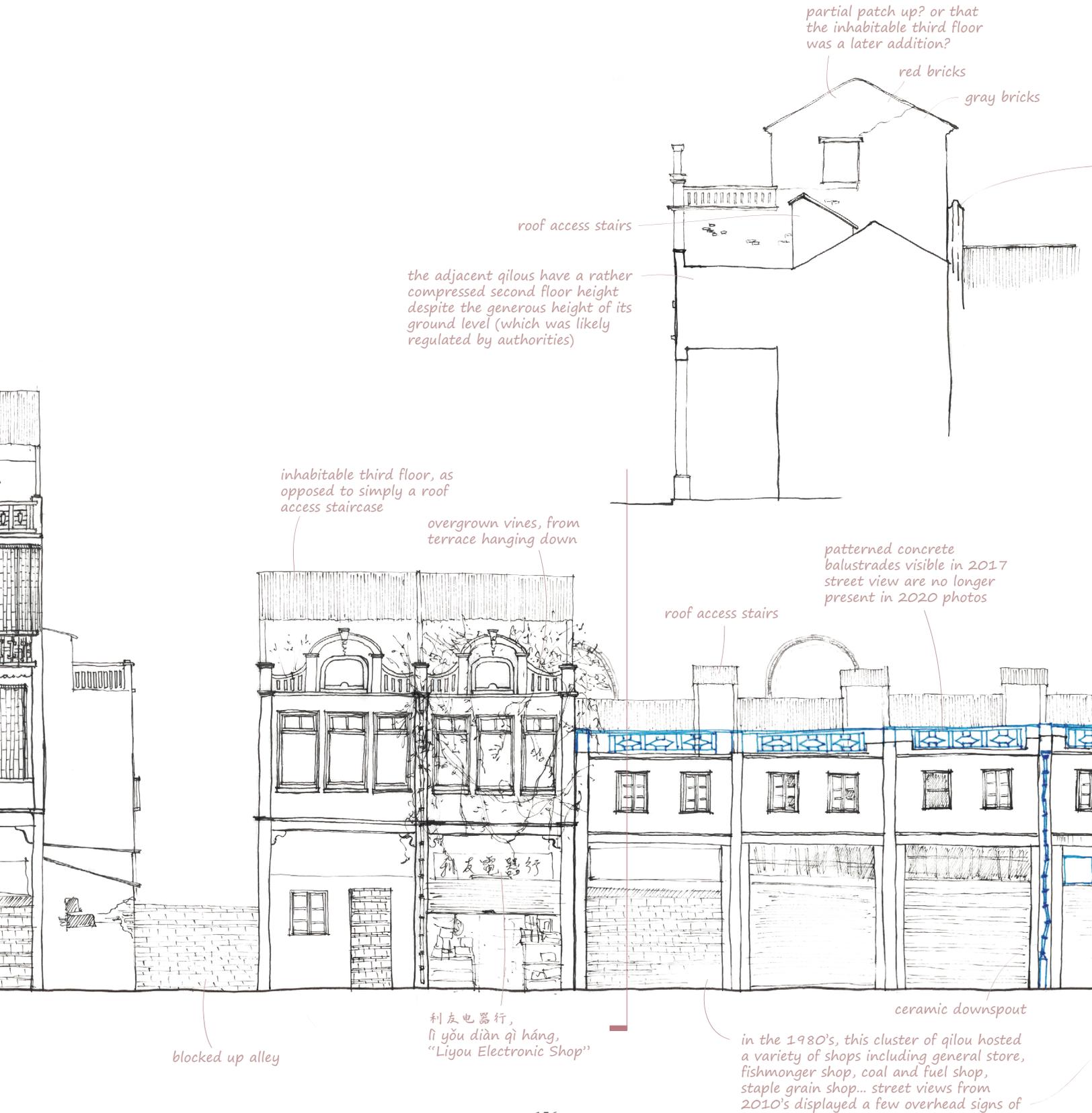
patterned concrete balcony balustrade

corbels supporting the balcony

signage of an electronics store; around the 1980's Kuaizi Lu concentrated a number of electronics and components shops, very few of which remains today

around the 1990's, the shop sold basic garments and personal toiletries such as socks, towels, and toothbrush; the shop was shallow, approx 3-4m deep; at the back of the shop, a small door led to the residential quarters behind

Fig. 2.32  
Chopsticks Street east elevation - enlarged.



wok-ear houses behind, marking the shallow depth of the street-fronted qilous

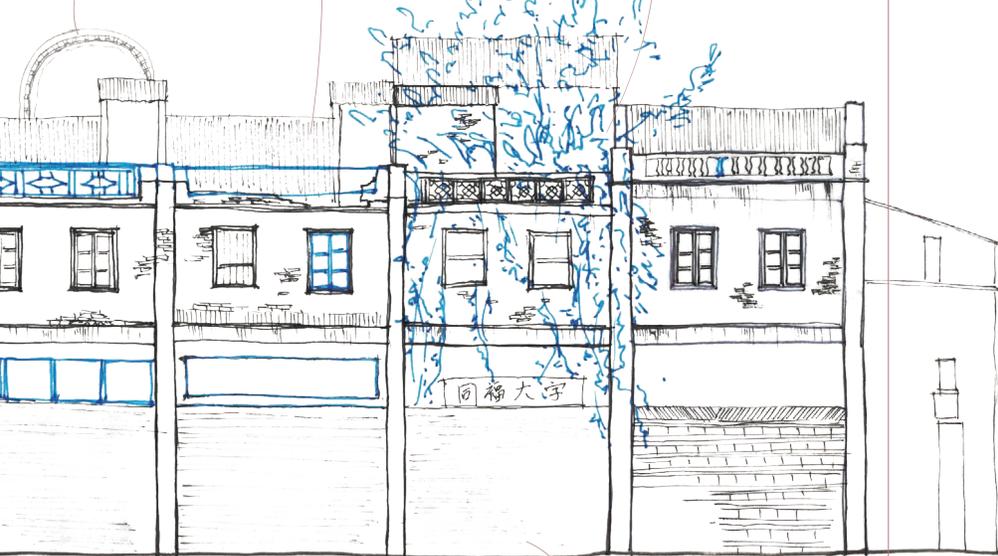
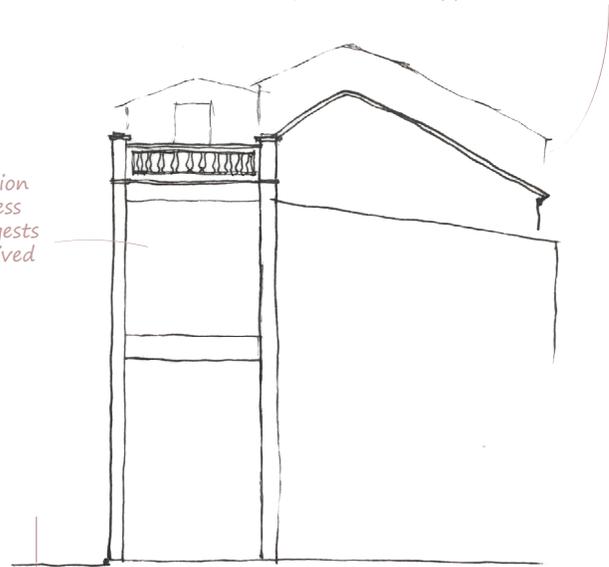
qilou houses on this side of Kuaizi Lu for the most part seem to have a shallow depth of just one gable roof, in contrast to succession of multiple gables on the opposite side of the street

the uniformity of construction between the qilou, roof access stairs, and main house suggests that they were likely conceived and built at the same time

the regularity of this row of seven consecutive qilous was very likely constructed by the same owner; the individual roof access stairs indicate that each unit, occupying one bay, had its individual stairs

in the years of neglect, a tree — uncertain whether it grew and outgrew from a potted plant, or from the strong will an accidental seed — overtook the roof terrace; infringing on the structural integrity of the qilou, it was removed some time between 2018-2020

wok-ear wall of the vernacular courtyard residences behind; not visible from street level viewing angle



electronics shops and a ceramic general store, though the shopfronts were mostly sealed behind metal roller doors or filled up with bricks altogether, overtaken by new years calligraphy booths

perhaps the longest stretch of qilous offering a continuous covered walkway



## The Qilou Saga

The qilous of Chopsticks Street are the local variation of an architectural emblem of Lingnan. Having evolved from the rudimentary *xia pu shang ju* 下铺上居, “shop below, dwelling above,” and *qian pu hou ju* 前铺后居, “shop in front, dwelling at back,” to the sophisticated hybrid dwelling of Chinese and Western lineages, the qilou unravels as a kaleidoscopic reflection of both intimately local and broadly territorial cultural histories.

Qilou, in Chinese, *qi lou* 骑楼, literally means “riding building.” It describes the projected upper-floor structure supported on columns, giving the appearance of the building riding on top of the ground-floor pedestrian walkway. The term first appeared in the 1912 “Guangdong Provincial Capital Police Department Current Prohibition on Construction Regulations and Implementation Rules”:

Article 15: Anyone who builds a shophouse on the [vehicular] road should leave a width of eight chis [2.7 metres] in front of the door and build a qilou with feet. On both sides of the qilou, merchandises and obstacles such as partition boards and bamboo fences should not be used; they obstruct pedestrians.

Article 21: For new house and shop constructions, if a [multistory] building, the clear height of the ground floor should not be less than one zhang [3.3 metres], the remaining floors should not be less than nine chis [3.0 metres], except

for the top level which can have one chi less [2.7 metres], measuring from top of floor to middle of the king post.<sup>36</sup>

The regulations foremost officialized the qilou as a distinct typology. The “shophouse” referred to the commonly combined shop-dwelling functions, with commercial business staged in the front room and private residential quarters located in the back rooms and on upper levels. The description of “qilou with feet” vividly recounted the exterior form of the new building type, alluding to the multi-story structure standing on a pair of columns flushed with the road. The emphasis on an unobstructed pedestrian passage in front of the recessed ground-floor shops formally characterized the quintessential feature of qilou architecture.

Qilous typically lined up should-to-shoulder, forming a continuous shaded corridor that sheltered pedestrians from the scorching sun and sudden torrential downpours, both typical of the regional subtropical climate. The covered walkway became a haven for strollers and shoppers, where casual encounters and spontaneous chatters fostered neighbourly relationships between owner-residents and frequenters. While respecting a clear passage, merchandises often spilled out onto the extended porch, as did domestic life, occasionally joined by peddlers. Beyond a passageway for foot traffic, the qilou elaborated into a space of its own; it was a site of exchange, a set of relationships, a mode of life, altogether, a culture.

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36 “Guangdongsheng jingchating xianxing qudi jianzhu zhangcheng ji shixing xize” 广东省城警察厅现行取缔建筑章程及施行细则” [Guangdong Provincial Capital Police Department Current Prohibition on Construction Regulations and Implementation Rules], 1912.

The width of each qilou unit, demarcated by the spacing of the pair of supporting columns, typically stretches three to five metre – traditionally limited by the achievable span of a timber beam and reminiscent of the ancient house tax system calculated based on the width of the street frontage.<sup>37</sup> The narrow façade conceals the building's indefinite depth, often varying from ten to twenty metres, but can extend as far back as fifty metre.<sup>38</sup> Interior spaces are arranged in a linear sequence, with successive rooms punctuated by skywells to bring light and ventilation into the deep, windowless building. The layout, native to the region, is locally known as the “bamboo culm house” for its resemblance to the nodal segments of a bamboo tube. The formation is conveniently expandable. In its most basic form, the building can be one room deep; the ground floor front room would be either a shop, in the case of a shophouse, or the front hall of a solely residential house. Additional rooms and skywells can be easily attached to the back of the existing structures in succession, extending as deep as three or four skywells to the back of the lot.

As the only visage of expression for the indefinitely deep structures, the qilou's narrow frontage often self-manifested with exuberance. Plaster relief adorned the facades with a repertoire of Western ornaments, from classical column capitals, renaissance pilasters, arch window keystones, to baroque pediments integrated with auspicious Chinese motifs. The curious blend, perhaps a bit

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37 Jun Zhang, “Rise and Fall of the *Qilou*: Metamorphosis of Forms and Meanings in the Built Environment of Guangzhou,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 26, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 27.

38 Lin Lin 林琳, *Gang Ao yu Zhujiangsanjiao diyu jianzhu: Guangdong qilou* 港澳与珠江三角地域建筑——广东骑楼 [Regional Architecture in Hong Kong, Macau, and the Pearl River Delta: Guangdong Qilou] (Beijing: Kexue chubanshe, 2006), 26.

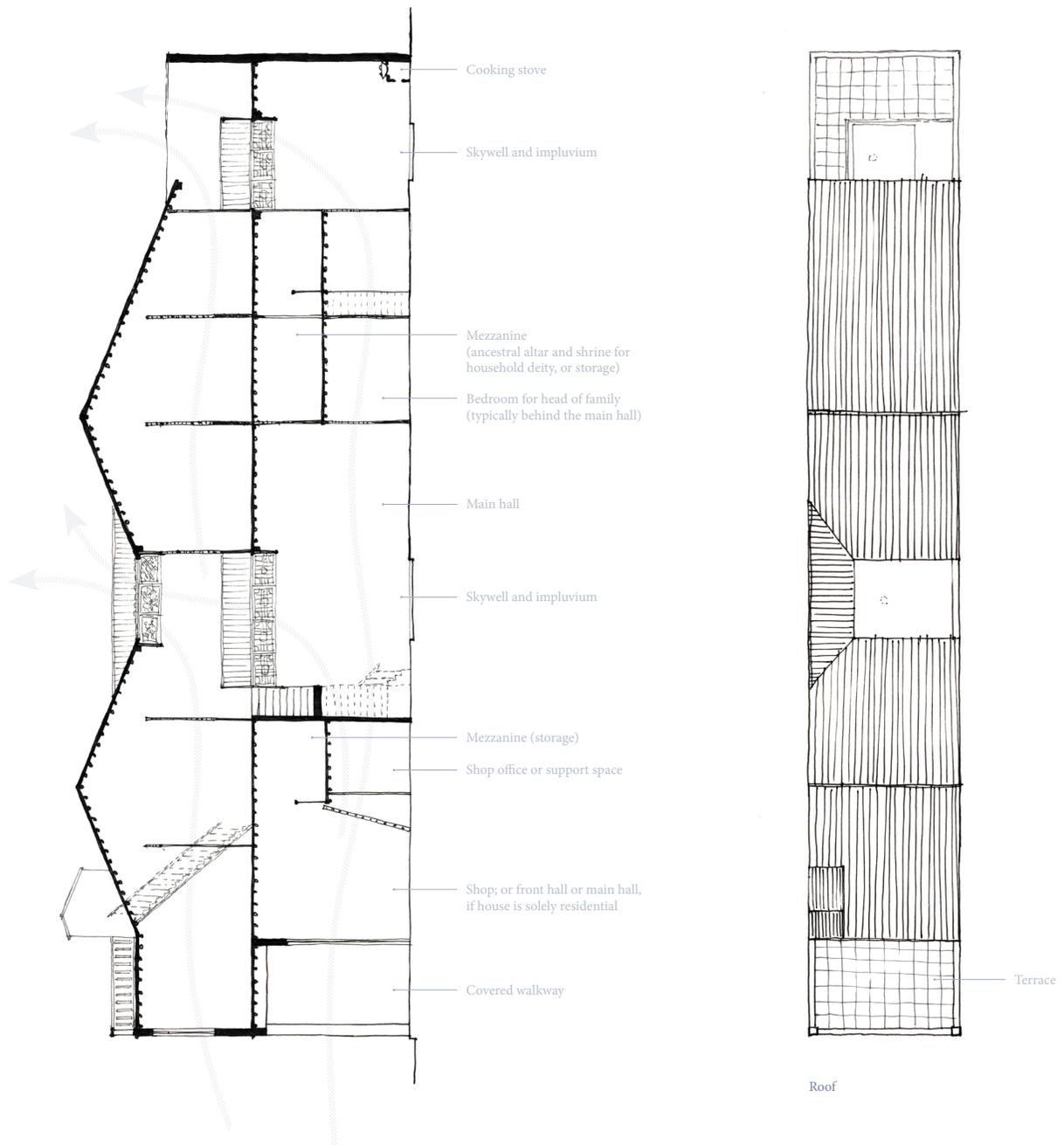
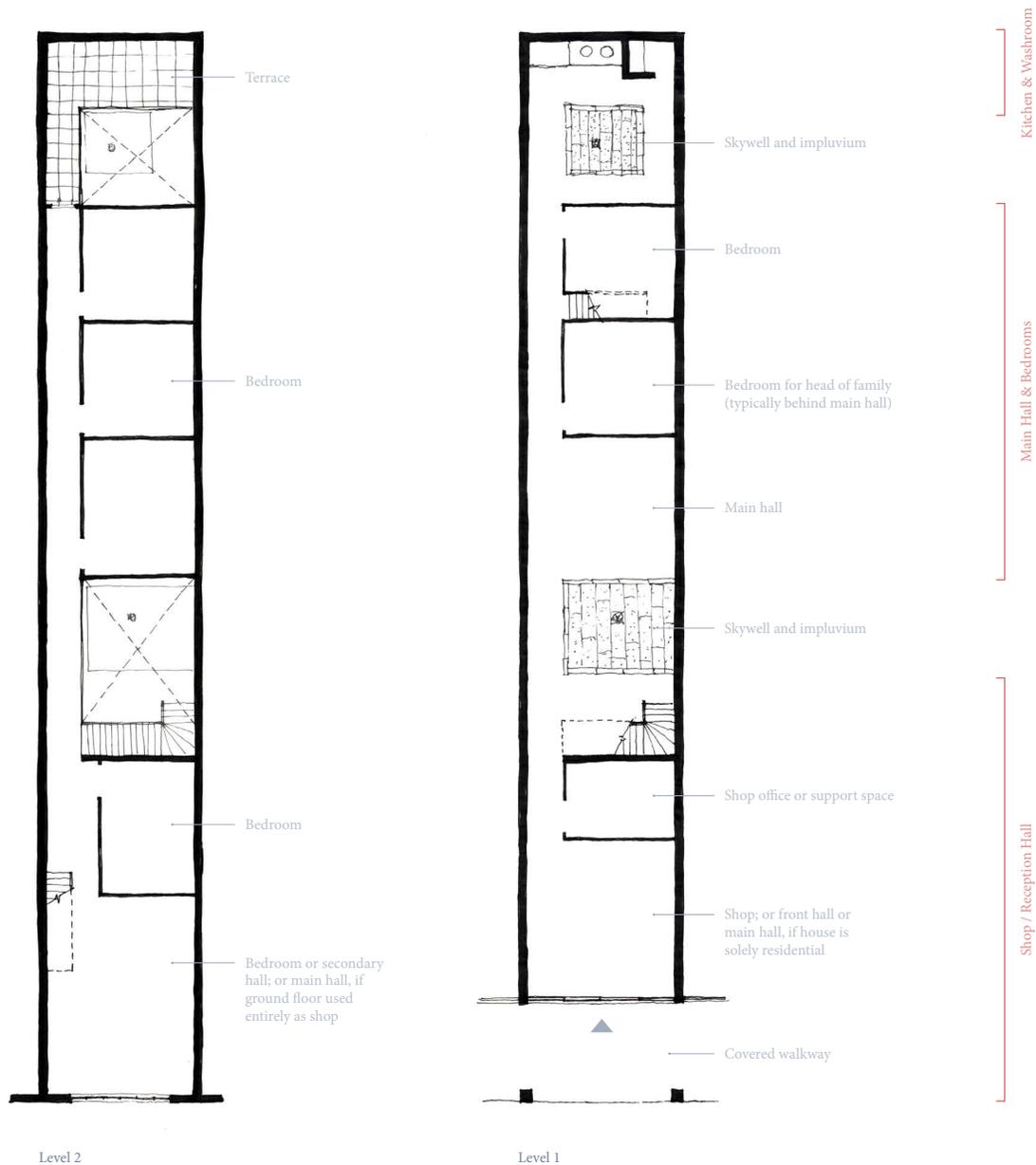


Fig. 2.33

Typical plans and section of a qilou. Specific layouts vary infinitely according to functional requirements and financial capability of the household and shop, but can be generally divided into three segments punctuated by skywells. The front typically accommodates the shop and reception hall. The middle contains the main hall for familial activities and bedrooms. The rear finds the kitchen and sanitary facilities. The middle segment can vary greatly in length, with additional skywells inserted if needed.

Narrowness of the bamboo culm plan is also a vernacular response to the regional hot-humid climate. Its basic formation is reminiscent of the traditional Chinese courtyard house, in which subsequent courtyard units are



added axially in accordance with family size and status. However, in contrast to the cold north, where housing compounds feature relatively separate buildings surrounding large courtyards to maximize solar exposure, warm climate of the south prefers compacted buildings with narrow skywells to let in light and ventilation while limiting direct sunlight. Houses tend to be spaced closely together, if not sharing a party wall, to further minimize solar exposure on the exterior walls, or minimize the area of exterior walls altogether. The long narrow plan and skywells also create a stack effect to ventilate heat and humidity from the interiors. Interior partition walls, often openwork wood lattice screens, effectively create a fluid interior space for airflow.

frivolous, is nonetheless harmonious. If not a fair understanding for the Western architectural language, the qilou, at the least, boasted the imaginative and artisanal capabilities of local builders, as well the region's readiness to absorb foreign fashions.

The widespread introduction of qilous during this time period was likely not a coincidence. After overthrowing the Qing dynasty and ending China's imperial rule, the newly founded Republican government, favouring progressive Western ideals, pushed for an updated urban image representative of the new era. The emergence of motorized road vehicles also effected speed, traffic, and spatial conflicts for traditional urban thoroughfares dominated by travelers on foot. The mention of "road" in the regulations, in fact, referred to the Republican urban agenda for construction of new vehicular roads to anticipate automobile dominance. The qilou responded as a two-in-one solution which refreshed outmoded cities with a chic appearance while creating a pragmatic separation between vehicular traffic, pedestrian flow, and commercial spaces. In an in-depth study of qilous in Guangzhou, the sociocultural anthropologist, Jun Zhang, commented,

many *qilou* streets became the busiest thoroughfares in the city, with individual *qilou* housing a variety of stores, restaurants and cinemas. In a symbiotic existence, new streets brought traffic, and *qilou* provided space for consumption, which in turn increased traffic on the streets. The result was the image of a vibrant city that can today be seen in many old photos.<sup>39</sup>

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39 Zhang, "Rise and Fall of the *Qilou*," 32.

The 1920 “Temporary Prohibition on Construction Regulations and Implementation Rules” appended:

Article 36: Anyone who builds a house on a one-hundred-chi [33.3 metres] wide road is allowed to build a qilou [with a pedestrian passage height] of twenty chis [6.6 metres]; on an eighty-chi [26.6 metres] wide road, it is allowed to build a qilou [with a pedestrian passage height] of fifteen chis [5.0 metres]; [...].

Article 37: For the construction of qilous on an eighty-chi [26.6 metres] wide road, minimum height should be no less than fifteen chis [5.0 metres] for the ground floor, thirteen chis [4.3 metres] for the second floor, eleven chis [3.6 metres] for the third floor, and ten and a half chis [3.5 metres] for the fourth floor and above [...].<sup>40</sup>

The generous dimensions lent to qilou streetscapes of imposing scales, which, while suiting the Republican spirits of Guangzhou as the provincial capital, were not always achieved in smaller urban centres around the province. In the town of Foshan, for example, urban construction in the 1930s widened a dozen of new vehicular roads, almost all of which, including Chopsticks Street, had an average road width of 9.6 metres and pedestrian walkways of 2.4 metres on both sides – rather narrow compared to the provincial standards.<sup>41</sup> The height of qilous in Foshan, respectively,

40 “Linshi qudi jianzhu zhangcheng” 临时取缔建筑章程 [Temporary Prohibition on Construction Regulations], 1920.

41 Liang Ruixing 梁瑞星, “Foshan jindai qilou jianzhu fazhan chutan” 佛山近代骑楼建筑发展初探 [A Preliminary Study on the Development of Modern Qilou Architecture in Foshan], *Sichuan jianzhu* 四川建筑 31, no. 6 (December 2011): 71, <https://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotal->

were humbler. Modesty in size of qilous in smaller townships, nonetheless, did not limit the imaginative diversity with which local builders styled their buildings. During the 1920s and 1930s, fashionable qilous spread fervently across the Pearl River Delta.

Yet, the sudden appearance of qilous in full maturity baffles the normal evolutionary process for a local building typology. Taking hints from its Western visage, a retrospective pursuit on the Maritime Silk Route drops the anchor in colonial Singapore. As early as the sixteenth century, merchant-adventurers from China's southern coasts traded actively in the Nanyang regions – the “Southern Seas,” spanning from China's southern coasts to the Strait of Malacca and Java Sea – and formed local settlements. When the British governor Sir Thomas Stamford Bingley Raffles established a trading post in Singapore in 1819, European and Nanyang-Chinese communities flourished on the island, each building in their respective architectural styles. Shophouses – likened to those native to southern China – were the predominant building type of immigrant Chinese groups. In his Ordinances of November 4, 1822, Raffles laid out his town plan for future Singapore and required that “all houses constructed of brick or tile should have a uniform type of front, each having a verandah of a certain depth, open at all times as a continuous and covered passage on each side of the street.”<sup>42</sup> Locally termed as the “five-foot way,” although most were six to seven feet in width, thus became the formula for the Singaporean shophouse – the pioneer qilou.

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SCJI201106026.htm.

42 Lai Chee Kien, “Multi-ethnic Enclaves around Middle Road: An Examination of Early Urban Settlement in Singapore,” *biblioasia* 2, no. 2 (July 2006): 8, <https://biblioasia.nlb.gov.sg/files/pdf/BiblioAsia%20Jul%202006.pdf>.



Fig. 2.34  
Singapore shophouses.

The early Singaporean shophouses were “fairly perfunctory structures: two storeys, with the upper floor projecting over the covered walkway beneath, supported by a pair of square-plan columns, which were carried through to the upper storey as pilasters.”<sup>43</sup> Façade ornamentation was minimal save for a basic cornice and moulding for capitals of column and pilasters. The rudimentary construct reflected two phenomena in early Singaporean-Chinese communities: firstly, a relative poverty; secondly, the perception of the Singaporean settlement as a sojourn, expecting to return home at a later date, which dissuaded the need for an elaborate temporary house.<sup>44</sup>

Towards the late nineteenth century, increasing affluence from business ventures and perhaps the persuasion of time witnessed a growing tendency for Chinese immigrants to accept Singapore as their permanent home. The shophouse became a medium for self-expression and ostentatious display of hard-earned fortunes.<sup>45</sup> Strategically located at the tip of Malay Peninsula, a necessary passage on the Maritime Silk Route between China and the West, Singapore was gifted with a diverse supply of stylistic, technical, and material resources coming from both directions. Shophouses dressed in Chinese, Baroque, Neo-Classical, Rococo, and mix-matched hybrid styles trended in different phases.<sup>46</sup> The façades saturated with colourful stucco reliefs depicting Western and traditional Chinese motifs, from flowers and animals to fable scenes, were often applied onto a base of fluted pilasters,

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43 Julian Davison and Luca Invernizzi Tettoni, *Singapore Shophouse* (Singapore: Talisman Publishing, 2010), 90.

44 Davison, *Singapore Shophouse*, 90-92.

45 Davison, 93.

46 Davison, 36.



Fig. 2.35  
Singapore shophouses.



Fig. 2.36  
Singapore shophouses.

Corinthian capitals, dentil cornice, and pedimented windows. The five-foot way was adorned with encaustic floor tiles imported from Europe and ceramic wall tiles boasting intricate geometric and floral designs.<sup>47</sup> Singapore became a cauldron for the typological and stylistic brewing of the shophouse that spread quickly along the Malay peninsula and in other Nanyang-Chinese communities.

Despite their cosmopolitan facades, the spatial layouts of the Singaporean shophouse revealed a striking loyalty to the archetypal bamboo culm house native to southern China.<sup>48</sup> Interior ornamentation also displayed strong ideological ties to ancestral roots, with a repertoire of Chinese elements including calligraphy, granite lintels and thresholds, sculpted wooden beams and corbels, wooden lattice screens, carved doors, glazed ceramic airbricks, and sometimes furniture pieces commissioned and shipped from traditional craftsmen in China.<sup>49</sup> It is also with this wealth and fidelity towards ancestral roots that many overseas Chinese merchants, at the turn of the last century, returned to southern China with monetary funds – and architectural styles – to invest in new constructions for their native hometowns.

Nanyang shophouses trickled in almost synchronously in various Chinese coastal cities, first via ancestral familial ties with overseas communities, and from those hometowns they spread through stylistic imitation by adjacent townships. As a major maritime port and a metropolitan trading hub, Guangzhou was not the direct inventor of the qilou, but a departure point, landing site, and source

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47 Davison, *Singapore Shophouse*, 54-62.

48 Davison, 16-17.

49 Davison, 93, 78.



Fig. 2.37  
Qilous in Chikan, Kaiping, Guangdong. The town was historically a regional maritime hub and centre of emmigration. In the early 19th century, Chikan's rapid growth and numerous qilou constructions were fueled by investments from overseas Chinese native to the town.

of local diffusion for the return of the bamboo-culm shophouse mutated overseas.<sup>50</sup> As the provincial capital, Guangzhou's regulations further promoted the official construction of qilous during the early Republican period. The Pearl River Delta boasted one of the highest concentrations of qilous in China.<sup>51</sup>

Compared with their Nanyang counterparts, the Cantonese qilous tended to be more reserved in colour and in ornamentation for both façades and interior spaces. Perhaps not too surprisingly, China did not have the same material palette and facilitated access to exotic resources as did the Malay Peninsula. Furthermore, occupants of Cantonese qilous, on average, were less wealthy than owners of Nanyang shophouses. In China, well-off elites traditionally lived in finely decorated mansions or multi-generational courtyard compounds; the bamboo-culm houses and qilous were urban dwellings for the average citizens. The overseas Chinese merchants, however, typically individuals from the less affluent population venturing in hopes of making a fortune abroad, concentrated their new wealth in the sole prevailing mercantile housing typology in their overseas communities.

Also notable, while Nanyang shophouses were often commissioned to architects, who built with a certain material resourcefulness and stylistic consistency, Cantonese qilous were typically constructed by builder with materials and techniques locally affordable. With less extravagance, stylistic variations, nevertheless, thrived at both the regional scale and in individual qilous, evolving from interpretative imitation of craftsmen and

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50 Lin, *Gang Ao yu Zhujiangsanjiao*, 66-75.

51 Lin, 66.

adapting to locally specific cultures. Aided by Lingnan's historic open receptiveness, the relaxed Republican attitude towards Western culture, the qilous' pragmatic spatial separation, and climatic practicality of the covered walkway, the Chinese-Western hybrid shophouse assimilated effortlessly into Cantonese culture as a vernacular typology.

Albeit their instantaneous popularity, flourishing of the Cantonese qilou was short-lived. In the late 1930s, invasion of Japanese troops broke into an eight-year War of Resistance on Chinese territories, during which qilou and various urban developments stagnated. Reconstruction resumed briefly following the Chinese victory, but internal political conflicts and the Chinese Civil War plagued the country with social instability during the second half of the 1940s.<sup>52</sup>

When the Communist Party rose to power in 1949, socialist ideologies discouraged capitalism, of which the qilou were a symbol. The Cultural Revolution further criticized the shophouses' Western facades as "bourgeois cultural expression." Yet, housing shortage and insufficient economic resources during this period continued residential occupation of the qilous, albeit fallen out of favour, under the premise that they would undergo socialist reform, namely, the conversion to state-ownership and abolition of private business functions. The qilou streets, as predominant residential neighbourhoods, nonetheless bustled with people and activity, as family life extended into the covered walkway, blurring

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52 Lin, *Gang Ao yu Zhujiangsanjiao*, 75-81.

the boundaries between public and private during different times of the day and seasons of the year.<sup>53</sup>

During the economic reform beginning in 1979, many properties confiscated in the socialist era were returned to their original owners and qilous regained some of their former commercial vitality.<sup>54</sup> Yet, urban redevelopment pressure soon condemned these aging buildings as obstacles to a modernized cityscape. Large-scale demolition took place in all too familiar tragic tales.

In the lead-up to the 2010 Asian Games hosted by Guangzhou, the provincial government enlisted citizen participation through an online vote to select the “Ten Most Representative Emblems of Lingnan Culture.” The qilou was on the list amongst Cantonese cuisine, Cantonese opera, inkstone from a Cantonese locality, Sun Yat-sen, and other historical figures, sites, and arts. The announcement also came with a small description:

Cantonese qilou is a shophouse architectural typology evolved from the marriage of traditional Lingnan dwellings and Western architectural styles; it shelters from wind and rain and protects against the sun, especially suitable for the subtropical climate of Lingnan; its commercial practicality is particularly outstanding. Cantonese qilou has gradually evolved to be a part of the lives of Cantonese people, becoming an architectural symbol representative of Lingnan Culture.<sup>55</sup>

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53 Zhang, “Rise and Fall of the *Qilou*,” 33.

54 Zhang, 34.

55 “‘Lingnan wenhua shidaminpian’ mingdan” ‘岭南文化十大名片’ 名单 [List of the ‘Ten Most Representative Emblems of Lingnan Culture’], *Yangcheng Evening News*, December 29, 2010, <https://news.qq.com/a/20101229/001465.htm>.

It was somewhat ironic that this recognition came at a time when qilous were being phased out of the lives of Cantonese people. Nevertheless, it occasioned turning a point for the fate of a cultural artifact that embodied the Cantonese identity.

From physical and mnemonic vestiges, thus, the following pages sketch minute stories of the qilou that the Cantonese people prided as a Lingnan distinctiveness. The intimate moments rediscover the experience of the qilou, as well as the symbiotic relationships it curates between its architecture and people, both specific to Chopsticks Street and the larger regional cultural sphere. The narrative is visual, tangible, symbolic, temporal, reminiscent, and speculative, and perhaps, sentimental.

The practice of dismantling, it would seem, manifests as a prerequisite for any type of construction – and sometimes, hypocritically, restoration – in the Pearl River Delta. This process of taking apart physically tears down the tangible structures and intangible social-spiritual relationships. The drawings, thus, attempt an alternative form of disassembly, one that, instead of “destruct,” tactfully “de-constructs” the cultural essence of Chopsticks Street and its qilous. This gestural and contemplative dismantling interacts with the soul of the relics, to ultimately guide more sensible “re-construction” of the place, the architecture, and its cherished ambiance.

### *Covered walkway*

*The most typological characteristic of the qilou is certainly the colonnaded covered walkway on the ground floor.*

*The word qilou, 骑楼, literally means "riding house". It describes the second-floor structure that projects over the ground floor pedestrian space, supported on columns, as if the house is riding over the sidewalk.*

*Much welcomed regionally, the qilous lined up side-by-side create a continuous covered walkway that*

*offers shade from the intense sun...*

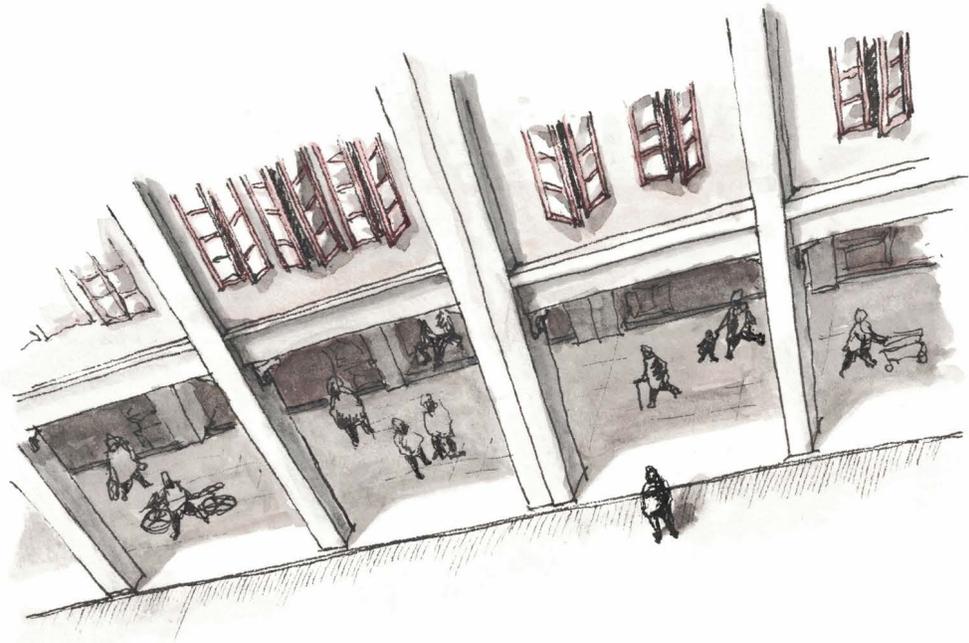


Fig. 2.38  
Qilou sketch.

*and shelters from sudden torrential downpours ...  
both typical of the regional climate.*



*Weather Temperaments hamper little daily life under the qilous.*

Fig. 2.39  
Qilou sketch.

### Shophouse

The qilou is sometimes referred to as a shophouse, as its ground floor front room is typically a shop. With a storefront that opens up its full width, the pedestrian walkway often becomes an informal extension of the shop.



Fig. 2.40  
Qilou sketch.



*a signboard stretches  
above the full width  
of the storefront,  
big and loud,  
sometimes slightly  
inclined for better  
visibility from the  
viewing angle  
of pedestrians.*

*Merchandise is commonly displayed  
on shelves and cabinets lined  
against the walls of the  
narrow shop; the  
shopkeeper serves  
the customers from  
behind a long counter.*



*often enough,  
merchandise display and shopkeeping tasks spill out  
onto the covered walkway, where there is daylight,  
breeze, and pedestrian chatters.*



Fig. 2.41  
Qilou sketch.

*Closing the shop*

*of the shops still in operation on Chopsticks Street today, many close their shopfronts with rolling metal doors.*

*However, the use of these metal doors or metal devices in general was not widespread until China's industrialization in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*



Fig. 2.42  
Qilou sketch.



*In earlier times, local shopkeepers sealed their shops with wooden planks that were inserted individually into upper and lower tracks to secure them in place.*

Fig. 2.43  
Qilou sketch.

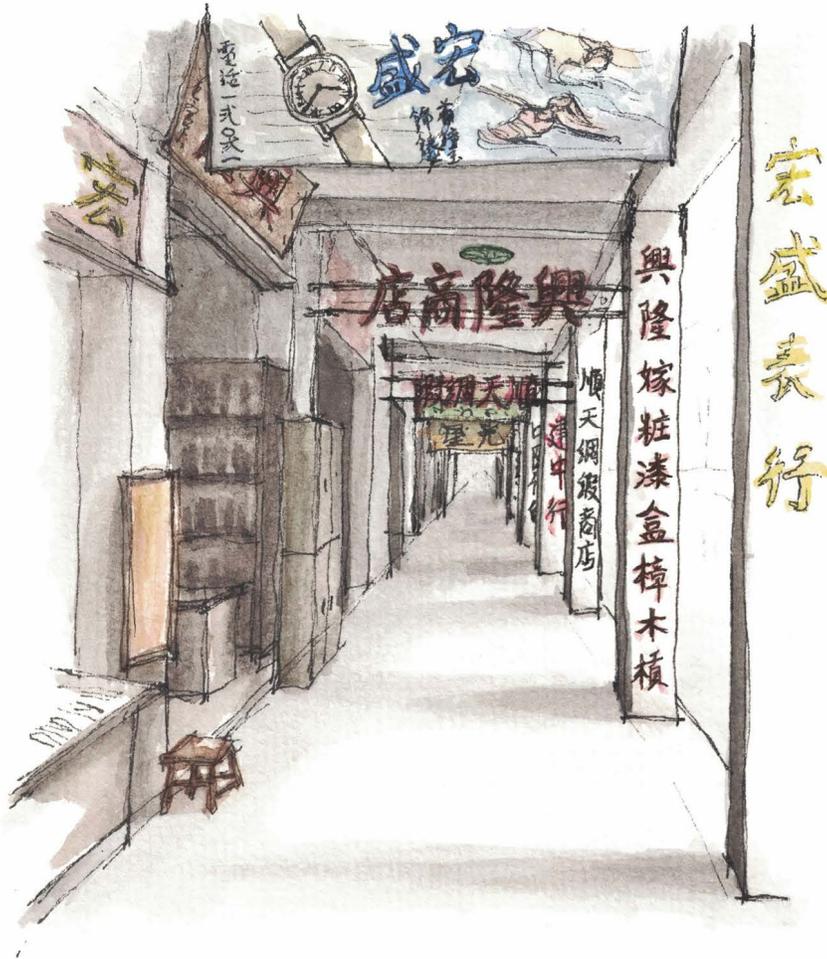
*Informal signage*



*As shop signboards are recessed behind the qilou colonnades along with the storefronts, columns become the new means of conspicuous signage. With four faces of visual exposure, information hosted on the columns is visible to all directions of approach.*

*The unitized nature of the qilous mean that the columns spatially demarcate the location of each shop. Shop owners paint on their respective column(s) the shop names, the key merchandise or services they offer, and/or terse self-selling phrases.*

Fig. 2.44  
Qilou sketch.

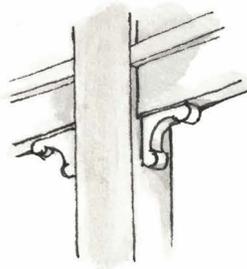
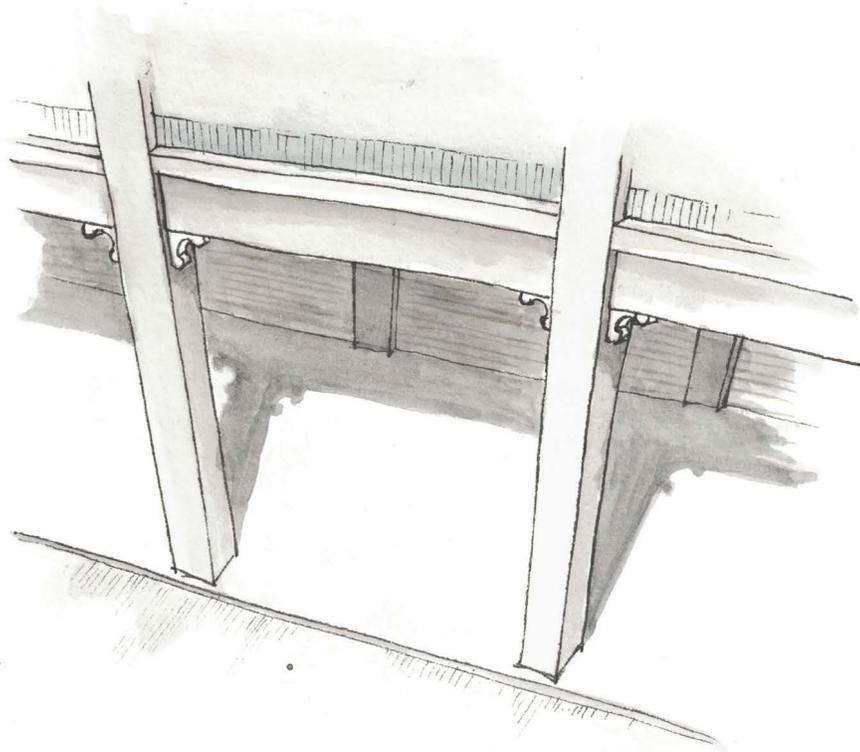


*Beneath the qilou, beams are also used to suspend advertising posters. Shop owners also devise ways to put up additional horizontal signage anchoring to the qilou structure to compensate for the unfavourable viewing angle of the main signboard for pedestrians strolling along the walkway.*

Fig. 2.45  
Qilou sketch.

*Brackets*

*Sometimes overhead details go unnoticed, until their curious shadows prompt us to look up...*



*On the front façades, beams over the walkway (and sometimes over a recessed balcony on upper levels) are often supported on brackets. Brackets are typically moulded and decorative, with profiles reinventing from Western styles, assimilating geometries reminiscent of Classical, Baroque, and Modernist characteristics.*

Fig. 2.46  
Qilou sketch.

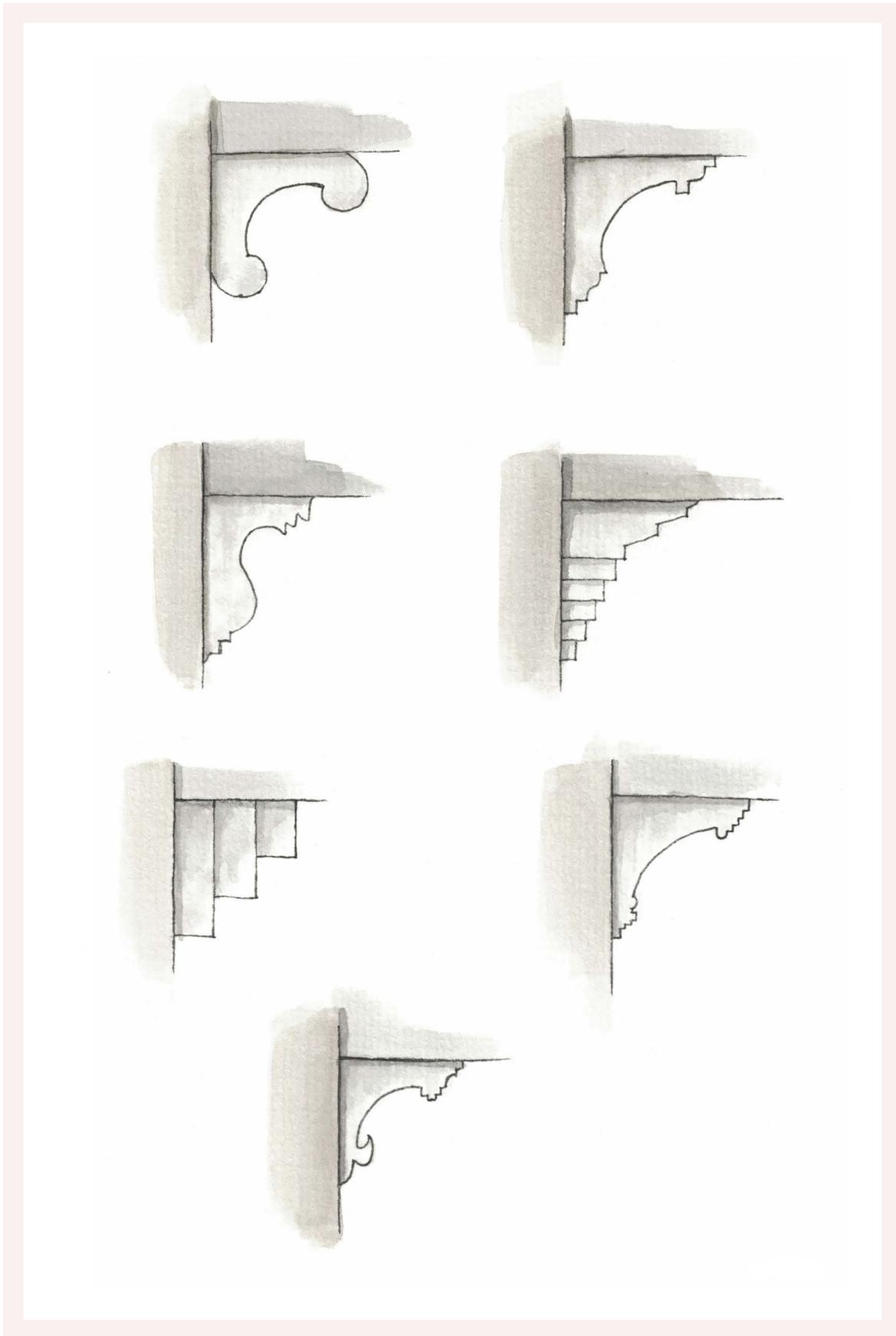
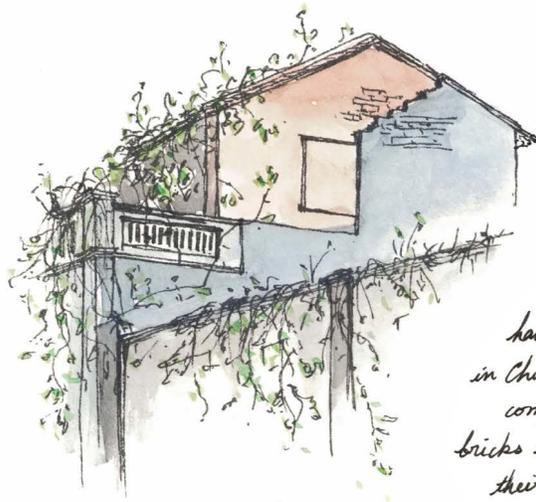


Fig. 2.47  
Qilou sketch.

## Gray bricks, red bricks



Many qilous were constructed from traditionally crafted gray bricks. Some qilous reveal patches of red bricks, or an ancillary structure built entirely in red bricks.

For thousands of years, gray bricks have been one of the main building materials in China. Despite being more technically complex and costly to fabricate, gray bricks have been preferred over red bricks for their superiority in resisting weathering and corrosion. The modest bluish-gray colour also lends a dignified appearance admired in the Chinese culture.

It was not until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that red bricks gained popularity in China under Western influences.

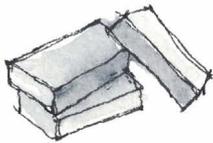
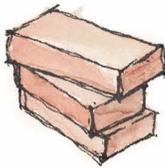
Their simpler production phased out that of gray bricks in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the dramatic political restructuring and dire economic situation in China urged for low-cost, high quantity production. In Foshan, red bricks replaced gray bricks on the market in the 1970's.

The appearance of red bricks in the qilou suggests that the structure was repaired or added at a later date.

The patchy use of red bricks also reflects an impoverished period in local history, during which citizens had to make do with whatever inexpensive material available to mend or expand their dwellings.



Fig. 2.48  
Qilou sketch.

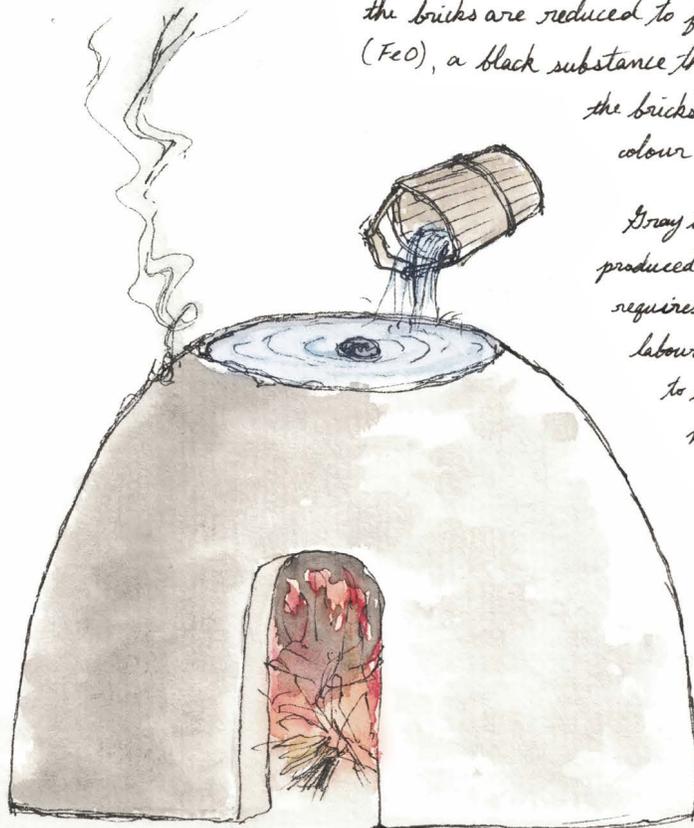


Gray bricks and red bricks begin from the same clay and undergo a similar firing process. The difference in their colours results from the method of cooling.

Red bricks are cooled through the natural ventilation of air into the kiln chamber. The process provides an abundance of oxygen, which oxidizes the iron inside the brick clay into ferric oxide ( $Fe_2O_3$ ), giving the bricks a brownish-red colour.

Gray bricks are cooled by injecting water into the kiln chamber, thereby producing an oxygen-deficient environment. Iron inside the bricks are reduced to ferrous oxide ( $FeO$ ), a black substance that lends to the bricks' bluish-gray colour.

Gray bricks can only be produced in small batches, requires more skilled labour, and is subjected to unpredictability, making it more costly to fabricate than red bricks.

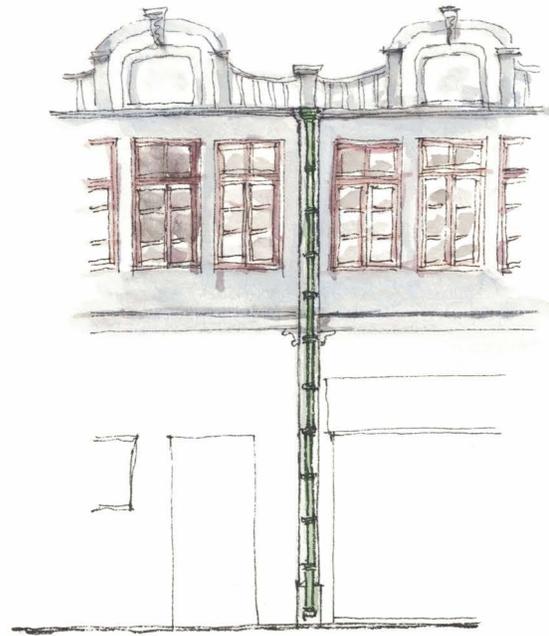


Gray bricks can endure the gnawing of the forces of nature and the voracity of time.



Fig. 2.49  
Qilou sketch.

*Ceramic downspout*



*Draining rainwater from roof to the ground, downspouts present in older houses are often made from ceramics, reflective of the local thriving ceramics industry.*

*Ceramic downspouts can be glazed or unglazed, and are sometimes adorned, as artisans amuse with their craftsmanship.*



Fig. 2.50  
Qilou sketch.

*And where water passes often,  
in time,  
life will flourish...*



Fig. 2.51  
Qilou sketch.

## Windows

Facing the street, upper floor windows are often laid out in a set of three, two, or one window, often articulating a strong rhythm for the facade.

Windows observed on Chopsticks Street are of rather basic construction, consisting of clear glass panes held between maroon-colour wood frames, most are unadorned. A few instances display minimally decorative frames and lightly patterned glass.



Fig. 2.52  
Qilou sketch.

*Double-leaf  
windows are  
most common;  
vertical pivot  
windows are  
occasionally seen.*

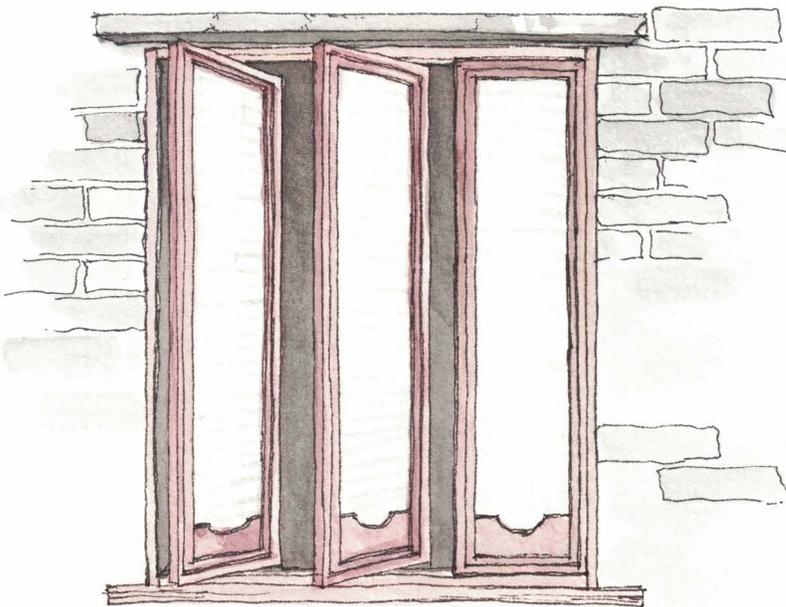
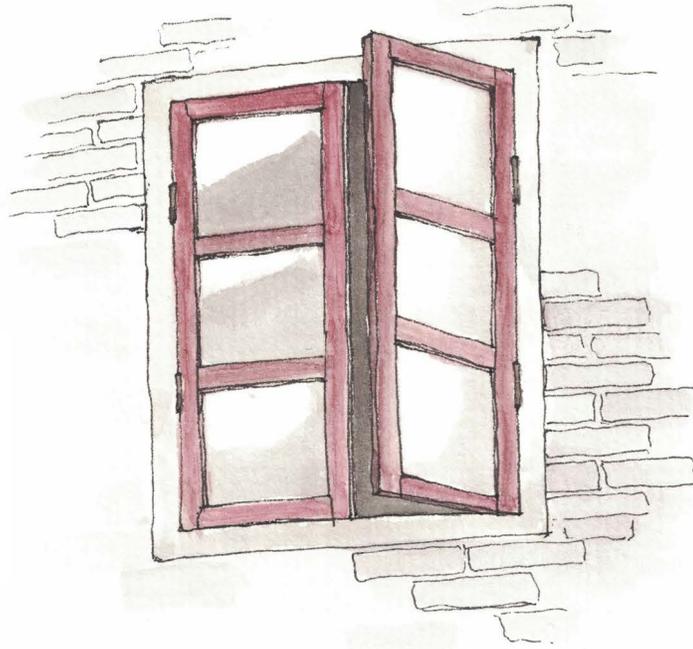


Fig. 2.53  
Qilou sketch.

Some qilous boast windows that span the entire width of the street facade. Given the skeletal structure of the qilou, the street-fronted wall is typically non-loadbearing.

A wall of windows and glass, however, certainly costs much more than a brick wall.

The large window are is typically divided into operable leaves in the lower portion and transom windows or louvers at the top. Older windows are composed of wood frames and glass panes; some qilous are fitted with industrial windows from a later period.



Fig. 2.54  
Qilou sketch.

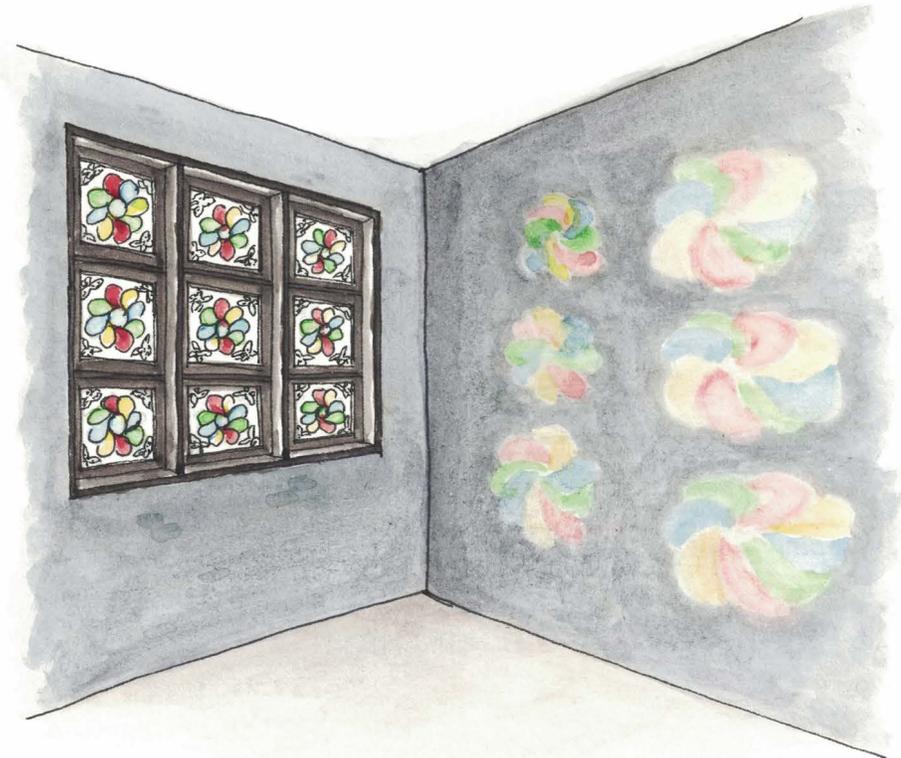


Less commonly, a few qilous enjoy a recessed balcony on the second floor, some very narrow and more like a standing balcony. The wooden door panels behind are mounted as pairs of double leaf doors, almost like an operable wall that opens the interior space fully to exterior air. Glass panes inserted in the door panels allow in ample daylight even when the wall is closed. Such extraneous elements and sacrifice of inhabitable space — in contrast to other economical qilous in vicinity — likely belonged to the wealthy.

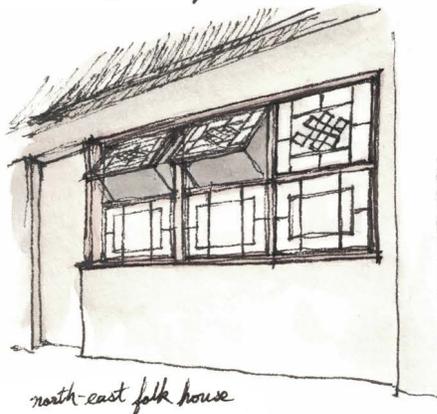
Fig. 2.55  
Qilou sketch.

*Manchurian windows*

*"manchurian" but in fact distinctively Lingnan...*



*Manchurian window is said to have evolved from Manchu customs, brought by troops of the north-eastern Chinese ethnic group sent to Canton in the Qing Dynasty, but have since then developed uniquely Lingnan characteristics with little reminiscence to its supposed predecessor.*



*north-east folk house*

*Manchu houses in the north-east typically feature a window array of large rectangular frames. Translucent oil paper covers each panel supported by a lattice of uncomplex geometric motifs, symmetrical in both directions. Panels are individually operable.*

*The Manchurian windows of Lingnan present a grid array of more repetitions with smaller and typically square panels. Lattice feature not only geometric shapes but also intricate floral motifs and curvilinear patterns. Keeping symmetry, the composition frames a central focus in each panel.*

Fig. 2.56  
Qilou sketch.



Most distinctively, coloured glass enlivens the Lingnan Manchurian windows into a kaleidoscopic visual pleasure. With Guangzhou as the only port authorized for foreign trade in the late Qing Dynasty, the region was privileged with tinted glass imported from the West, although at the time only affordable for the rich.

The windows typically used highly saturated colours, such as red, blue, yellow, orange, and green, or frosted, to block the strong sunlight in the regional hot climate and keep interior spaces cool. Panels are individually operable to flexibly adjust for different lighting and ventilation.

Each panel acts as an individual unit, likened to a patterned floor tile, arrayed to infill a window opening or span an entire wall, often in the main space doubling as a decorative display.

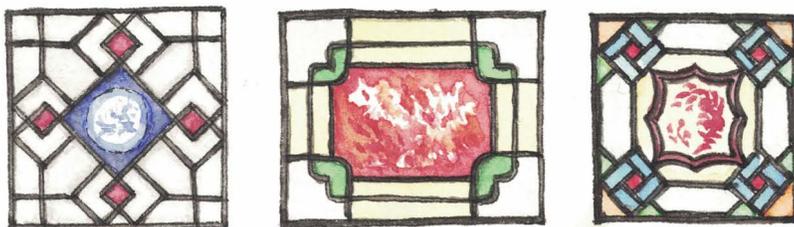


Fig. 2.57  
Qilou sketch.

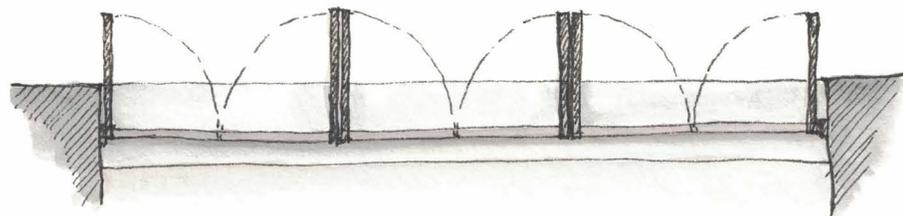
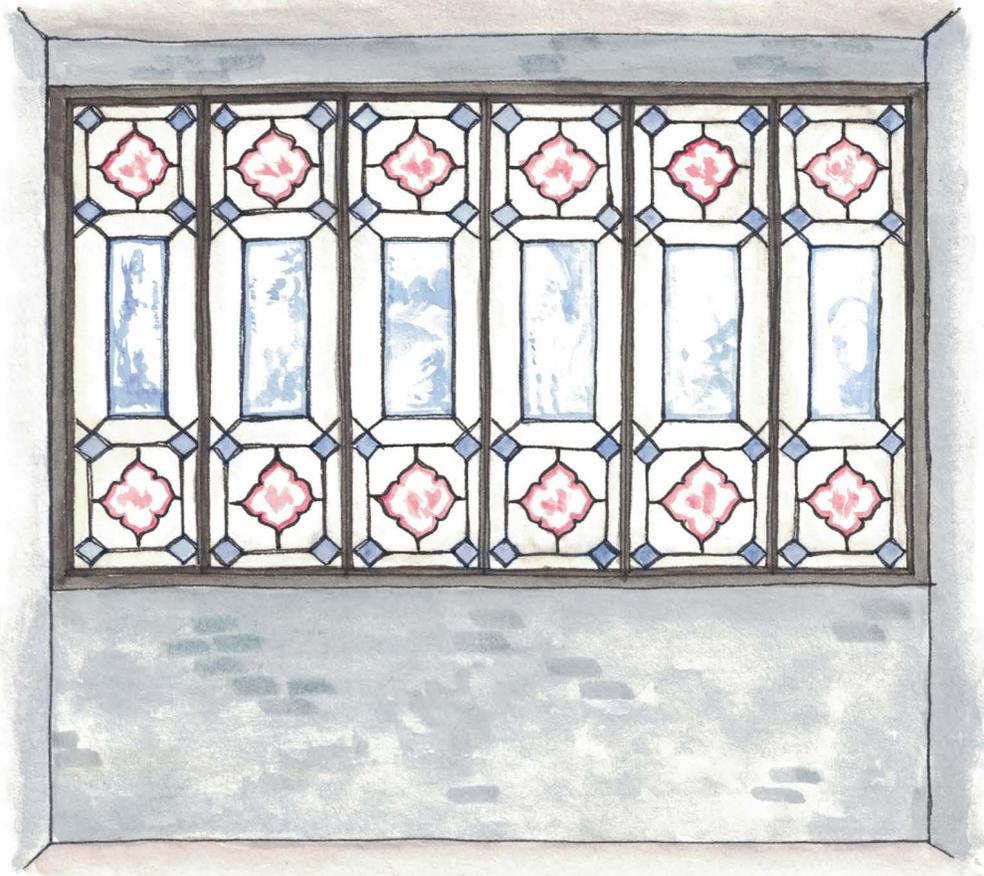


Fig. 2.58  
Qilou sketch.

*The lattice patterns and coloured glass were quickly adapted to other local window types and layout compositions, whilst keeping symmetry and an accentuated centrality, adopting motifs considered as auspicious and/or admired locally.*

*When etched glass painting was introduced to the region, it became quickly popular and featured as a focal element at the centre of window panels.*



*Framed at the centre of each panel, local craftsmen often painted traditional themes, such as flowers and birds, landscape, folk and moral stories, and calligraphy verses.*

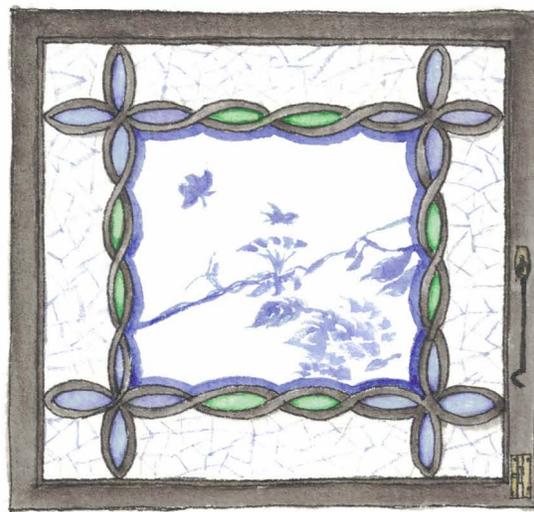


Fig. 2.59  
Qilou sketch.

## *Hanging out (washing)*

*Windows are also exploited as a spatial extension for everyday domestic life in the qilou: residents hang washing outside their windows to dry in the sun and breeze.*

*In this way, laundry does not take up living space in the compact urban residences and excess moisture does not collect within the dwelling in the often-humid local climate.*

*Local residents never cease to surprise with their creativity and resourcefulness in how they hang their clothes. The overly simplistic cantilevered bamboo structures are visually daring but always tactfully balanced.*

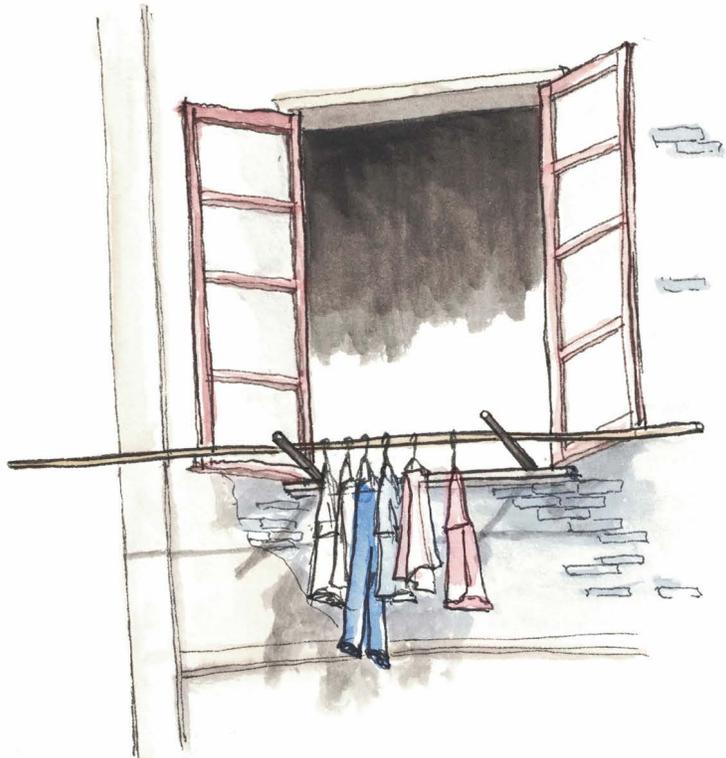
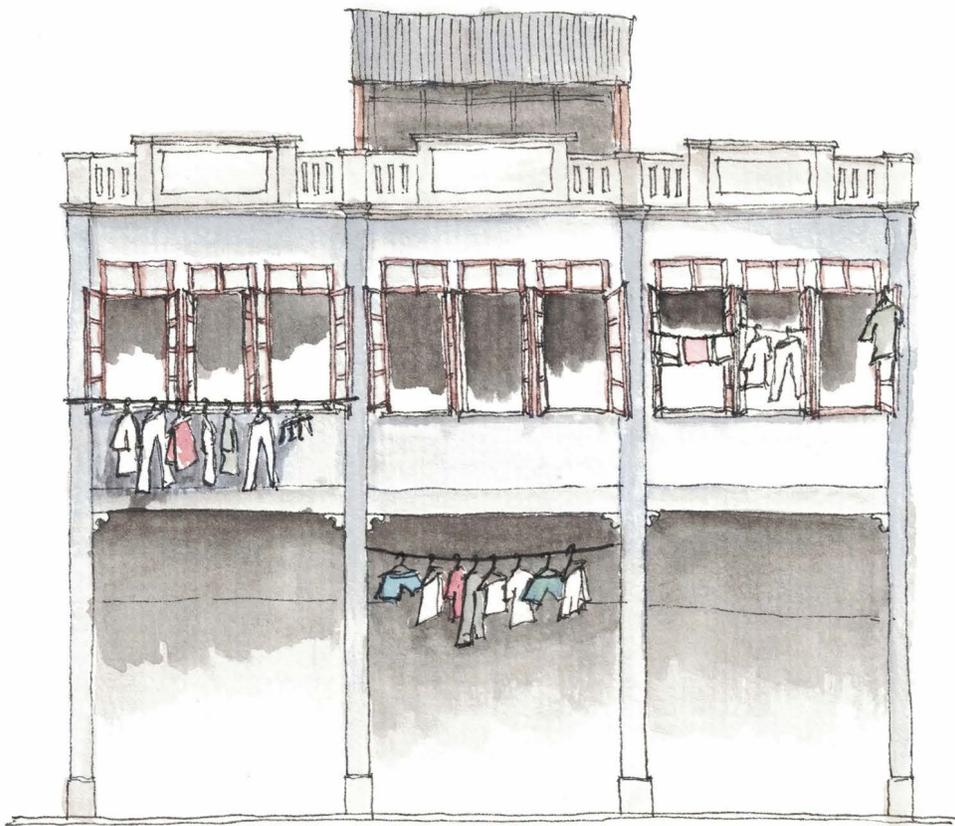


Fig. 2.60  
Qilou sketch.



*The display of hanging washing add a touch of humanness to the streetscape and a sense of neighbourhood intimacy between local residents.*

Fig. 2.61  
Qilou sketch.

## Airplane olive

Airplane olive was a popular snack in Guangzhou and surrounding regions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Chinese olive, *canarium album*, is pickled with salt, licorice, and herbs. With sweet and sour flavours, the cured olives can soothe a sore throat, clear phlegm, and suppress coughs.



Peddlers on foot sold the cured olives from street to street, often playing a suona, Chinese trumpet, to announce their presence. Customers in their upper-storey apartments would call out to the vendors from a window or balcony. In response, the vendor wraps a handful of olives in paper and throws it up to the customers above, who drop money down to the vendor. The olives came flying in the air, hence their name, airplane olives.

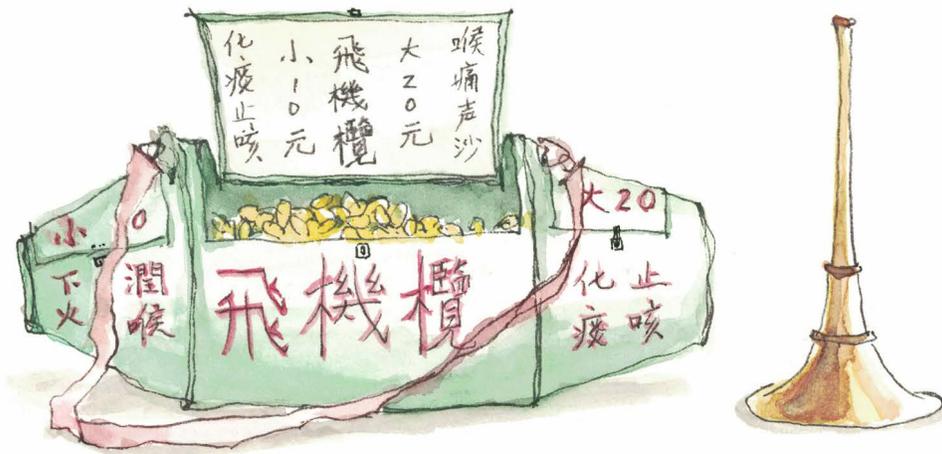


Fig. 2.62  
Qilou sketch.

*A well-practiced vendor can accurately throw the packaged olives as high up as to a seventh storey window.*

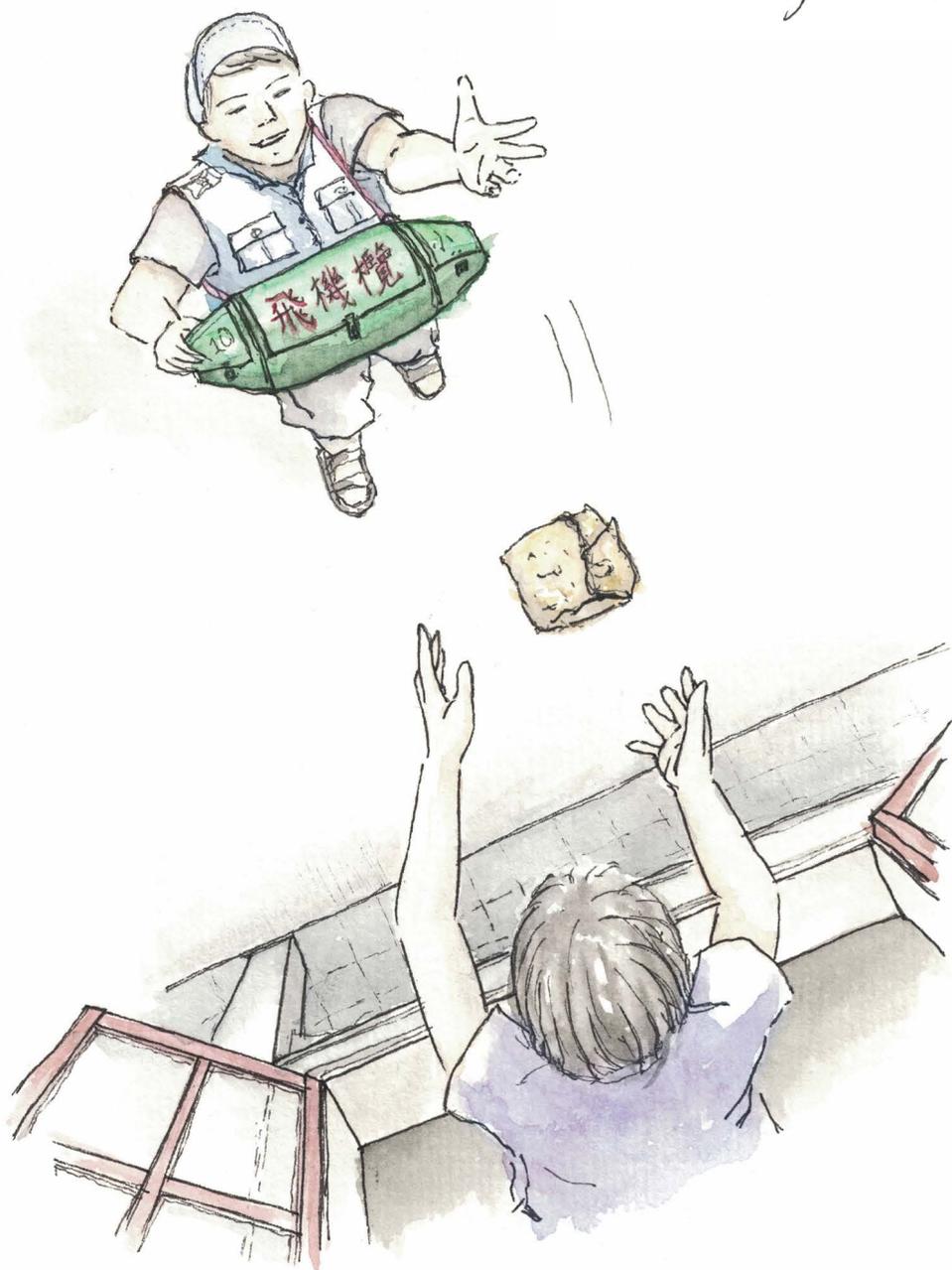


Fig. 2.63  
Qilou sketch.

The phenomenon of airplane dives reflected two urban-social conditions of the era:

1. Multi-storey buildings began to dominate the urban landscape, enabled by new construction materials and techniques. Building development in the vertical dimension rendered impossible the planar continuity between home and the street that was present in traditional single-storey residences. Confronted by the added obstacle of stairs between home and the street, airplane dives cunningly counteracted the inconvenience by allowing residents to make their purchases without descending the stairs.
2. Despite the vertical growth, local buildings in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century remained low-rise, allowing for strong social interaction between upper-storey residents and the life on the streets. Windows and balconies were not only openings for light and air, but an important social interface between building occupants and the street.

Fig. 2.64  
Qilou sketch.



Fig. 2.65  
Qilou sketch.

## Parapets & Pediments

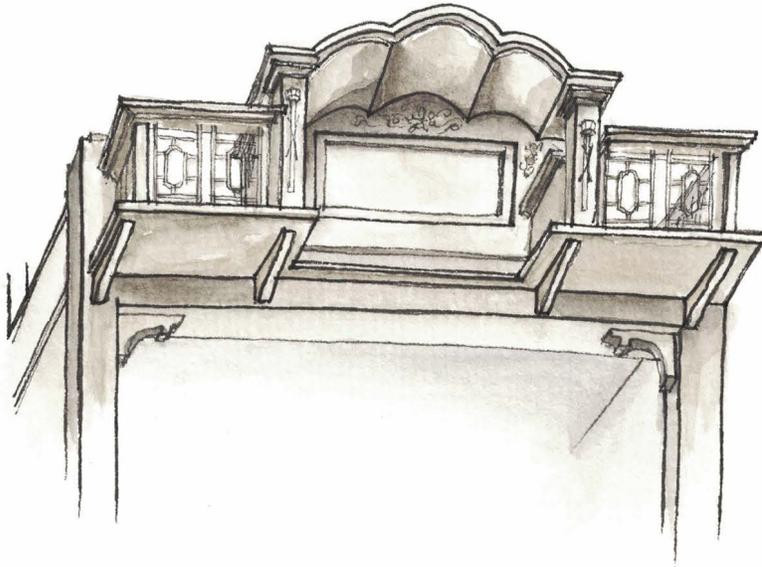
*Street facades, for the qilou, are the only conspicuous face and surface of expression for the indefinite depth of space concealed behind.*



*The façades of Kuaizi Li qilous are in general modest — except for their decorative roof parapets, which boast grandiloquent gestures involving pediments, tablets, and other rhetorical flourishes.*

*The parapets echo Classical composition and Baroque contours, superficially applied and infused with Chinese motifs, reincarnating into a stylistic appearance which the West would identify as Chinese and the Chinese would claim to be Western.*

Fig. 2.66  
Qilou sketch.

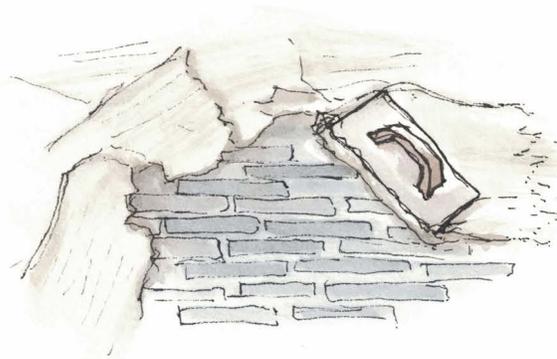
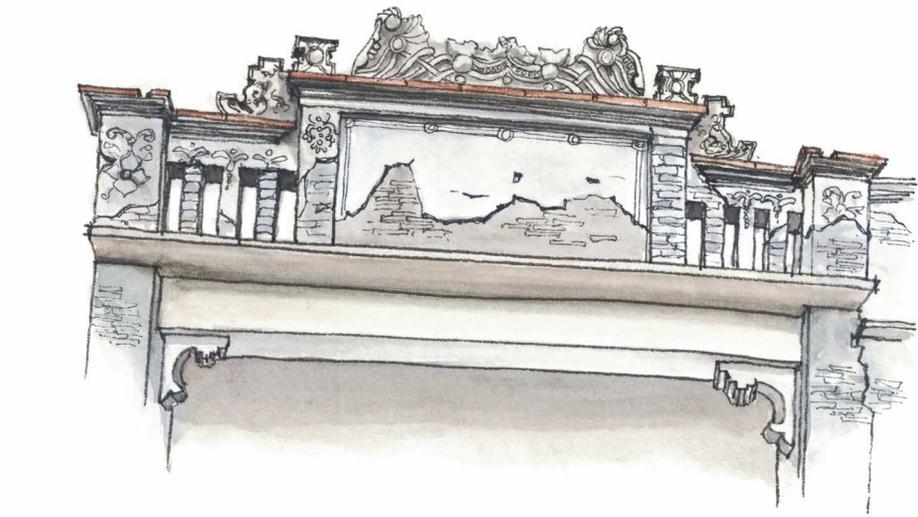


*Characteristic of qilous in southern China, parapets always incorporate apertures in their decorative motifs in order to reduce resistance against wind pressure during seasonal typhoons typical of the region.*



*At a certain time of day, or a particular spot on the street, the daylight and viewing angle reveal faintly recognizable marks of written characters on the tablet, likely the name of the business that once occupied the building, both fading by the passing of time...*

Fig. 2.67  
Qilou sketch.



*Dilapidation and peeling of the parapet reveal the brick and plaster construction of the decorative walls.*



*Brick walls are rendered in plaster to mold cornice profiles, sculpt relief flora and fauna, and model more complex ornamental pediment.*

*The parapet cornice is sometimes topped with flat terracotta tiles, delineating the contours with a subtle accent.*

Fig. 2.68  
Qilou sketch.



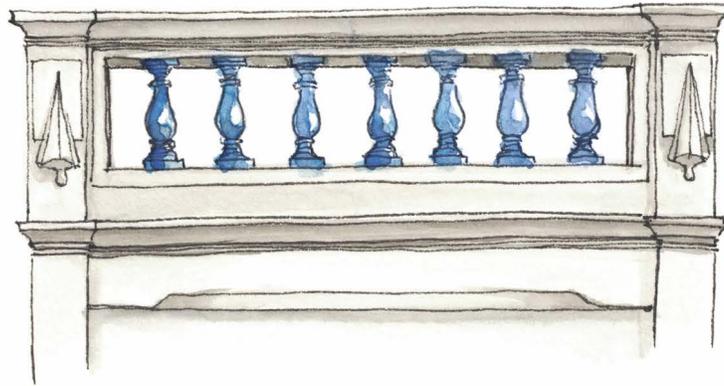
*Parapet and pediment designs are infinitely diverse, limited only by the creativity of the builders. Facades on Kuaiji Lu never repeat, except for a few instances of adjacent qilous in pairs or triplets. Their complementing or identical design suggests that they were built by the same builders or owned by the same proprietor.*



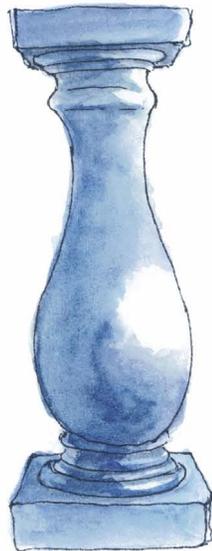
Fig. 2.69  
Qilou sketch.

## Balustrades

Parapets sometimes take the form of balustrades made from glazed ceramics, reflecting the celebrated ceramics industry of the region, or concrete, when the latter material became widely available.



Decorative motifs (not limited to balusters) are often inspired by symbols, homonyms, fables, analogies, nature, or stylized written Chinese characters with meanings of good wishes.



The vase-shaped baluster of Renaissance origin gained popularity in China as a homophonic blessing. The word for vase in Chinese, 宝瓶 (baoping), literally "treasure vase", is a homophone of 保平 (baoping), literally "to keep safe" the residents of the house.

The hexagon is also a commonly used shape in Chinese ornaments. In Chinese cosmology, the universe is composed of six directions: East, South, West, North, Heaven (up), and Earth (down). The six sides of the hexagon is hence symbolic of the unity of the six directions and a worldly completeness.

Fig. 2.70  
Qilou sketch.



Fig. 2.71  
Qilou sketch.

### *Rooftop terrace*

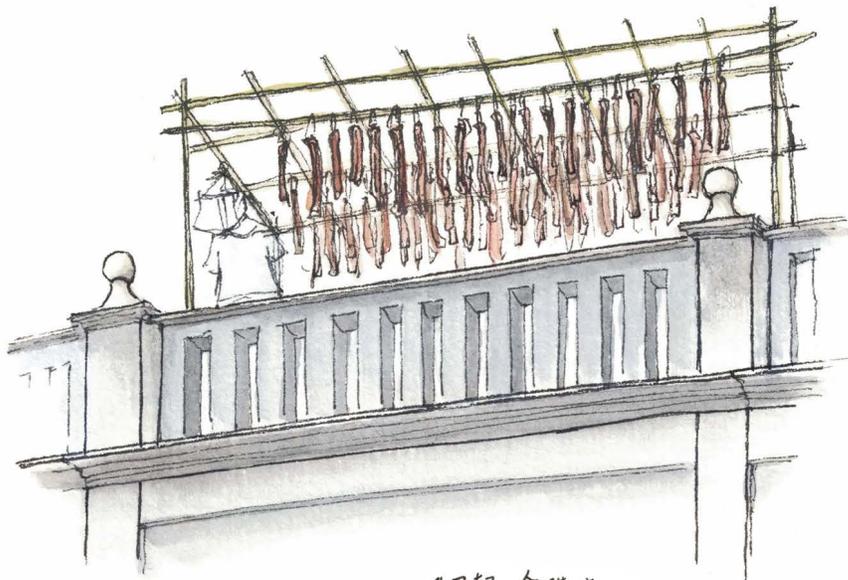
*Many of the qilous on Chopsticks Street have a modest rooftop terrace, which are not only practical for hanging washing, but also for sun-drying surplus vegetables and fruits at harvest to be eaten during the barren winter months.*

*Dried bok choy soup, for example, is a popular dish when the weather turns cold, simmered for two hours with pork, carrots, apricot seeds, and dried scallop to warm the soul and soothe coughs brought by the dry autumn air.*

*Other vegetables commonly dried are white radish, water chestnut, winter melon, sweet potato, taro.....*



Fig. 2.72  
Qilou sketch.



秋風起，食腊味。

"Autumn breeze, cured meat feast."

For the humid South, autumn welcomes little rainfall and low-humidity. The north wind brings dry air ideal for curing meats. Pork, minced meat (for sausages), fish, and duck are marinated and dried under the sun for three to five days.

A strip of well-cured pork belly gives a sheen like agate. A thin slice of it has a translucency that appears to glow.

Cured meats can be steamed on rice or stir-fried with vegetables, giving hearty aromas and flavours that come to associate with familial warmth and happiness for Cantonese people.

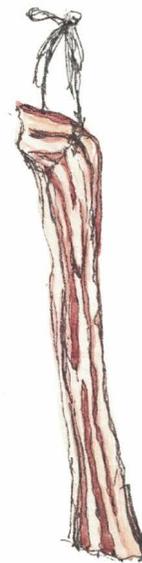
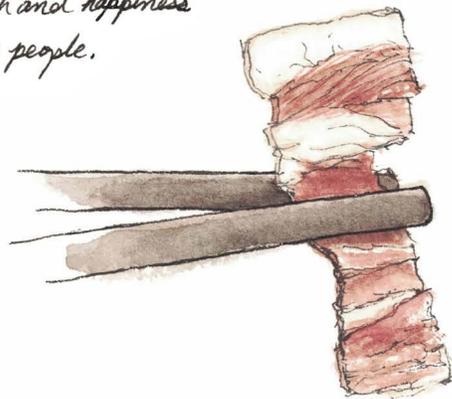


Fig. 2.73  
Qilou sketch.

*Terraces can either be accessed directly from a habitable top storey, or by climbing a flight of stairs that protrudes modestly on the rooftop.*



Fig. 2.74  
Qilou sketch.

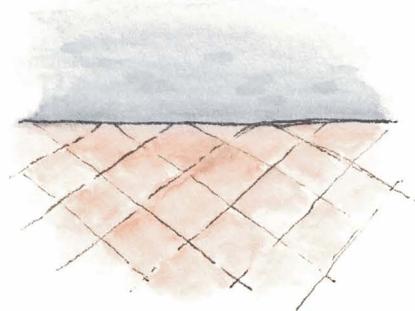
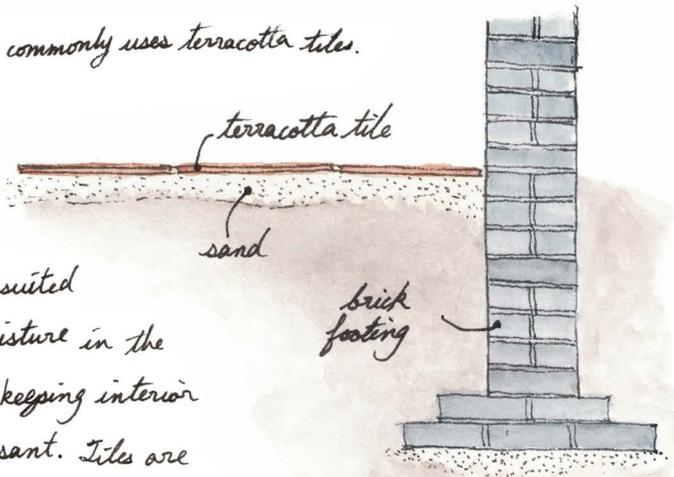


Fig. 2.75  
Qilou sketch.

### Terracotta tiles

Ground floor paving commonly uses terracotta tiles.

These clay tiles, fired at relatively low temperatures, remain porous, well suited for absorbing excess moisture in the local humid climate, keeping interior spaces dry and pleasant. Tiles are typically set on a bed of sand, which serves the purpose of levelling uneven surface and isolating the tiles from the damp earth beneath.



Paving tiles are typically square, measuring 30-40 cm in length. They can be laid in an orthogonal grid or a diagonal grid. The latter is seen as more fashionable, but requires additional labour and is subjected to potential material waste in cutting the bordering tiles, hence used by only those who are more financially comfortable.

Mortar is sometimes used to fill in the joints between the tiles and to secure them in place.

Fig. 2.76  
Qilou sketch.

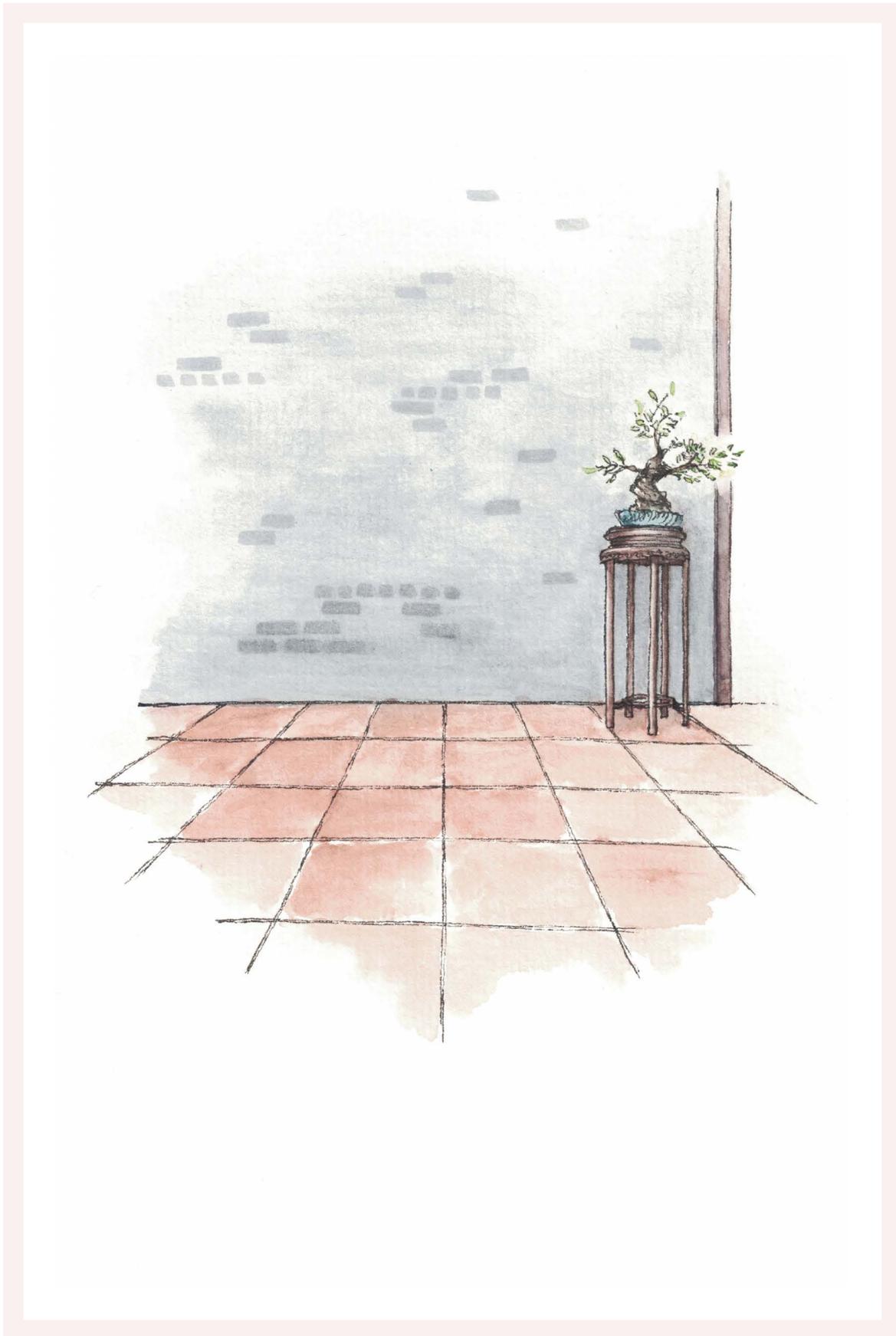


Fig. 2.77  
Qilou sketch.

*Stairs*

*Stairs, constructed from timber, are typically set on a brick base on the ground floor, to prevent the wood from coming in contact with damp floors.*



Fig. 2.78  
Qilou sketch.



Fig. 2.79  
Qilou sketch.

### Patterned ceramic tiles

Patterned ceramic floor tiles are popular for those who can afford them. Used on both ground floor and upper levels, the square tiles, measuring 10-30 cm in length, invariably feature geometric and floral patterns that compose a pattern module in groups of four tiles. The layout in a room is typically symmetrical, with a different bordering pattern to delineate the room, or to define different functional spaces within a large room. Tiles, despite being laid orthogonally, can sometimes accentuate a diagonal pattern.



Fig. 2.80  
Qilou sketch.

Motifs often feature eight-sided shapes, as the word for eight in Chinese, 八 (ba), is a homonym of 发 (fa), which signifies "prosperity".

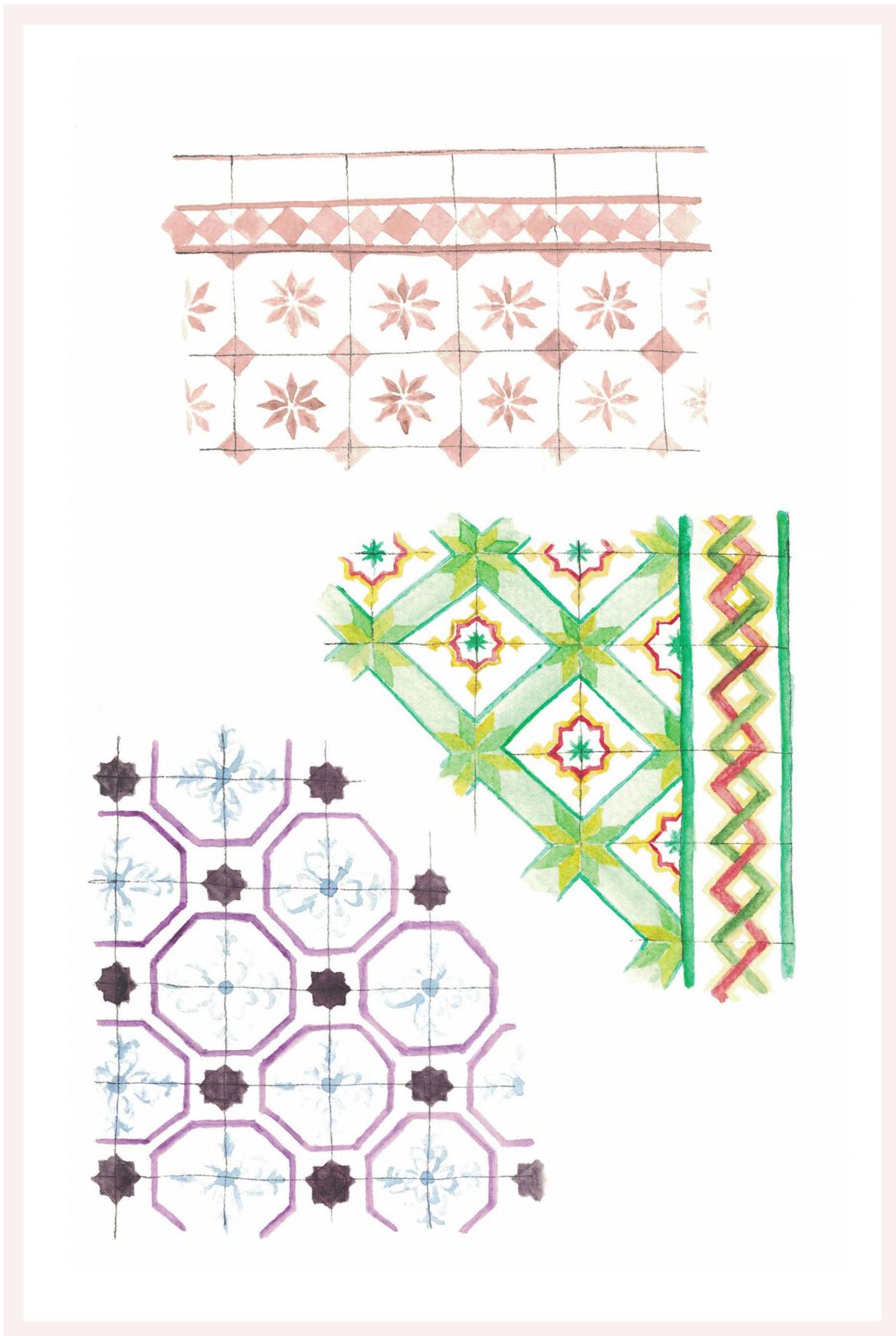
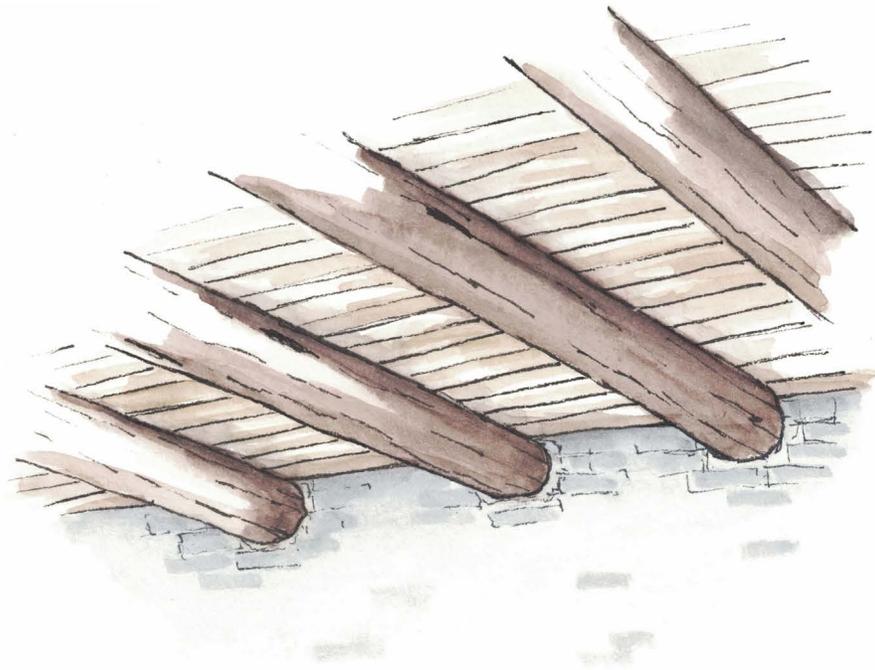


Fig. 2.81  
Qilou sketch.

*Floor framing*



*The underside of the floor is typically left exposed, revealing rhythmic round log beams. The ends of the round beams sit in pockets recessed into the loadbearing brick wall. Wooden floor boards span across the beams and sometimes serve as the finished floor. Weather owners lay onto the wooden boards patterned ceramic tiles set on a bed of lime mortar.*

Fig. 2.82  
Qilou sketch.

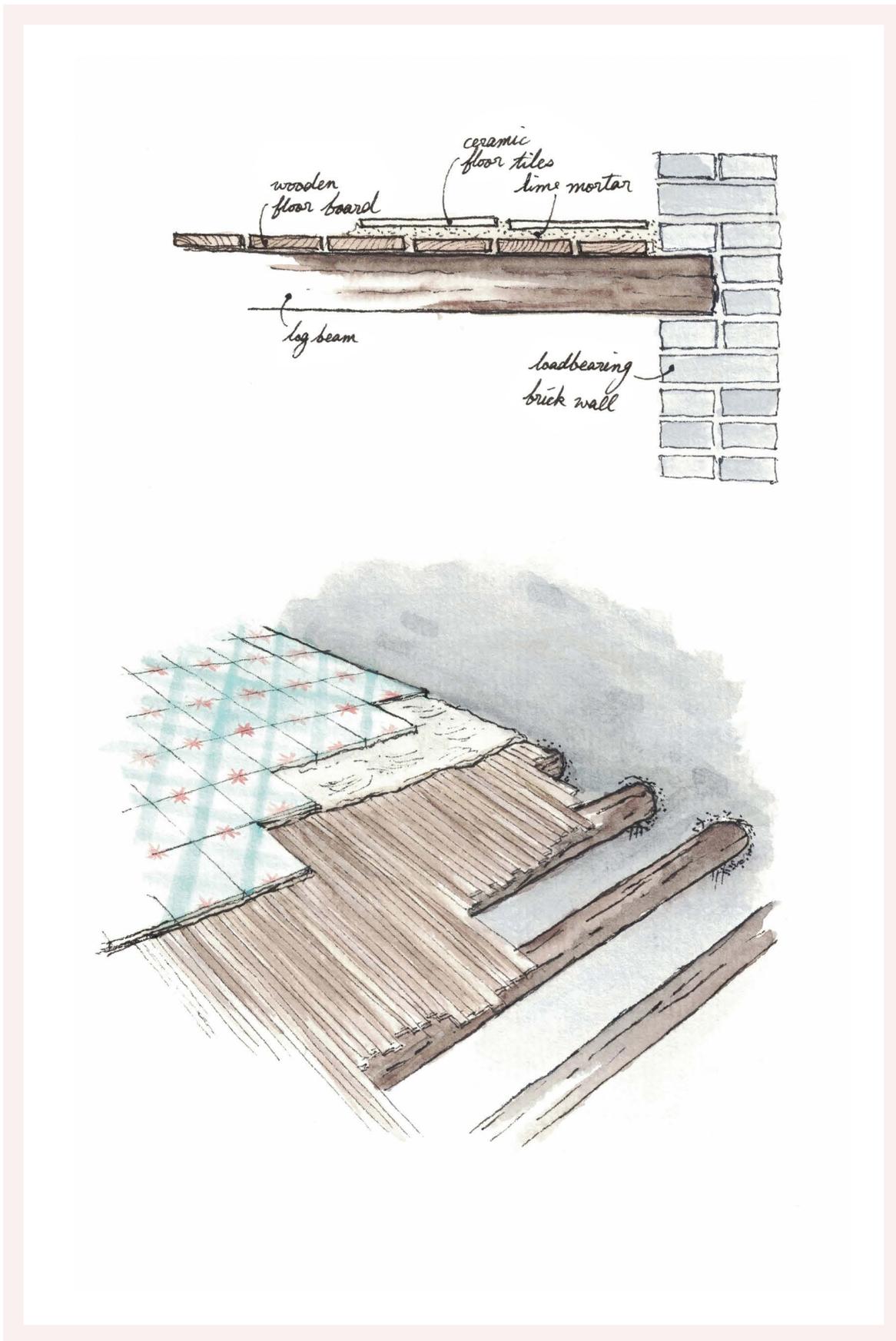


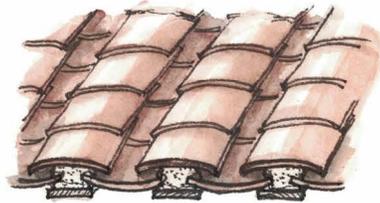
Fig. 2.83  
Qilou sketch.

## Roof

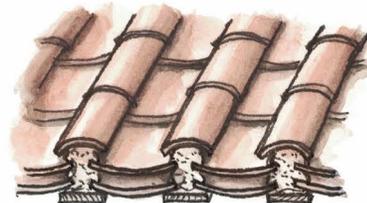
Roofs are typically covered with clay tiles. Wood battens span between roof purlins to support alternating concave and convex tiles. Tiles are laid on top of each other with a small overlap; tiles are held in place by self-weight rather than a binding material. With that said, a small amount of mortar is usually used to hold the convex tiles to the wood battens, stabilizing the concave tiles in the process.

Because roof tiles are stacked and not fully bonded, such roof assembly is not airtight, which, for the hot humid south, is welcomed for its ability to ventilate and evacuate hot air through the gaps between the tiles.

Glass tiles, being costly in price, are used sparingly to let in daylight.



Single-layer tile roofing is the most basic roofing assembly. The small overlap between tiles, however, is not always able to keep out wind-driven rain that pushes through tile junctions during a tropical storm.



Double-layer tile roofing is almost always preferred, as the added layer can better control the flow of water and provide heat insulation from the intense sun.

Fig. 2.84  
Qilou sketch.

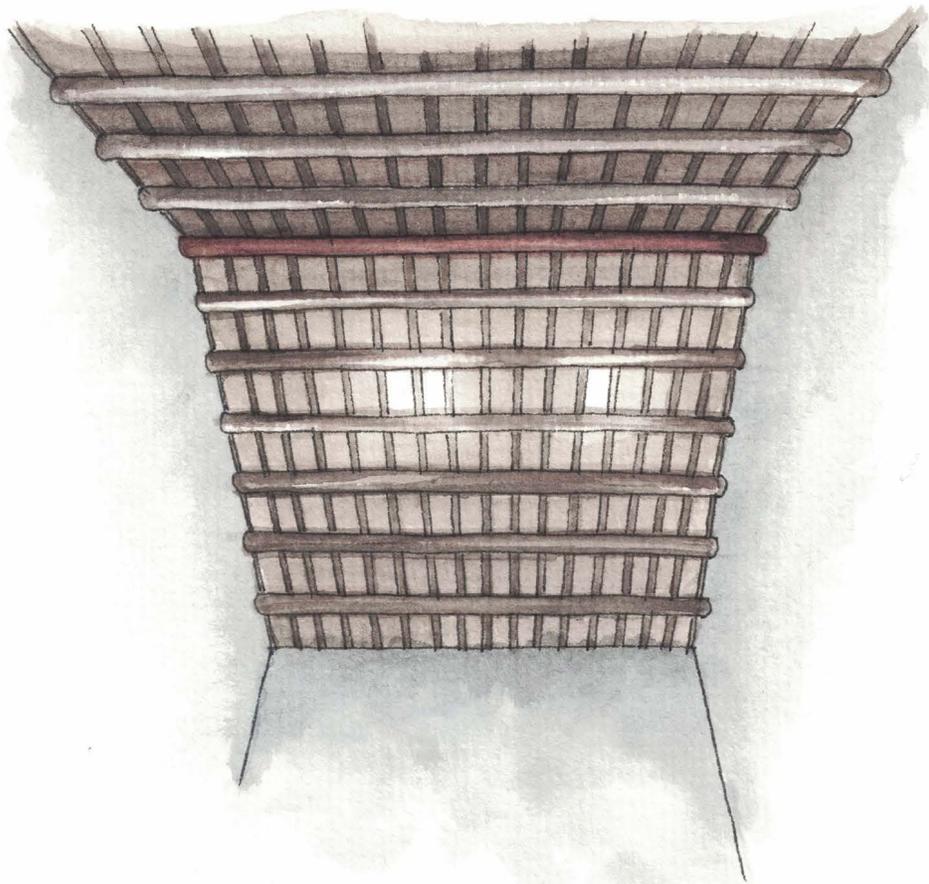


Fig. 2.85  
Qilou sketch.

### *Skywells*

*The deep windowless plans of qilous are typically punctuated by skywells.*

*At a functional level, the narrow skywell brings in daylight while limiting direct sun exposure, at the same time creating stack effect to ventilate the dwelling, responding aptly to the hot-humid regional climate.*

*At a symbolic level, through the skywell, rainwater — connecting weath — from the revered Sky flows continuously into the home. It is also gesturally a connection between the Earth and the Sky, unifying Man with the Cosmos.*



Fig. 2.86  
Qilou sketch.

*Drains on the ground are sometimes in the shape of an ancient Chinese coin, evoking water's association with wealth, representing wealth entering.*

*Sometimes impluvium becomes a pond, where wealthy owners would keep goldfish, koi, or carp.*

*Fish are in many ways auspicious in Chinese culture: the word for fish,*

*鱼 (yu), is a homophone of 余 (yu), "surplus," and*

*裕 (yu), "abundance" — of wealth; fish reproduces plentifully, resounding the traditional Chinese value favouring many descendants; fish, especially carp, is also admired for its longevity.*

*The obsession with water — and symbolically wealth — collection is conditional: stagnant water is inauspicious; as is found in nature, healthy water moves slowly and nurtures life. The presence of fish is naturally a sign of healthy water; reciprocally fish can vitalize the pond within the home. Living water breeds fortune.*

*On a more spiritual level, flowing water evokes the Taoist concept of wuwei, a state of mind or spirit of unconflicting personal harmony, free-flowing spontaneity, and non-resistance.*

*Go with the flow.*

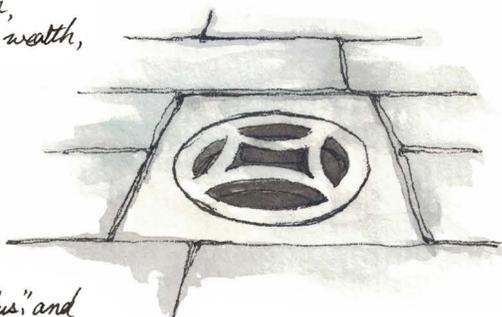


Fig. 2.87  
Qilou sketch.

### *Interior partitions*

Qilous are typically windowless apart from its narrow street-fronted façade, evidently, as its side walls are shared with adjacent houses. Its deep floor plan is commonly punctured by skywells and skylights for daylight and ventilation.

Given the regional warm climate and high humidity, openness and spatial fluidity for passive lighting and ventilation is more practical than sealed compartments. Skywells are not always formally enclosed by walls, but instead flows continuously with adjacent spaces — often a shared space of some sort for the family.

Bedrooms are placed adjacent to the skywell or one of the daylight shared spaces. Partition walls often use openwork wood lattice panels to provide visual privacy while allowing light and air circulation into the room. Such floor plan configuration and use of perforated partitions can maximize the number of spaces serviced by each skywell or skylight.

Lattice patterns can be very simple or intricately carved and decorative. In the houses of the rich, colourful Manchurian windows are also used for room partitions, with a horizontal band of fretwork panels at the top. In this way, air can always move fluidly throughout the house, flushing out every room of foul air and drawing in fresh air, helped by the stack effect created by the skywells.

Fig. 2.88  
Qilou sketch.



Fig. 2.89  
Qilou sketch.

### New Year's calligraphy couplets

One or two weeks leading up to the Lunar New Year, Chopsticks Street would be coated in festive red papers. The dilapidating qilous that render helpless nostalgia on a normal day are instantly reinvigorated by local calligraphers who set up makeshift booths to write and sell New Year's couplets.

A New Year's couplet is a pair of antithetical propitious phrases hung on either side of a dwelling's front door for Lunar New Year, to bless the household with good fortune, happiness, health, safety, and longevity.

New Year's couplets are typically written with brush on red paper, in black or gold ink, by a calligrapher who is an elderly person or a hobbyist practiced in the art for many years, whose brushstrokes convey vigor, strength, spirit, and stability.

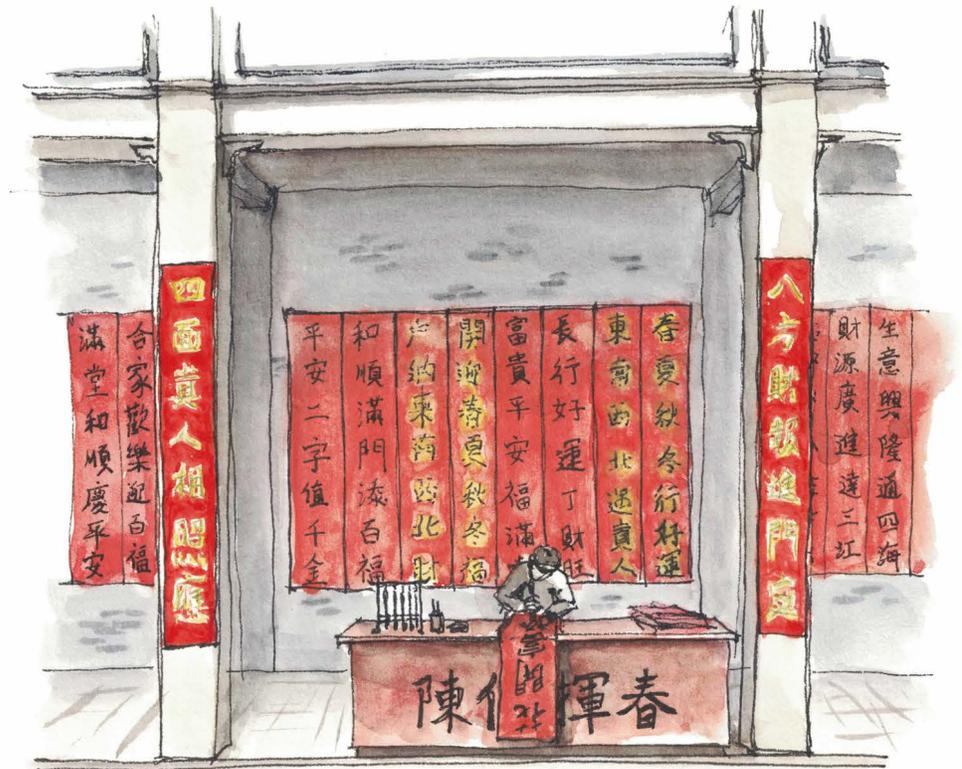


Fig. 2.90  
Qilou sketch.

The couplet is both a work of calligraphy and a literary piece.



Fig. 2.91  
Qilou sketch.

*Although the wane of Chopsticks Street is lamentable, it is ironically this exact abandonment of the buildings, bricked-up storefronts, and absence of street life that permitted the flourishing of the New Year's couplet booths not possible on a commercially active street.*

### Chopsticks Street vs. Quick Son Street

筷子路 (kuai zi lu), "Chopsticks Street," alludes to the street's early history with an accumulation of shops that made and sold chopsticks, as well as other cooking and dining utensils, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Today, the chopsticks shops are long gone, as are majority of the diverse businesses that occupied the street in subsequent decades, leaving the street and its qilous in a state of forgotten dilapidation.

Meanwhile, a new ritual develops.

The Chinese word for "chopsticks," 筷子 (kuai zi), is a homophone of 快子 (kuai zi), meaning to "have children quickly." With the Chinese enthusiasm for puns, such is certainly an auspicious idea, given traditional Chinese values which emphasized on producing descendants to continue the family lineage. Chopsticks Street — or, Quick Son Street — hence became a ritualistic passthrough for wedding convoys.

Throughout different time periods, the street name has been recorded variably as 筷子路 "Chopsticks" Street and 快子路 "Quick Son" Street, both officially and casually, as if past history and persisting customs are coalesced and interchangeable on this street, each evokes the other...

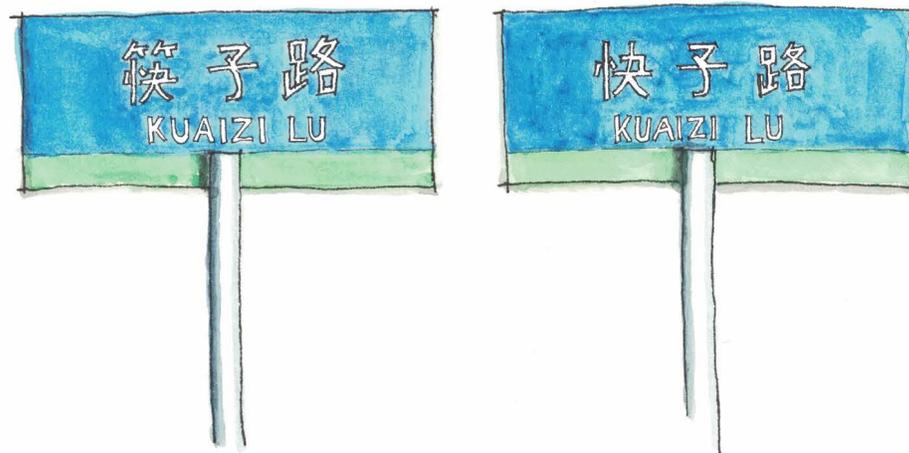


Fig. 2.92  
Qilou sketch.

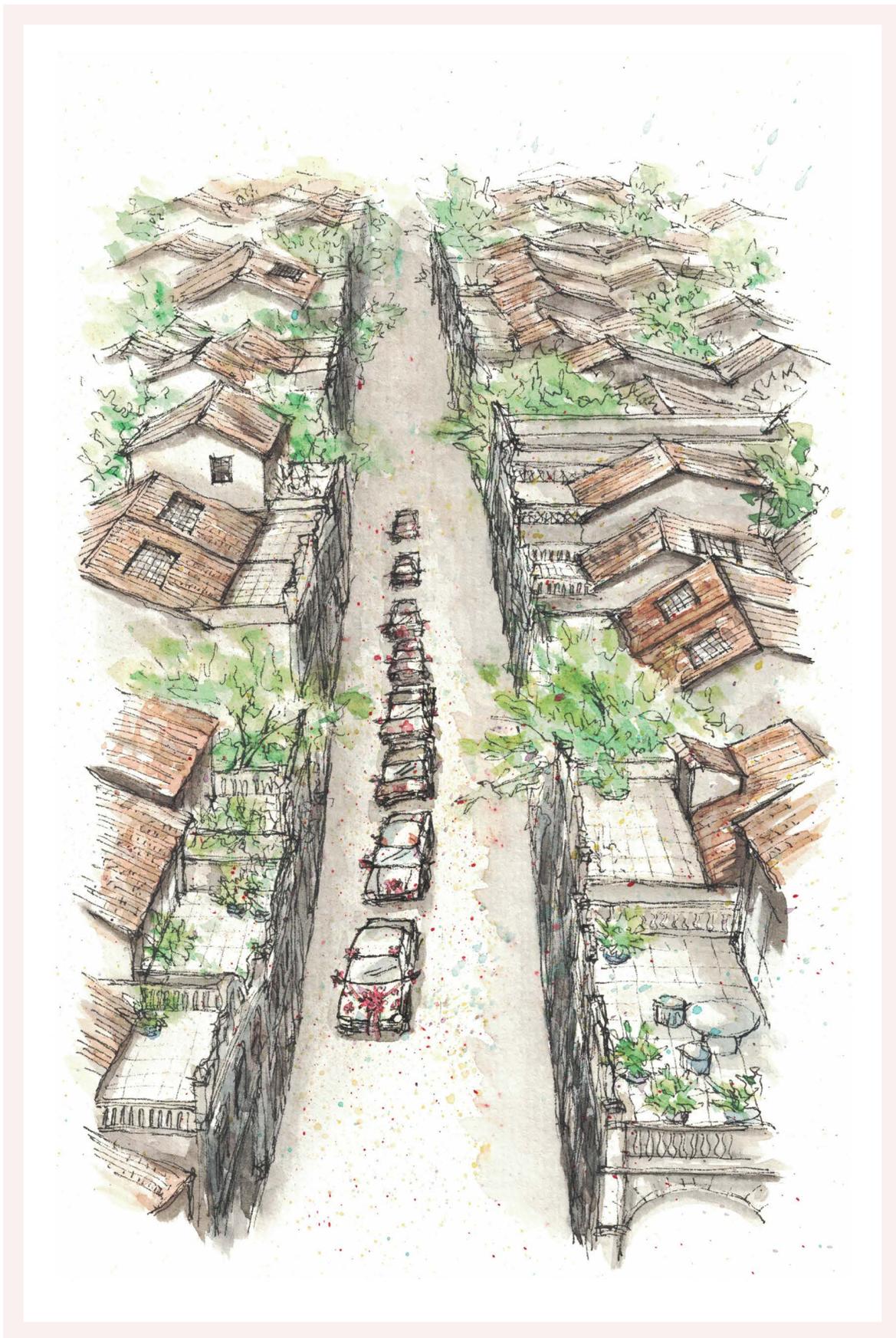


Fig. 2.93  
Qilou sketch.



名實



Fig. 3.1  
續 xù

續 xù  
to continue, to prolong, to connect, to link, to pass down

*Re-Presenting the Qilou*



## From Inherit to Impart

In his reflection on the simultaneous physical absence and spiritual presence of historical heritage in China, the sinologist, Simon Leys, makes a provocative speculation on the correlation between destructive practice and creative flourishing of the Chinese culture:

We must lament the grievous losses that were inflicted upon the cultural heritage of China—and of mankind—and yet, we may wonder if there was perhaps not *some* relation between the inexhaustible creativity displayed by Chinese culture through the ages and the periodic *tabula rasa* that prevented this culture from becoming clogged up, inhibited and crushed under the weight of the treasures accumulated by earlier ages. Like individuals, civilisations do need a certain amount of *creative forgetfulness*. Too many memories can hinder intellectual and spiritual activity, as it is suggested in a well-known tale by Jorge Luis Borges, describing the ordeal of a man who cannot forget anything.<sup>1</sup>

Infallible memory is inevitably a curse for the creative process when recollection overpowers imagination. Yet, here, it must be recognized that the “creative forgetfulness” of which Leys speaks is never a complete *tabula rasa* concurrently deprived in physical and ideological dimensions, but sporadic emptying that opens up the ground for interpretative reinvention in lingering reminiscence of cultural values. It hence differs from the wholesale destruction of vernacular urban fabric for speculative real estate developments

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1 Simon Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past,” in *The Hall of Uselessness: Collected Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2011), 293.

that inhibits the reoccupation of native rituals. It also excludes the touristic commercialization of historic districts that destroys the meaningful relationship between the tangible and intangible heritage. Nonetheless, this idea of cultural continuity via creative potency born to destruction provides insight into the Chinese attitude towards tradition rooted in the tradition itself, which suggests approaches for reengaging Chopsticks Street and its qilous into the contemporary society.

Leys points out that “China’s dominant ideology—Confucianism—extolled the values of the past.”<sup>2</sup> This reverence for the past, however, never limited to a static manifestation. Leys explains,

Confucius considered antiquity as the repository of all human values. Therefore, according to him, the sage’s mission was not to *create* anything anew but merely to *transmit* the heritage of the ancients. [...] The antiquity to which he referred was a *lost* antiquity, which the sage had to seek and practically to *reinvent*. Its actual contents were thus highly fluid and not susceptible to objective definition or circumscription by a specific historical tradition.<sup>3</sup>

In this ideology, traditions foremost does not confine to a fixed state. Tangible enactments – material artefacts or gestural practices – are temporary vessels through which mankind expresses and conveys knowledge and rituals to posterity. These vessels reiterate the Chinese notion of eternity which fixates not on the permanence of singular physical objects but survives in

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2 Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards,” 293.

3 Leys, 294.

periodic reinterpretations of values inherited through the relics by successive generations. The evolution of physical characteristics are iterative attunements to core values that remains constant, relatively speaking, and unbroken.

Leys reinforces that,

*the vital strength, the creativity, the seemingly unlimited capacity for metamorphosis and adaptation which the Chinese tradition displayed for 3,500 years may well derive from the fact that this tradition never let itself be trapped into set forms, static objects and things, where it would have run the risk of paralysis and death.*<sup>4</sup>

Thus clues the future for Chopsticks Street. Perpetuation of the qilous' embodied values bets not on the restoration of physical structures to their former state of intactness – which, as discussed earlier, is an inherently fallacious pursuit – but on the reactivation of material remnants with the potency to communicate what they inherited and transform as they accumulate from each historic present. The design intervention, therefore, seeks not to negate change, but to orchestrate change with curated inserts and selective deductions, to be evocative of accreted pasts up until the present and anticipatory of interactions moving forward from the present.

In a discourse tracing the thread of “deconstruction” in Chinese thought, pervasive in the Chinese mastery of forgery, the philosopher and cultural theorist, Byung-Chul Han, unveils an absence of the concept of “original” in Chinese philosophy, which

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4 Leys, “The Chinese Attitude Towards,” 298.

embraces instead a notion of creation that exists as an unending process. Han evokes the Taoist concept of change, in which the substantial existence undergoes continuous transformation while its essence remains consistent. Change operates as a state of constant in the world, without a definite beginning or end. Han writes,

With its unrelenting metamorphoses, process also dominates the Chinese awareness of time and history. For example, transformation takes place not as a series of events or eruptions, but discreetly, imperceptibly, and continually. Any kind of creation that occurred at one absolute, unique point would be inconceivable. Discontinuity is a characteristic of time based on events. The event marks a rupture that breaches the continuum of change. Ruptures or revolutions, however, are alien to the Chinese awareness of time. [...] To this end [the Chinese thought] does not accept the idea of the original, as originality assumes a beginning in the emphatic sense. Not creation with an absolute beginning, but continual process without beginning or end, without birth or death, defines the Chinese thought.<sup>5</sup>

Han also draws on the Buddhist belief of reincarnation, in which life restarts over and over again in a cyclical process. Continual reproduction thus “maintain[s] life not *against* death but *through and beyond death*.” In the endless cycles of life, absolute creation nullifies as an iterative recurrence, “there is [thus] no longer anything unique, original, singular, or final.”<sup>6</sup>

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5 Byung-Chul Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Huro (Boston: The MIT Press, 2017), 2-3.

6 Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, 67.

While Han's arguments develop from the peculiar Chinese habit of piracy, most often in the replication of artistic works, they are in fact parallel to the Chinese attitude displayed in the creative reinterpretation and periodic reconstruction of cultural relics examined by Leys. Han's concept of creation as an unending process conditioned by constant change resonates with Leys' observation of fluid form and continual reinvention in the Chinese perpetuation of heritage traditions. Artefacts, as iterative reproductions or singular objects, assume no finished state and are thus variable and mutable. These ideas liberate Chopsticks Street from a definitive identity and productively positions an intervention proposal as a phase in the course of change, which can more courteously accommodate the past, present, and future.

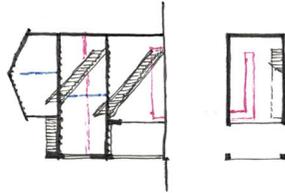
The metamorphosis of Chopsticks Street is conceptually rooted in its past essence but not physically confined to any strict image of its history. This conception effectuates from the scale of the masterplan to individual qilous and within. The street is not burdened to reinstate chopsticks workshops or any specific businesses from previous epochs, but can continue to celebrate a certain mercantile tradition, in which the makers and frequenters convene in a reciprocal experience curated by the architecture of the qilou. Neither do the qilous necessitate private residency – in fact, privatized ownership risks depriving the relics from the populace – but can invite a differing form of inhabitation that continues to respect the network of neighbourly relationships the buildings are capable of hosting. Spatial organization and physical elements of delineation will inevitably deviate from former programmatic occupations of the qilous, but can continue to inform the ceremonial sequences and vernacular patterns in

a constant evolution. The adaptive intervention restricts not to revive a precise bygone tradition on the site, but seeks to evoke rituals that are relevant to the mode of life, past and present.

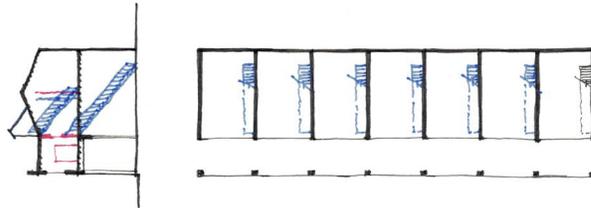
Observance of fluid change opposes prescribed formulas. It entails a certain spontaneity. The proposed design intervention thus reinvents Chopsticks Street with varying possibilities, illustrated in three different forms of qilous existing on site. The first is a basic qilou unit of one room deep; the second involves a row of continuous qilous, whose formal resemblance suggests a unity shared by having the same initial proprietor or builder; the third examines a qilou with a bamboo culm plan extending two skywells deep. Programmatic allocation in the three qilous derives from three statuses of cultural traditions: traditions which are still current, traditions which are outdated but can be actively relearnt, and traditions which are bygone but can continued to be appreciated by posterity.

As a tradition still practiced today, an herbal tea shop will occupy the single-unit qilou. The consumption of herbal tea is a unique Cantonese custom derived from traditional Chinese medicine, which promotes the balance of internal energies to heal, to boost, and to nourish the body. The hot-humid subtropical climate of southern China plagues local people with an excess of heat and dampness in the body, which the herbal “cooling tea” mitigates to prevent illnesses. Even in a modernizing society, regional climate and the body’s biological response remain unchanged and function accordingly to the laws of nature. Drinking herbal tea sustains as a persistent practice in local culture with which the people identify.

Traditions which are still current | Herbal Tea Shop



Traditions which can be actively relearnt | Artists' Residence



Traditions which can be remembered as the past | Cooling House

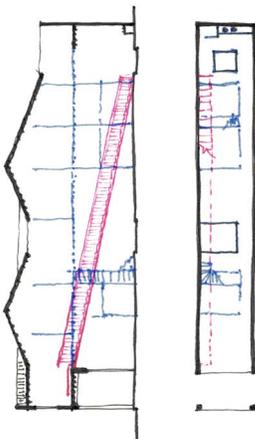


Fig. 3.2  
Proposed programs for the intervention in Chopsticks Street's qilous.

An herbal tea shop on Chopsticks Street thus reconnects the vacated qilous with the regular habits of local citizens.

The row of continuous qilous will accommodate an artists' residence, in reminiscence of Foshan's handicraft traditions, many of which are waning at the rise of modern industrialization. The invitation of artists and craftsmen re-establishes an everyday presence of the old town's handicraft practices, from which visitors can casually relearn and reengage with traditional processes and the artists' creative experiments. Each qilou unit in the row hosts an artist. The ground-floor atelier and respective second-floor living space elicit the functional spirit of the shophouse. The shopfront is a workspace, a display, and an interactive interface between artistic endeavours and pedestrian strolls. The upper-level residences breathe life into the qilous during different times of the day with domestic scenes and neighbourly relationships. A termed residency, say, one-year duration, prevents total privatization of the historic buildings while instituting an inhabitation long enough for occupants to take partial ownership of their qilou, to maintain it, to adapt it, to engrave the self onto it, in process subtly, continually changing the architectural relic.

The bamboo culm floor plan of a qilou constitutes a mode of living phased out by modernity in light of new lifestyles, spatial requirements, functional developments, and family compositions. Yet, it remains a cherished way of living that continues to communicate the essence of familial and social values. The intervention converts the long narrow qilou into a public space where local citizens can gather and interact leisurely in the traces and ambiance of the vernacular dwelling. This space will be called

the “cooling house.” The name borrows from the Chinese term, *cheng liang* 乘凉, meaning to rest and enjoy the coolness in a shaded place during hot weather. *Cheng liang* can be a meditative activity, but more often a social one. Elders *cheng liang* below the tree, chattering away with each other while watching their grandchildren play; youths join to listen in on stories, feeling the subtle breeze under the foliage; families *cheng liang* on the porch, letting the coldness of the floor tile tingle in beneath the feet, laughing at mundane anecdotes of daily affairs. The cooling house hopes to evoke these scenes by offering a site of exchange for casual intergenerational interactions, where memories of the qilou add contemplative and social dimensions to this spontaneous encounter between people and the architecture, which does not require any engagement in a formal activity.

The assignment of new programs in the vacated qilous does not finalize the intervention but reopens a dialogue between local citizens and their architectural heritage. It informs a reacceptance for metamorphosis, whereby the designer reinitiates and the frequenters relay the process of change imposed by every subsequent interaction with the buildings. The effect resonates with an age-old cultural phenomenon in Chinese connoisseurship, as summarizes by Han,

[a masterpiece of Chinese painting] is regularly overwritten by connoisseurs and collectors. They inscribe themselves into the work by means of inscriptions and seals. In this way inscriptions are layered upon the work like memory-traces in the psychic apparatus. The work itself is subject to continual change and permanent transcription. [...] The work empties

itself out to become a generative, communicative locus of inscriptions. [...] It presents itself as a palimpsest.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore,

most seal stamps come from the connoisseurs or collectors who inscribe themselves into the picture not only through their seals but also through commentaries. Here art is a communicative, interactive practice that constantly changes even the artwork's appearance.<sup>8</sup>

From the start Chinese paintings are designed to facilitate later inscriptions. With areas of the picture left empty as communicative spaces, they directly invite viewers to inscribe themselves. Thus with his seal the Chinese painter does not establish his *presence* as a creative subjectivity. Rather, he uses it to open a field of dialogue by merely marking a *trace* that serves to take it forward.<sup>9</sup>

The intervention on Chopsticks Street, analogous to the art pieces, activates it as a medium for communication, where people of the present interact with tangible and spiritual traces of ancestors, leave commentaries for descendants, and anticipate inscription of posterity. This aspiration, then, is suggestive of a certain condition of blankness necessary in the present intervention in order to invite future inscriptions. The design also examines infrastructural elements on the base of the qilous to inspire inventive occupation of the architecture by future tenants. Borrowing from Chinese art,

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7 Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, 13.

8 Han, 34.

9 Han, 34.

the designer does not seek to make a permanent personal presence in the intervened work, but an inaugural statement that attracts popular participation and returns ownership of the cultural relics back to the people.

In contrast to Western art, in which the master's signature seals up the work and prohibits future interventions, Han notes, "The seal stamps on Chinese paintings do not actually *finalize* anything. Rather, they *open up* a communicative space. They lend the picture no authorial, authoritative presence."<sup>10</sup> Intervention on Chopsticks Street shares this ideal. At the withdrawal of the designer, it is hoped that the qilous will continue to narrate themselves and transform in the hands of their users. The qilous will breathe for their own lives.

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10 Han, *Shanzhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, 52.



## On Memory

Chopsticks Street is unanimously recognized as a locus of cultural memories. Yet, amidst the efforts to satisfy nostalgia, there remains a curious question thus far not discussed: how does a cluster of silent, old buildings store and evoke cultural memories? By extension, if nostalgia is defined as “a sentimental longing for the past,” the inquisition also challenges how the populace – especially the younger generation – feels nostalgic towards memories not personally experienced, in the existing temporal chasm between Chopsticks Street’s animated past and uninhabited present?<sup>11</sup> Answering to these curiosities deepens an understanding of the sentimental attachment people have for historic urban relics and informs design gestures for how to impart memories to posterity.

The philosopher and sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, proposes that an individual participates in two types of memories: individual memory personalizes a remembrance within the framework of the self, in such a way that the shared memory distinguishes the self from others; at the same time, individual thought upholds as a part of the collective memory, resonating with the interest of a larger social group. Individual memory “relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory” while subjected to the personal will. Collective memory “encompasses the individual memories while remaining distinct from them,” evolving without personal consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

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11 Margaret E. Farrar, “Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics of Place Memory,” *Political Research Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (December 2011): 728, <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1065912910373553>.

12 Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter and Vida Yazdi Ditter (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), 50-51.

Individual memory and collective memory are contrasting yet complementary. Halbwachs notes that while individual recollection is wholly possessive, collective remembrance is a consolidation of partial fragments from members of the group. Personal memory can be described as “internal” and “autobiographical”; social memory, on the other hand, can be labeled as “external” and “historical,” as it spans a broader temporal expanse. Memory held by the individual then boasts as a richer and more continuous reflection of a historical memoir that has been condensed and rendered schematic by time.<sup>13</sup>

Within the same social sphere, historical memories are succeeded by individuals as cultural knowledge, imparted through personal recollections shared amongst members living in temporal overlaps, forming continuum at another scale. “While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remembers.”<sup>14</sup> Every instance of cultural ritual is simultaneously the cultivation of self and an attunement to the zeitgeist of the group. Cultural memory is hence both collective and individual. The two reciprocates in confirming the identity of a social group. Individual thought thus naturally connects with remembrance of the larger collective.

In this respect, cultural identity is also inextricably attached to place, as memories form from social interactions, interpersonal relationships, and daily routines, which almost always require a physical setting. Beyond the realms of consciousness, abstract

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13 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 52.

14 Halbwachs, 48.

memory in fact assumes material and bodily qualities. Marc Fried, an academic of human sciences, speaks of a concept of “spatial identity,” in which “a phenomenal or ideational integration of important experiences concerning environmental arrangements and contacts [associates with] the individual’s conception of his own body in space.”<sup>15</sup> Michael Hebbert, an academic of planning, remarks that the “shaping of space is an instrument for the shaping of memory. A shared space—such as a street—[...] can express the accumulation of memories [...] through the physical and associative traces left by interweaving patterns of everyday life.”<sup>16</sup> Urban space, such as Chopsticks Street, is thus a receptacle of collective memory and anchor for cultural identity through human corporeal interaction with and within the physical environment.

As human memory is foremost emplaced, recollection is also, logically, spatial and bodily. The philosopher and semiotician, Umberto Eco, finds the process of remembering to liken to “constructing and then travelling again through a space.”<sup>17</sup> When the body re-enacts movement through the mnemonic apparatus, it triggers the human consciousness to vibrate to a similar experience from one’s past, mentally activating a bygone imagery or sensation. Margaret Farrar, an academic of political science, enlightens,

We possess a ‘body memory’ of these events—a memory that exists alongside and also deeper than our conscious narrative

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15 Marc Fried, “Grieving for a Lost Home,” in *Urban Renewal: The Record and the Controversy*, ed. James Q. Wilson (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966), 365.

16 Michael Hebbert, “The Street as Locus of Collective Memory,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 23, no. 4 (August 2005): 592, <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.uwaterloo.ca/10.1068/d55j>.

17 Hebbert, “The Street as Locus,” 581.

about the past. [...] What is memorable is written on and in the body [...]. The body is not simply a container for perception or a vessel to fill with our recollections but is, instead, the intermediary between thought and the world, shaping and shaped by both whenever we remember.<sup>18</sup>

Drawing from these commentaries, the evocation of cultural memories from historic buildings foremost necessitates a certain physical trajectory in accordance with a former experience, belonging to either individual or collective entities. The orchestration of movement through the architecture can retrace a historic path, allowing a visitor of the present to re-enact the journey and course of actions taken by ancestors, thereby reliving history. Manipulating the same logics, a contrasting itinerary traversing the space can also provoke the consciousness with an unanticipated and unconventional encounter that is recognized to deviate from cultural apprehension. Opposition pricks the mind to think and speculate. A path of movement perpendicular to, reversal in, or completely new punctures from the direction of a previously established route effectively acts as an antithesis to highlight by juxtaposition the qualities of the past against the state of the present. It brings to awareness and within physical reach architectural details and habits of human occupation that would have otherwise evaded conventional observation. In both cases, the contemporary visitor continues to leave traces on the relic, either accreting on the former vestiges to integrate with ancestors or contrasting them to denote a different temporal presence, recording multiple temporalities within the same space.

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18 Farrar, "Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics," 724.

The activation of memory through architectural encounter can be further deciphered as two processes: instinctive memory and interpretive memory.

Instinctive memory speaks to an instance that can be universally comprehended from intuition, without former knowledge or reasoning, even in an unfamiliar setting. Material wear and natural decay are the most palpable examples of instinctive memory inscribed into a historic building. The art historian, Alois Riegl, ascribes this phenomenon of disintegration as the “age value” of a monument, which reveals in “imperfection, a lack of completeness, a tendency to dissolve shape and colour, characteristics that are in complete contrast with those of modern, ie., newly created, works.”<sup>19</sup> Riegl suggests that appreciation of the age value in historic relics recognizes nature’s working in cycles of growths and decay, with which mankind finds resonance in his own organism. For this reason, the age value addresses human emotions directly.<sup>20</sup>

Patina, moss, and rounded corners of wall bricks expand a space into temporal dimensions. Depressed curved on granite stairs and a dull patch on the waxed wood floor remind of the most frequently walked paths throughout the ages. Polished handrails share a touch with ancestors who occupied the structure in a preceding epoch. Tile stains mark spontaneous incidents. Disintegration reveals the layers of construction, both by the hands of the builders and the accretion of historic events. These traces of former inhabitation in

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19 Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and Its Development,” in *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage*, ed. Nicholas Stanley Price, M. Kirby Talley Jr., and Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 1996), 73.

20 Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments,” 74.

the built environment evidence the most animated and tangible recount of a past otherwise conceptual and disconnected. Aged buildings, thus, should not be eagerly withdrawn from the disintegrating process of wear and weathering – yet, admitting necessary interference to ensure structural integrity and sufficient distinct form – but instead be permitted to express the layered depth narrated by organic development.

The process of wear and decay can also be exploited through the juxtaposition of historic and modern materials to overlay narratives from different temporalities in a design intervention. The framing of space using materials associated with contrasting time periods, say, sheet metal and brick, acknowledges a modern passage through a space of the past. The two materials also disintegrate at different paces. The passage of time will thus reveal two temporal trajectories collapsed into a single space, which descendants will perceive instinctively, and differently, in nearby and distant futures, allowing for multiple possible readings of space and history. As Farrar writes, “there is nothing that is either purely past or wholly present.”<sup>21</sup>

Interpretive memory, in contrast, is normally retrieved with reflection on some pre-existing understanding of a cultural context, often from verbal traditions or rituals infused in the everyday life, which is then associated with the physical encounter to extrapolate its ideological significance. As Halbwachs remarks, “Each aspect, each detail, of [a] place has a meaning intelligent only to members of the group, for each portion of its space corresponds to various

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21 Farrar, “Amnesia, Nostalgia, and the Politics,” 731.



Fig. 3.3  
Stairs inside Leaning Tower of Pisa, worn and polished by centuries of footsteps.

and different aspects of the structure and life of their society, at least of what is most stable in it.”<sup>22</sup> The bamboo culm plan is an example of interpretive memory intelligible by the Lingnan people – and, to varying extents, people of the Chinese culture. Sharing similar values, social environment, and climatic condition, local people can readily perceive ancestral thoughts when they move through the space. Spatial sequence, geometric arrangement, orientation, material symbolism, and iconic references are amongst the architectural syntax of a cultural group. With that said, the impartation of interpretive memory necessitates at least minimal amounts of continuity, be it in a tangible or intangible form, between successive generations. It thrives on the symbiotic relationship between architecture and the people, each mnemonic of and imprinting on the other.

As with other ancient civilizations, Chinese values and beliefs are deeply rooted in the culture, so innate that they sometimes elude the consciousness. They need not be specifically studied or explicitly spoken of, but are always active in the backdrop of daily affairs. They often conceptualize in fables, moral stories, philosophical doctrines, and spiritual beliefs, many of which evoke the three teachings – Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism – that formed the basis of the Chinese thought. These ideas have no fixed expressions and sometimes share representations superficially indistinguishable to an outsider. Their esoteric significance is to be apperceived from inherited collective cognizance. The narratives can be interpreted from individual elements – for example, a doorway, a pond, or an ornamentation, each with its own

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22 Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, 130.

ceremonious purpose – but are also intelligible through gestural allusion in specific arrangements and sequences that convey an overarching message – the invitation of propitious energy that is sequentially accumulated and reinvigorated by elements along the path of flow. Continuing the age-old practice, folklore can be layered onto a contemporary design intervention, to encourage manifold interpretations of urban relics, the process of which connects with the thoughts of ancestors and reinvents cultural ideologies in the consciousness of every historic present.

In speaking of renovating a historic brick warehouse in Japan, the architect, Tsuyoshi Tane, emphasizes that “it is not about repairing broken parts but restoring what was lost.” Design begins with “verifying its historical significance” and “understanding its dignity and potential” in order to pass on the memory of the old buildings.<sup>23</sup> Historic buildings, many of which no longer built the same way today, are important lineage in cultural history. They store and emanate memories by which individual and collective identity are formed and through which cultural continuity is achieved. To perpetuate memories embodied in aged architecture is to respect the histories of the place and honour the gifts bestowed by ancestors. The histories of Chopsticks Street are both locally specific and evocative of the larger cultural sphere. The bodily, instinctive, and interpretive engagements with material and immaterial heirlooms actively and regularly refresh their presence for succeeding generations, individual and collective. Through memories, Chopsticks Street orients and consolidates local citizens in space, in time, and in history.

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23 Tsuyoshi Tane, *Archaeology of the Future* (Tokyo: TOTO Publishing, 2018), 48-51.



## Learning from the Grandmaster

An intervention in the quilous of Chopsticks Street is at base an adaptive reuse design, but more expressively, it is an experimental narrative, in which there is not necessarily a plot but surely a story. It is a delicate method of storytelling, whose tacit revelation, tender moments, and ephemeral virtues linger in emotional resonance and rumination with every spirit it touches. The unfolding of this architectural narrative finds enlightening commonality with filmmaking and cinematographic techniques, particularly inspired by the acclaimed contemporary auteur, Wong Kar-wai.

Wong's films are often sparse in dialogues but communicates profound sentiments through spatial composition; he tells his stories through space. His style, signature yet unpredictably impromptu, is variably characterized by nonlinear narrative, off-centre framing, low-key illumination, superimposed reflections, indexical representation, and selective concealment to generate a swooning emotional and cognitive appeal to the viewers. The experience is multi-dimensional. Wong's manipulation of visual awareness subtly accentuates spatial, textural, ornamental, lighting, and temporal qualities commonly overlooked in a given space, intensifying the intimacy between spectators and the scene. His presentation is often implicit, cued through indirect representation and metaphoric details, imbued with cultural allusions that prompt the audience to contemplate on the profound, unspoken meanings.

A humble analysis of Wong's *The Grandmasters* (2013) decomposes selected scenes to transpose the auteur's film approaches to the narrative composition of Chopsticks Street.

The film opens onto a rainstorm in the dark night. Pale light, backlit from a source beyond the frame, spreads a curious ornamental shadow onto the flash flooded ground, relentlessly speckled with heavy raindrop splatters. The oblique frame, intensifying an agitated unsteadiness, at its edge reveals a sliver of the shadow-casting object, which, with its unmoving silhouette outlined by the backlit illumination, identifies as a gate. The words on screen emplace, “Foshan, Guangdong.”

The story begins in May 1936, amidst a period of political instability in Republican China. The southern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi resist the Nationalist rule of the north and conspire to be autonomous regions. The country faces a contentious divide. At this time, a recognized martial art grandmaster from the north arrives in Foshan. His entry is locally felt as a rivalrous challenge declared to the southern masters.

The gate is both a separation and a passage between two sides. In Wong’s opening scene, the gate is still against the stormy agitation, suggesting control and an apparent peace. Yet, the roiling floodwater – the larger environment – emanates an undercurrent of energy that flusters the shadow – the phantom spirit – of the gate. Turbulence is imminent and conflict will rupture. The gate can no longer guard the peace.

While the gate is apparently static and little shown in the frame, Wong uses external environmental, formless conditions to capture an immaterial extension of the architectural element, through which dynamic and multi-dimensional implications are overlaid onto an initially neutral subject. A story takes form.



Fig. 3.4  
Film still from *The Grandmasters*.

The use of silhouette and shadow is a recurring technique in the film. The indirect display of architectural elements, presented not in full clarity but through their responsive attributes to environmental conditions, bestows them unprecedented prominence. The octagonal signage contoured by bulb lights, the overhead ornaments normally above one's view scope, the decorative metal gate sculpted by its backlit highlights, and the openwork wood lattice screens only made known through its shadows – commonly-seen objects that ordinarily recedes into the backdrop are purposefully brought forth as the main space and atmosphere constructing elements.

Wong's conscious curation also recognizes that architectural elements never act alone. Space is not created by any singular components, but through the interaction of different physical and formless constituents. The rain, the fog, and the wooden floor are receptors of the ephemeral impression casted from original objects by a source of light. The architectural elements reveal not in themselves, but through spatial projection onto surrounding conditions. Equal awareness is brought to the sensuous qualities of negative space within the frame. The positive is necessarily experienced through and in the negative.

Wong's tactful obscurity reminds that, the fundamental elements which most expressively delineate a space are not always the components that most attract visual attention in a direct, lucid encounter. Not by showing in ample generosity, which overwhelms visual focus, but by showing in minimally sufficiency, orchestrated with elements beyond the objects themselves, creates a more powerful spatial narrative.



Fig. 3.5  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

Wong is an avid user of chiaroscuro, often amplifying the effect with his distinct stylistic manoeuvre. He dominates his scenes with darkness, not an oppressive blackout, but a way of framing and cropping the visual composition to create a highly focused moment of attention and emotion onto the subject of the shot. There are always more details in a space than necessary for the essential narrative. Wong obscures distractive elements and spaces, leaving just enough contextual clues for viewers to understand the space – a comprehension experienced through the viewer's sub-conscious, subjective interpretation of the parts unseen. In this sense, the audience is subtly engaged in the completion of the spatial narrative.

The obscured scenes heighten qualitative awareness of discernable shapes in the space. The waning lights, the fog condensation on dust-stained window panes, the silhouette of the fire stove's ornamental screen, the meagre but emotionally supportive warmth of the flames, a timeless wait, a serene innocence - the incompleteness of the frames intensifies a sentimental yearning. Too complete, and it risks depriving of room for imagination. The scenes intrigue with a minimal visibility that convey profound material, spatial, and emotional depth.

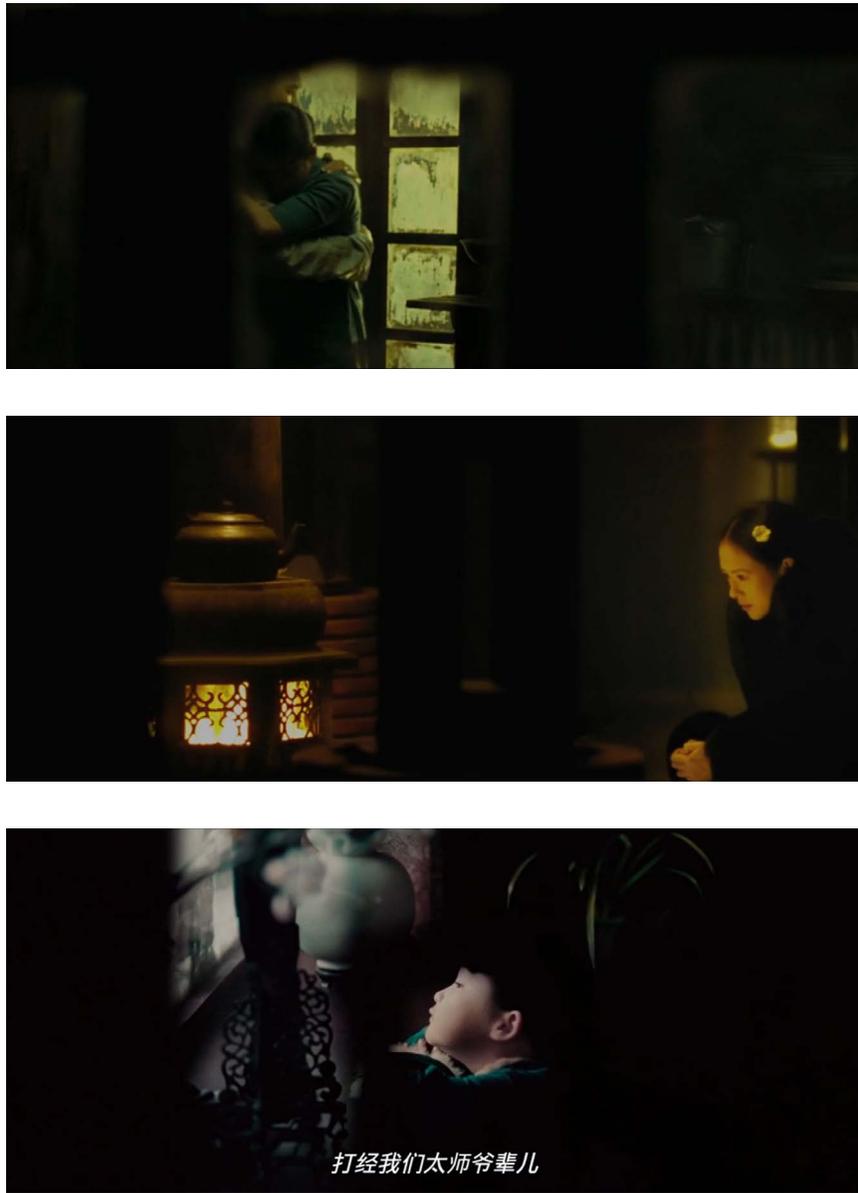


Fig. 3.6  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

Many of the combat scenes follow closely the feet swiping across the floor. The martial art techniques of Wing Chun combine quick arm movements with a steady stance established in the legs and feet. Softness via relaxation tunes the body to a state of fluid movements that can readily translate to blocks and fast-moving blows. The practitioner, however, is not stationary, but shifts and turns within a stance with equal flexibility, always keeping the legs strong and feet planted on the ground. Force comes from a firm foundation. While arm movements generate much of the visual drama, the essence of Wing Chun owes much to the footwork.

At the beginning of the film, the main character, Ip Man, says, “Kung fu, two words: horizontal, vertical. Make a mistake – you are horizontal. Only the one standing is right.” Setting a firm base keeps a combatant upright when challenged by an opponent. The camera glides closely to the floor, visually re-enacting the movement of the feet as they establish the foundation, physically for combat and metaphorically for a person’s moral uprightness in turbulent times.

Ip Man also says, “Kung fu is about precision. Whoever breaks an object in the room loses the match.” With this note, the movement of the feet on the floor is also a process of surveying the extents of the battleground through bodily perception. Different tractions manoeuvre the feet in distinctive ways. As the surface for human movement, the floor is thus a measure of space, gauged through tactile sensation tangibly experienced by a person moving across the surface. Texture, material, and rhythm reveal as space-defining element perceived beyond the visuals.



Fig. 3.7  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

Step-printing and reflective doubling also signature of Wong's film style, using overlapping frames to convey a sense of accelerated, stagnated, or ambiguous passing of time. The duplication of shifted frames creates a visual echo that folds multiple temporalities into one space-time continuum. The fluttering reflections, or collapsed temporal frames, projects the viewer into a very condensed moment, but also withdraws the being from the space, like a spiritual essence witnessing the scene as another temporal existence. Wong's visual technique extrudes not only spatial depth, but temporal layer.

The overlay of steadily repeating architectural backdrop simulates the temporal consistency of a cyclical rhythm. Against it, the trajectorial motions of the subject in the scene seems to evade the cycle and move in linear time. The juxtaposition renders ambiguous whether it is the person that transcends time, moving at freewill, or the architecture, which remains stable in constant reverberation beyond the passing of time. Evanescence and timelessness are consolidated into one space.



Fig. 3.8  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

Wong's use of indirect representation is sometimes intuitively comprehensible and other times draws upon cultural references. While words on screen write, "1951, Chinese New Year's Eve," Wong does not show New Year's Eve as an event, but evokes the occasion through leftover traces of the celebrations. Activities on the street are not shown explicitly. Instead, the frame focuses on the ground, discernible from light reflecting off the wet road. The pavement is littered with red, somewhat mushy debris. Rising smoke thickens the air near the ground. Associated with Chinese New Year, the debris and smoke are quickly reminiscent of firecrackers set off in the festivity. The actions do not need to be seen. Residual traces sometimes convey a scene more potently than if viewed in entirety.



Fig. 3.9  
Film still from *The Grandmasters*.

In a flashback, Ip Man reminisces the “springtime” of his life, from his early training in the martial art Wing Chun to his harmonious marriage to Cheung Wing-sing, living a life of carefree pursuits as the descendent of a wealthy merchant family. To convey a brief yet profound impression of his happy familial life, Wong presents a montage juxtaposing a frame filled by a bowl of red-stained eggs, followed by one focused on Cheung holding an infant, both dressed in beautiful garments. In Chinese customs, red eggs are prepared for a newborn’s one-month celebration – a milestone that indicates a likely survival to adulthood, in the high infant mortality rate of the old days – and birthdays. The first frame, through cultural cognizance, foremost implies a celebratory occasion surrounding a young child in good health. The second frame of the wife-mother and child completes the imagery of a blessed and gratified family life.

Wong’s montage was presented without any word, but, through cultural symbolism, conveyed a sentimental fulfillment more profound than words can communicate. The association with cultural customs – especially as practiced by Chinese audience – instantly constructs a shared understanding and emotional connection between the viewer and the characters in the film.



Fig. 3.10  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

Towards the end of her life, the female protagonist, Gong Er, recalls her childhood induction to martial arts. The sequence begins with a wide-eyed young girl, staring with intrigue. In the foreground, an out-of-focus white object emerges from the top edge of the frame, vaguely evocative of flower buds at the tip of a branch.

The shot turns to the girl's view. In the foreground, the striking dark silhouette of window frames and decorative carvings are vividly seen against a dominantly white background, which, although out of focus, could be identified as a snowy exterior, where a blurred figure makes swirling gestures across the snow-covered ground. The girl is peering out at an elder practicing martial art.

A delightful beauty is found in the detail of the intricate floral carving delicately holding small crumbles of snow. As the camera pans from left to right, a branch of white blossoms with softly pink centers, in focus, moves into the frame. One that blooms in the wintery presence of snow could only be the plum blossom. The scene evokes a well-known poem composed by the Song dynasty literatus and official, Wang Anshi, titled “梅花,” Plum Blossoms:

墙角数枝梅，

At the corner of the wall a few plum branches grow,

凌寒独自开。

In defiance of the cold they bloom in solitude.

遥知不是雪，

Even aloof they are not mistaken for snow,

为有暗香来。

For the subtle fragrance that drifts near.



Fig. 3.11  
Film stills from *The Grandmasters*.

In the first line, the corner of the wall foremost implies humbleness, in opposition of a boisterous central position. In the second line, blooming in frigid conditions and in solitude symbolize a strong will and perseverance in hostile conditions. In the third line, the potential of being mistaken for snow makes reference to the dominating white colour of the blossoms, assuming the pristine and austere purity of snow. The final line distinguishes the plum blossoms from snow with a faint fragrance that renders the flowers more humane, also alluding to a noble character and inner talents that would only be known to and appreciated by those who give the attention.

The girl, Gong Er, is the plum blossom.

Gong Er becomes an inheritor of the martial art style imparted by her father, the northern grandmaster, Gong Yutian, in a male-dominant society. She navigates difficult social situations compounded with political unrest and the weight of family revenge. She upholds her moral principles and values of virtue, staying pure and true to her heart. Gong Er blooms like plum blossoms amidst winter.

The scene sequence concludes with the young girl practicing rudimentary martial art moves in the snowy courtyard planted with plum blossom trees. The tree branches are speckled with crumbles of white. They are perhaps blossoms, perhaps snow. The gentle sway of falling snow hints a light breeze – perhaps it will carry a delicate fragrance in the air.



Fig. 3.12  
Film still from *The Grandmasters*.

It is ultimately unjust to generalize Wong's cinematographic techniques, which, while distinctively recognizable, are also highly improvisatory in execution. It is, however, fair to admire his storytelling approach curated by implicit expression, present in fragmentary but interconnected storylines, in spontaneous but profound cultural allusions, and in obscured but revealing visuals that resonate in harmony to create a rich narrative. Wong's film tactics, naturally spatial, can be transposed to architecture, for both the intervention design on Chopsticks Street, as well as the visual presentation of the experiential narrative to be expressed through drawings. The indirect representation, both physical and metaphorical, is a curation of visual cues that trigger subjective reflection and imagination, through the process of which evokes a scene more grand and vivid than that confined to the frame – of the film, the architecture, or the drawing canvas. While the storyline is framed by the architecture, the tales, variable within the framework, are conceived, in overlapping multiplicity, by individual encounters.

On this note, it is worthwhile to reflect on the dynamic quality of memory, which is neither stable nor constant, but forever evolving, translating, and adapting to each re-enactment by the self and the collective. In this sense, memory is a process, only alive in the act of searching. Incompleteness is thus more potent than an unreserved presentation of the subject of remembrance. The latter risks passive acknowledgement as it comes too readily and effortlessly. The former, however, propels the individual to actively contemplate, to deduce or to create anew to fill in the chasm.

Borrowing from Wong, a powerful narrative does not impose strictly defined memories onto the people through architecture, but presents fragments or abstractions, minimal but adequately recognizable in form, that allow the consciousness to make associations through intuition and interpretation. The implicit presentation of architectural elements – through cropped framing, through silhouettes and shadows, through obscurity, through reflective distortion, through environmental extension, through cultural symbolism – heightens individual awareness of their presence. By not seeing, more is seen, perceived not from visuals, but through the body and the mind. In fact, the mnemonic process cannot implant memories onto the receiver; it at best prepares a framework of cues for the individual to elucidate. Rumination, in effect a fortunate occasion, bestows partial ownership of the culture onto the individual and attaches a sense of contemporality to its rituals. Only when people associate and appropriate elements of the collective past to their present self, can cultural memories linger enduringly and achieve continuity in posterity.



## The Herbal Tea Shop

Although often identified with traditional medicine, Chinese herbology is perhaps more justly explained as the attuning of the human body to the complementary energies of the natural world, rather than a strictly medical endeavour. More colloquially, it is a practice of observing and regulating bodily responses to seasonal climate and lifestyle habits to sooth health-related discomforts with plant elements. Yet, while the drinking of herbal teas is a physical activity, harmonizing the body is as much in the organs and blood as in the mind and thought. The herbal tea shop seeks to provide a dual experience through the architecture of the qilou.

Functionally, the herbal tea shop prepares and serves herbal tea. The ground floor features brewing and serving counters, as well cabinets for herbs along one wall; the opposite wall hosts a bench for those stopping by hastily. The second floor offers a formal seating area, above which the upper floor is partially removed to create a double-height space. The third floor contains storage shelves and a roof terrace for the drying of herbs.

Spiritually, the intervention is mnemonic of the traditional characteristics of the qilou, whist using its spatial and material properties to induce a calmness for the body and mind. The shopfront, path of circulation, and usage of the roof terrace echo the shophouse in olden days. The brick walls and the openwork screens that facilitate fluid airflow for ventilation are some of the indigenous responses to the local hot-humid climate. Through manipulation and decluttering, these elements are highlighted to create a physical coolness and an internally perceived tranquility.

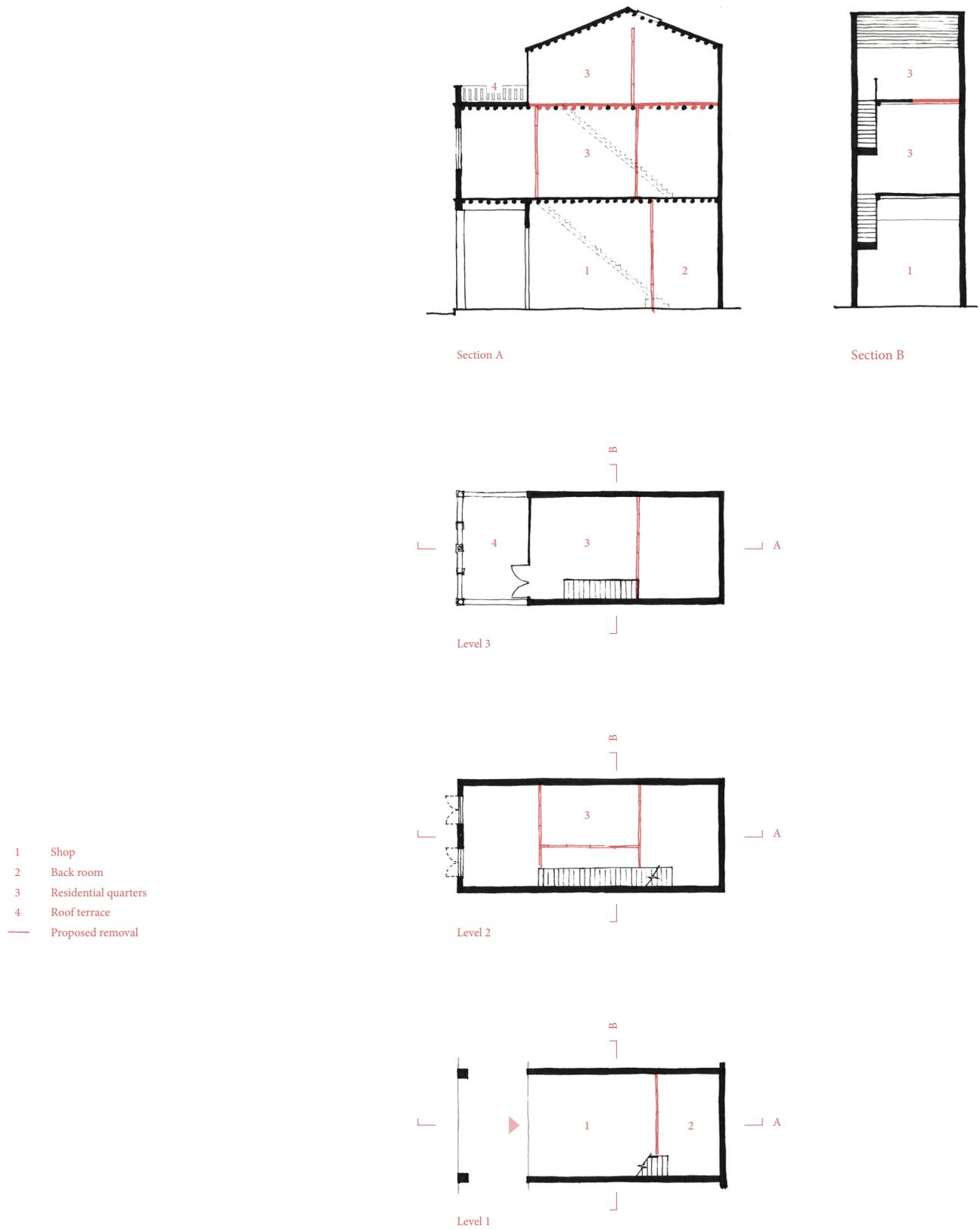
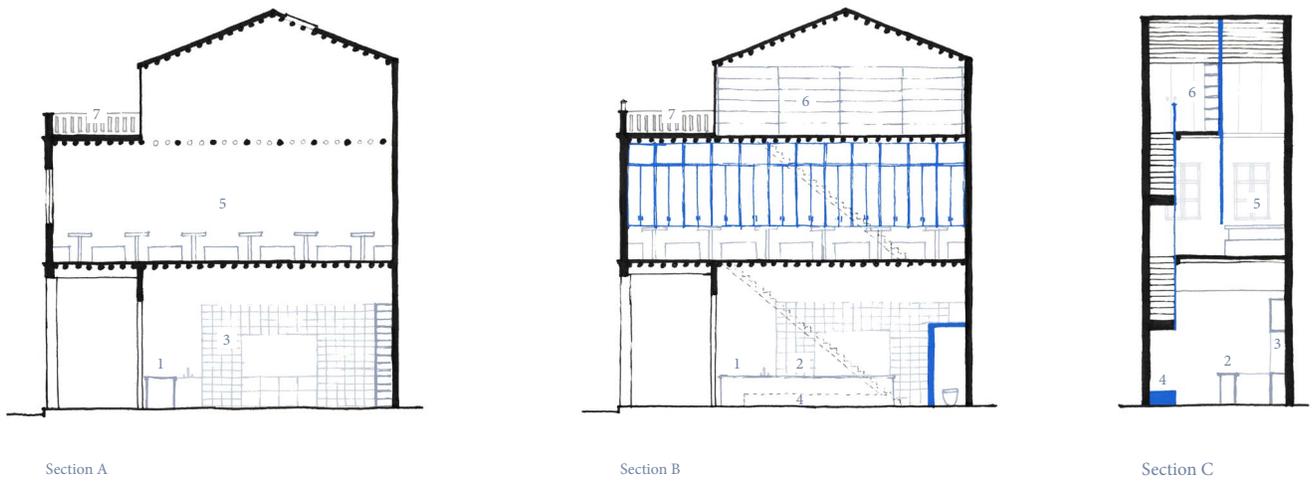


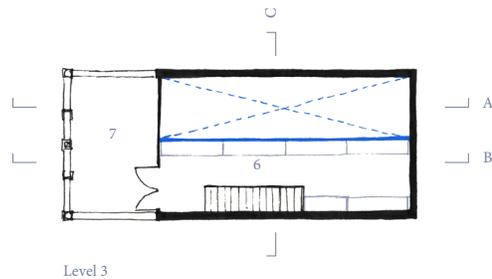
Fig. 3.13  
Speculated existing layout.



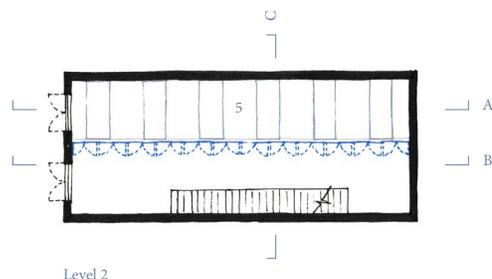
Section A

Section B

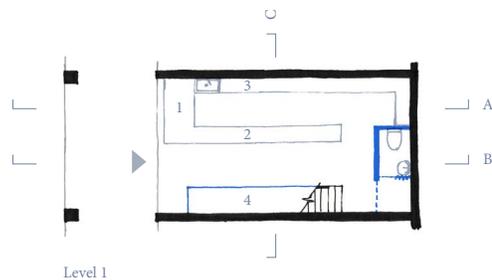
Section C



Level 3



Level 2



Level 1

- 1 Brewing counter
- 2 Serving counter
- 3 Herb cabinet with drawers
- 4 Brick bench
- 5 Seating area
- 6 Storage shelves
- 7 Roof terrace
- Proposed addition

Fig. 3.14  
Proposed layout for the herbal tea shop.

*High sun*  
*Cicadas shrill*  
*Asphalt wavers*  
*Too hot for flies*

*Shirt clings to back*  
*Head throbs*  
*Meridians congested*  
*The body aflame inside and out*

*Blessed, the qilou shades*  
*Herbal scent drifts*  
*A steam that cools the head and heart*  
*Breathe*



Fig. 3.15  
Herbal tea shop - front of shop opening onto the street



shaded walkway.



Fig. 3.16  
Herbal tea shop - ground floor brick bench across from the serving counter.



*Bitter bowls hold benign cures  
As ancestors know*

*A hasty stop suffices  
Three laps of the longest hand  
Suspend hustle and bustle  
To listen to blue bricks hum softly a cool  
As yesteryears know*

*How pleasant it is to know  
Brick bench beneath the thighs  
Earthy slab extends from  
The bottom steps that  
Alleviate wooden treads  
Off the dampness of ground  
As seasons know*

*Steps rise and fade behind the thickening screen*

*The boisterous world recedes  
From sight and from hearing*



Fig. 3.17  
Herbal tea shop - stairs leading up to the second floor.



Fig. 3.18  
Herbal tea shop - second floor seating area.

*Then chatters cease  
The necessarily space-efficient width  
Persuades a single file walk  
Up the stairs*

*Elemental screens filtrate clamour  
Without breaking fluidity  
Flush away and unclutter  
Then calm will befall*

*Master Hong Zicheng (fl. 1596) of Ming  
Left a humble thought  
Wisdom elucidated from the plainest  
Of bare subsistence as a Vegetable Roots Discourse:*

*There is no need to get rid of heat.  
Rid yourself of your fervent mind and  
you will always find yourself reclining  
on a cool and breezy terrace.<sup>1</sup>*

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1 Hong Zicheng, *Vegetable Roots Discourse: Wisdom from Ming China on Life and Living*, trans. Robert Aitken and Dnaiel W. Y. Kwok (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 2:28.



Fig. 3.19  
Herbal tea shop - lattice screens separating seating



area from circulation corridor.



Fig. 3.20  
Herbal tea shop - details of lattice screens.



Fig. 3.21  
Herbal tea shop - details of ring handle plates.

*Cricket*  
*Swallow returns*  
*Apricot blossoms*

*Awakening of Insect*  
*Spring Equinox*  
*Pure Brightness*

*For, when the mind is clear*  
*Details are lucid*

*Twenty-four screens for*  
*Twenty-four solar terms*

*The lunisolar calendar observes*  
*Patterns of the sky and earth*  
*Phenological phenomena*  
*From the reddest sunrise to the roundest moonset*

*When does the sweetest rain nourish the leaves?*  
*When to collect the most balanced roots*  
*from the mountain mist?*  
*When does the air plague the body*  
*with excess or deficient yin or yang?*  
*When to harmonize the mind and heart*  
*with which counterbalancing herbs?*

*So long as the stars spin the same trajectory*  
*as ancestors knew*  
*So will the workings of all that breathes*  
*as ancestors did*



Fig. 3.22  
Herbal tea shop - details of ring handle plate.



Fig. 3.23  
Herbal tea shop - seating area.

心静自然凉

*When the heart is tranquil*

*It is naturally cool*

*Daylight illuminates the path for air*

*Log beams reminisce a former floor*

*Rhythm restores a contemplative calm*

*Listen with the heart*

*To that which the eyes cannot see*

*In the serenity of the ages*

*A breeze chimes*

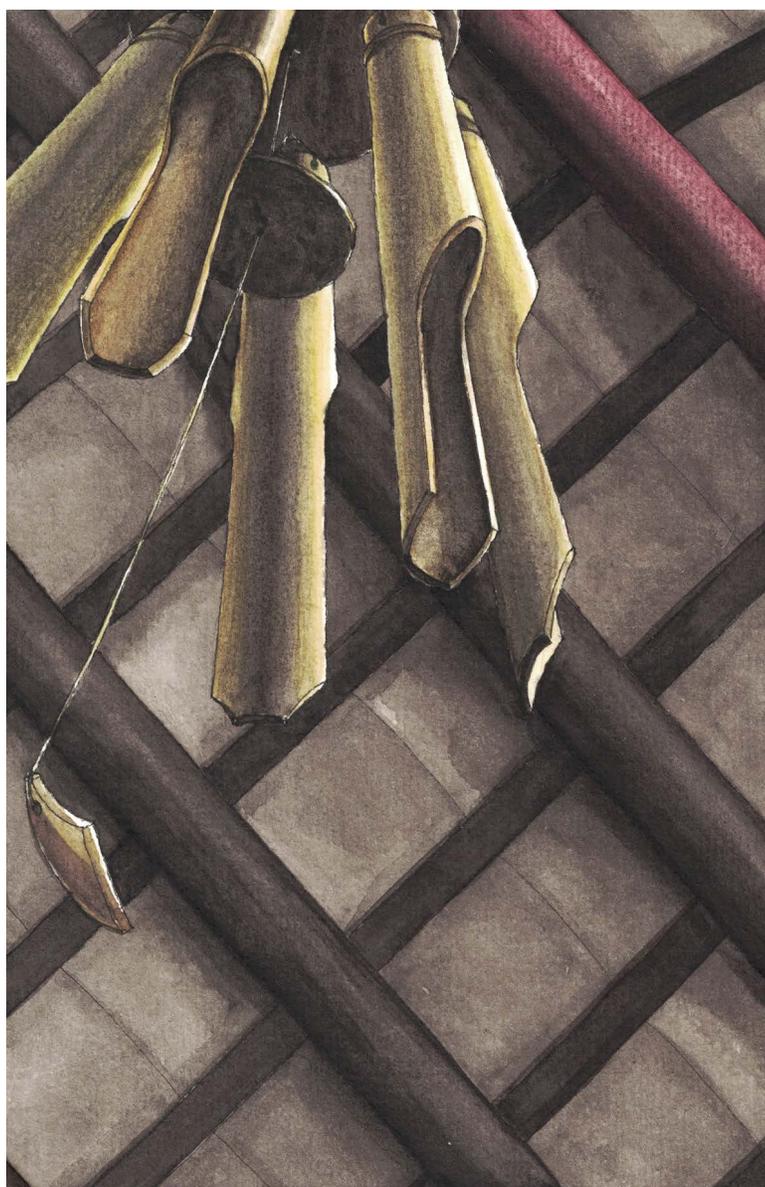


Fig. 3.24

Herbal tea shop - bamboo wind chime hanging from ridge pole.

*Echoes reverberate in the top chamber  
A half floor preserved  
On beams shared with the adjacent void  
Ample for shelves*

*Whilst the hazy city desires to rest in shade  
A few gladdens to bake in the sun*

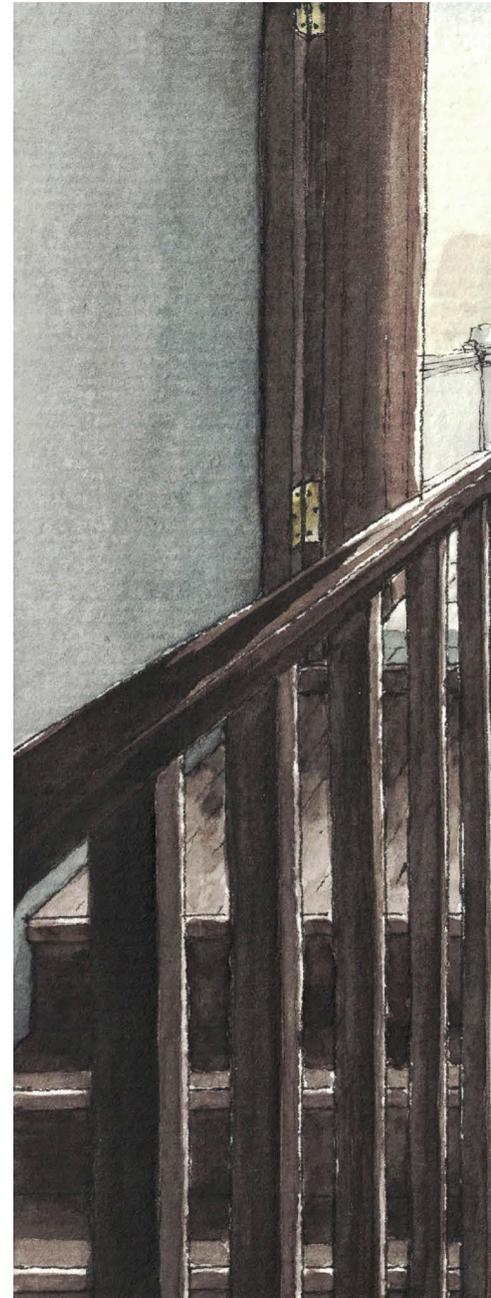


Fig. 3.25  
Herbal tea shop - third floor storage and access to



roof terrace.



Fig. 3.26  
Herbal tea shop - herbs drying on roof terrace.



*The rooftop terrace makes ideal*

*The drying*

*And second drying*

*Of herbs*

*To rid of dampness and prevent mould*

*The sun, after all, concerns not to vex or to bless*

*Vice or virtue, as mortals assign, is a matter of*

*Complementing deficiency and excess*

*The cleared mind shall see*



## The Artists' Residence

Beyond a physical restoration, social ambiance of the qilou street is equally quintessential. Chopsticks Street is incomplete without the diverse activities, spontaneous encounters, and domestic routines that busy the brick houses during different hours of day and times of year. The artists' residence re-establishes the qilous as a perennial site of exchange, between local people and traditional crafts and rituals, between workshop-keepers and passerby, between artist-neighbours, and between artist-residents and the inner self.

Artists' workshops foremost reconnect the people of Foshan with its handicraft traditions. Simple infrastructural elements are introduced in the covered walkway to encourage a co-existence between the re-inhabited qilous and informal rituals that thrived when the street was in a state of neglect.

Reminiscent of traditional shophouses, ground-floor workshops open onto the walkway to promote the spill out of creative activities and the engagement of pedestrians with handicraft processes.

Residential quarters are reserved on the second floor. Yet, different from the past, further emphasis on communality punctures through the party walls and connects adjacent units. Individual access stairs within the units are replaced by a shared stairwell, as are the kitchen and bathrooms. The rooftop terraces are likewise connected as one shared leisure space for the artist-neighbours.

Within the private units, artists can flexibly partition their rooms with wood lattice screens to compose a space of comfort and reflection suited to personal preferences.

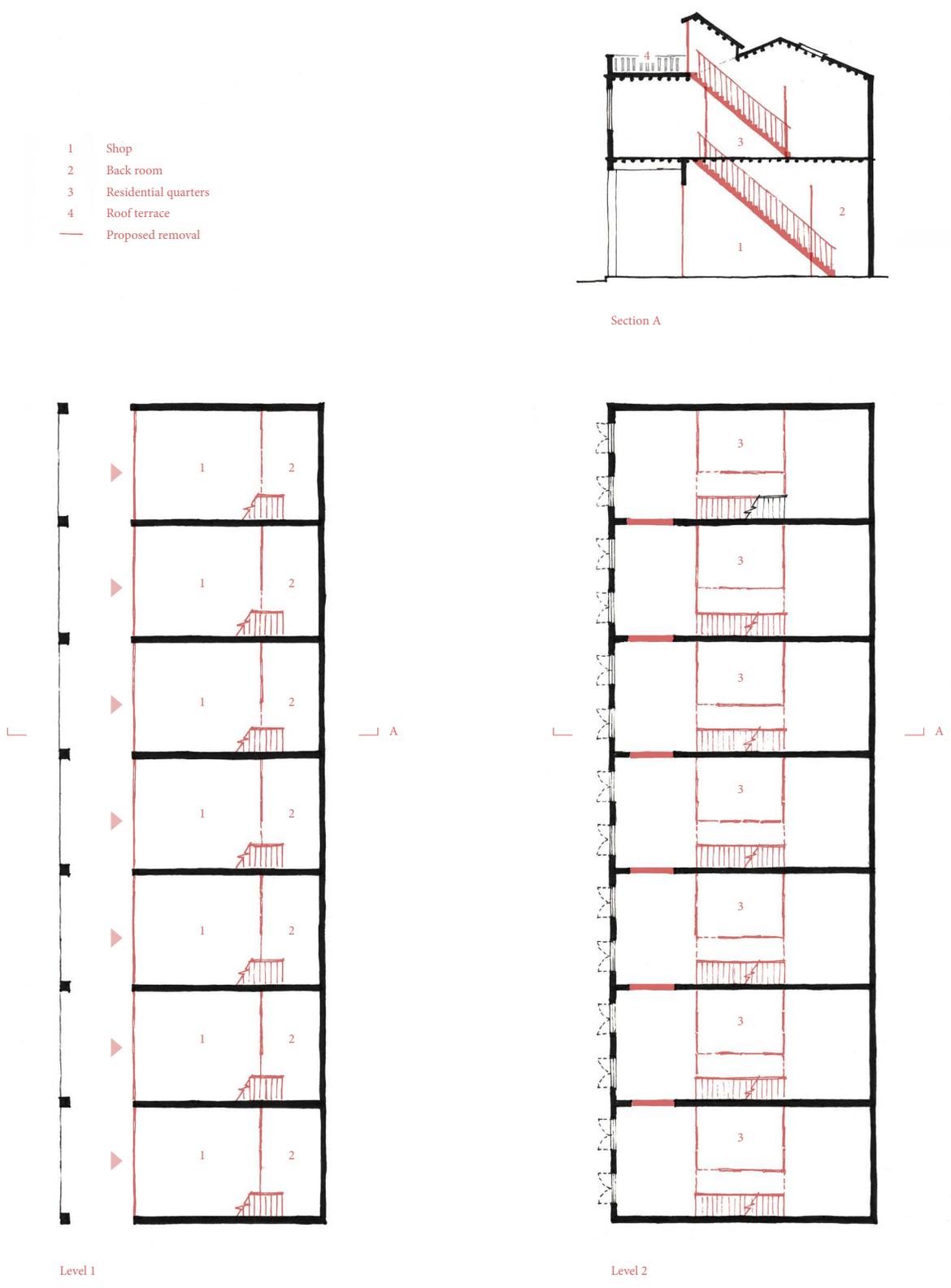
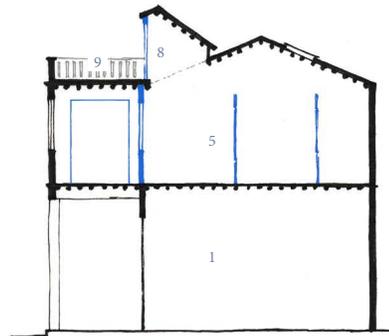
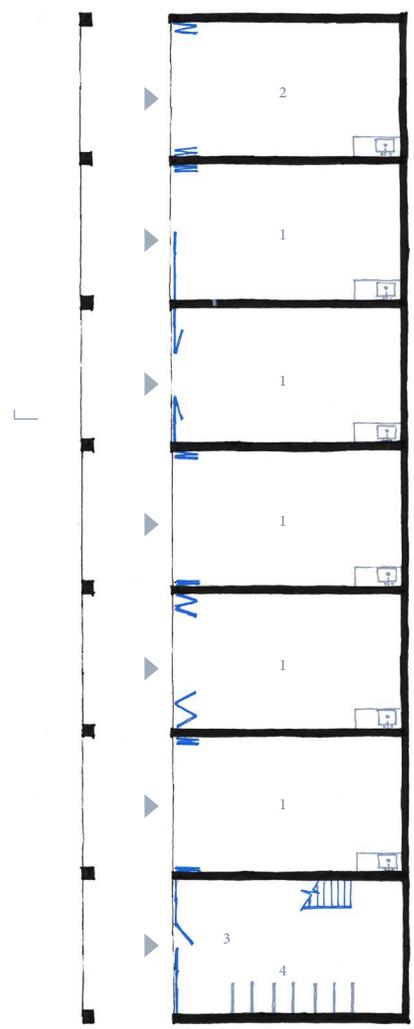


Fig. 3.27  
Speculated existing layout.

- 1 Workshop
- 2 Pop-up event space
- 3 Artists' residential entrance
- 4 Bike storage
- 5 Private rooms
- 6 Kitchen
- 7 Stairs to roof terrace
- 8 Skylight
- 9 Roof terrace
- 10 Storage
- Proposed addition

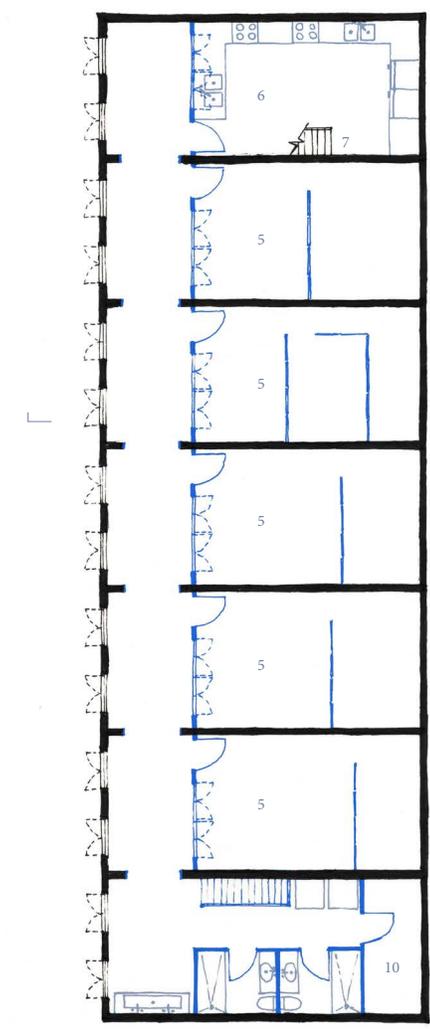


Section A



Level 1

— A



Level 2

— A

Fig. 3.28  
Proposed layout for the artists' residence.

*Morning dew  
A cup of tea  
Water plants  
Hang out laundry  
A productive day is ready to start*

*Evening breeze  
A can of beer  
Two small dishes  
A few neighbours  
That is all the repose the creative mind needs*

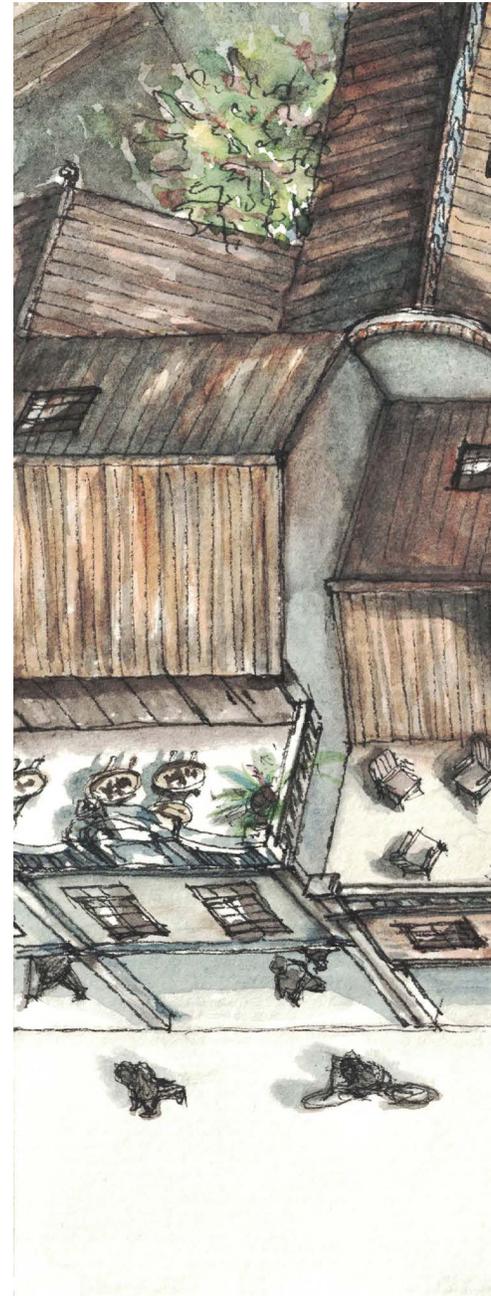


Fig. 3.29  
Artists' residence - bird's-eye view onto the connect



ected roof terrace.

*Some insist on trade secrets  
But true craft essence is in time, practice, and heart  
Process can be shared  
To touch more hearts  
Yet every person is a teacher of culture  
Who inspires who is never a set event*



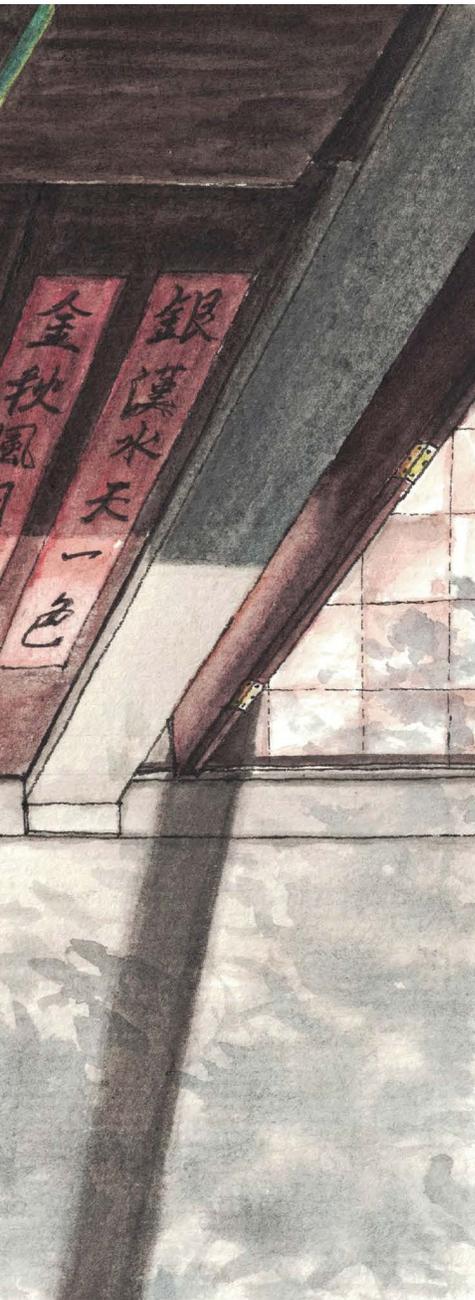
Fig. 3.30  
Artists' residence - ground floor workshop opening



g onto the covered walkway.



Fig. 3.31  
Artists' residence - workshop accordion door panels.



*From afar*

*Memory recognizes the door panels of olden days*

*Approaching*

*Thought appreciates the accordions no less*

*Retract them fully*

*The workshop and walkway become reciprocal extensions*

*Keep only the pair of central leaves open*

*The workshop coexists with new rituals that arose*

*When the storefront was a dead brick wall*

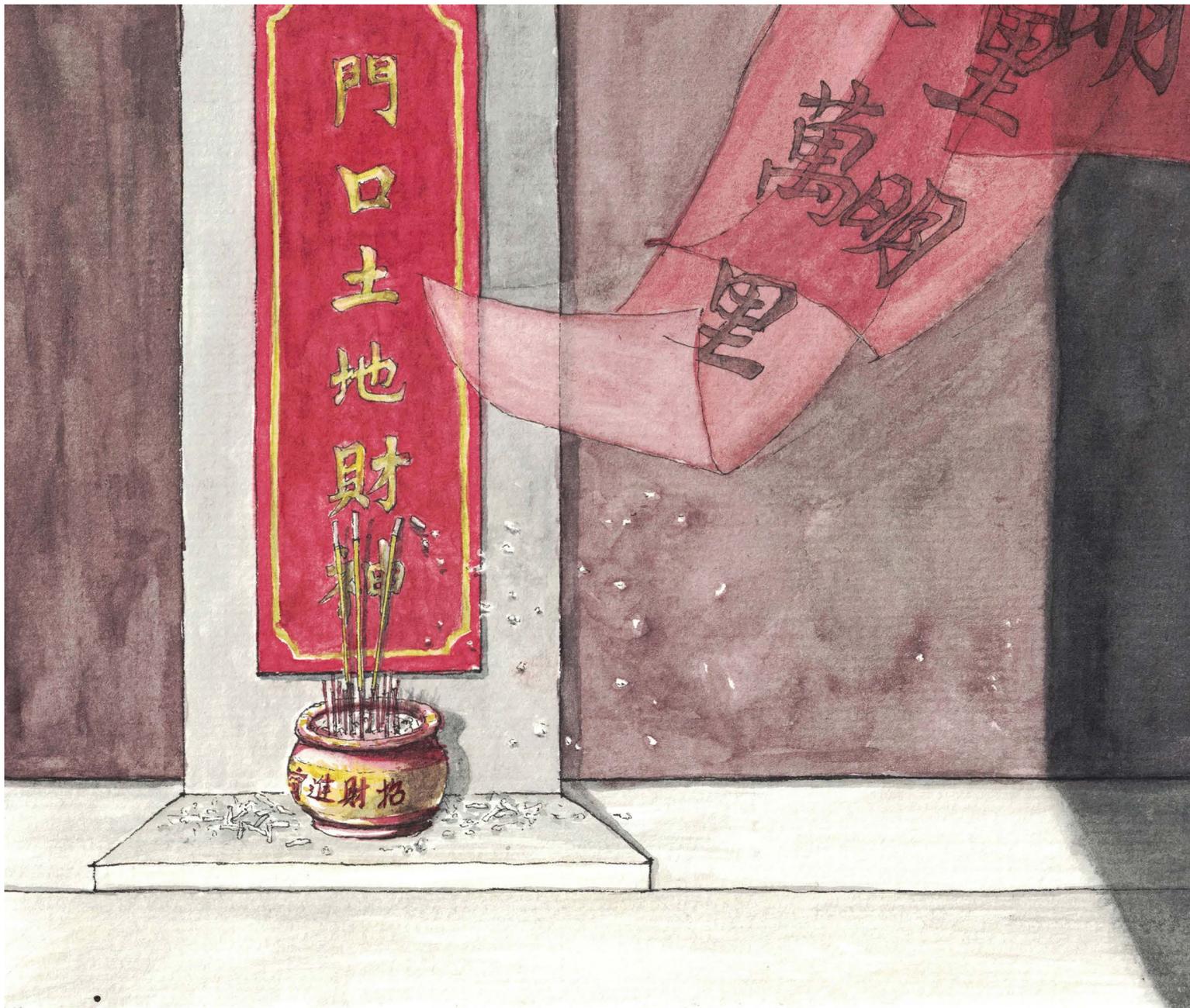


Fig. 3.32  
Artists' residence - altar for the tutelary God of Earth and Wealth.



*Convenience by chance*

*The end of the party wall and a slender ledge*

*Naturally an altar by the front door*

*For the God of the Earth and Wealth*

*At the initiative of those who find comfort*

*In daily tributes to the tutelary*

*A wisp of air*

*The tip of the burnt incense stick crumbles*

*And flakes in the air*

*The shopfront is at once an interface  
Also an occasional backdrop*

*The walkway is at once a passage  
Also a space of its own*

*Some arts are most enthusiastically spread  
On informal occasions  
Thriving from informal backdrops and informal spaces*



Fig. 3.33  
Artists' residence - co-existence between the reinh



habited qilous and informal pop-up stands in the covered walkway.

*The bare column is never truly bare  
Breezy light, leafy shadows, and peeling posters  
Are never the same between yesterday and today*

*Even the newly carved ornamental flower  
May be more than a cavity tomorrow*

*Only the unbusy can host*



Fig. 3.34  
Artists' residence - qilou columns.

*To accommodate expected conducts*

*Is a static endeavour*

*That may quickly outdate itself*

*To anticipate unexpected events*

*Chances in surprise and delight*

*At what the inventive human mind may imagine*

*From minimal instructure found in place*



Fig. 3.35  
Artists' residence - folk initiated festivities making



use of the qilou architecture in new ways.



Fig. 3.36  
Artists' residence - qilous continue to be animated at nighttime by artist-residents.



*When crickets serenade the celestial mirror  
And festivities fade  
The brick houses rejoice to know  
Their second floor windows will remain lit  
And teapots will continue to steam*

*Above the covered walkway  
Where solid walls once confined independent units  
The present punctures through the blue brick past  
And frames its passage with a fresh copper note*

*Thus accentuates  
The traverse of contemporality  
The rhythm of space  
The spirit of communality  
Of which posterity shall know*

*To cook, at the far end  
To wash, at the opposite  
The encounters are unhurried  
Spontaneous  
A living room without being a room*



Fig. 3.37  
Artists' residence - second floor corridor.



*Ancients prized the blue bricks  
For they would not mould nor decay for ten thousand years*

*The wooden floor lusters from tung oil protective coats  
But, through the ages, dulls at the foot's frequent caress*

*The copper frame speaks contrarily  
Polished where the body and carried objects collide most consistently  
Yet not perfectly smooth from scratched streaks  
And complacent with patina beyond the corporeal reach*

*Times overlap within the same space*



Fig. 3.38  
Artists' residence - close-up of the copper framed wall puncture.

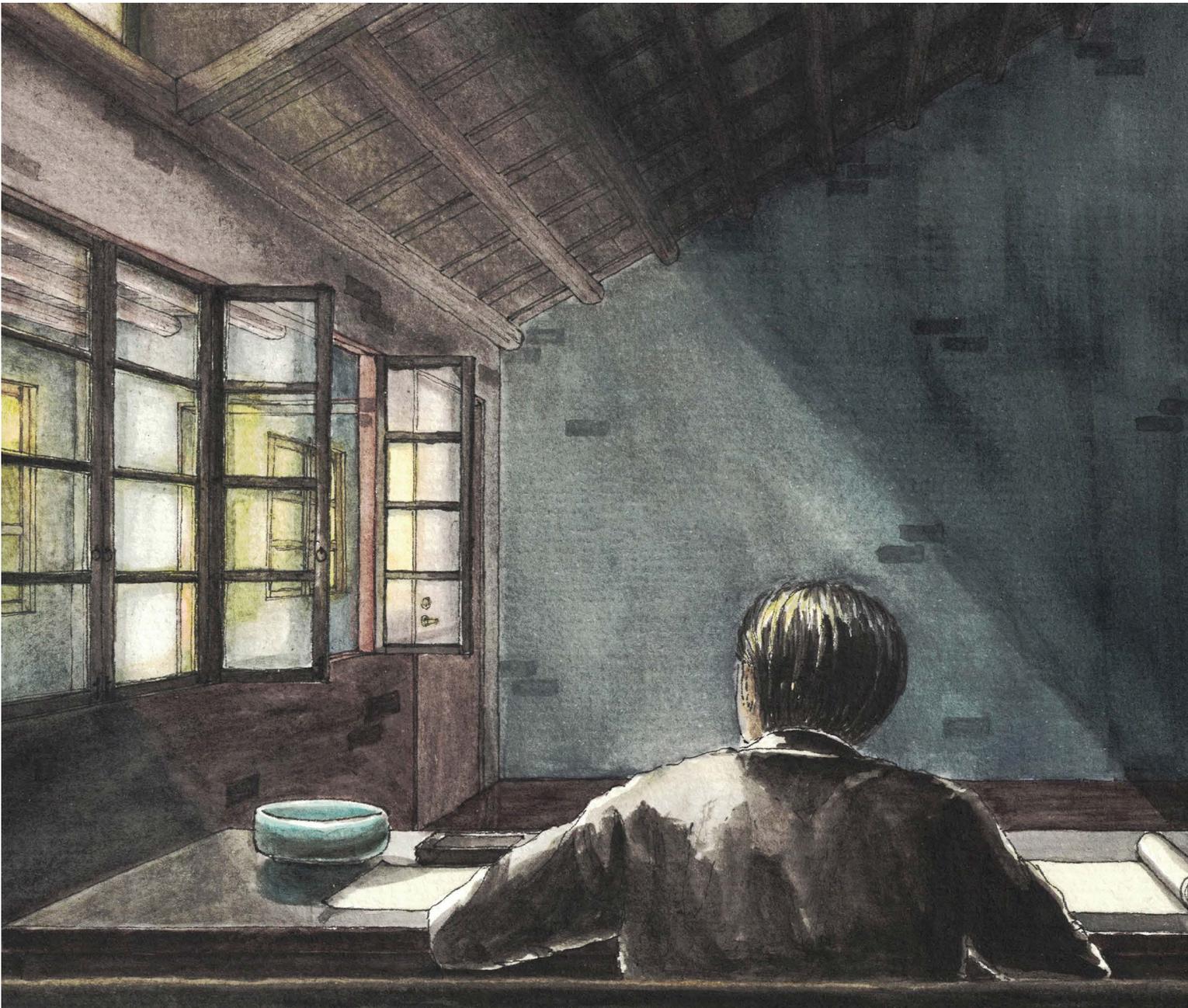


Fig. 3.39  
Artists' residence - artists' private living-sleeping rooms.



*In private reflection*

*A gentle breeze can evoke the whistling flute in a bamboo grove*

*A blank canvas can see the mountains of the cosmos take form*

*The inner realm can transcend the bounds of a small chamber*

*Light showers down*

*From where stairs once led to the rooftop*

*Yesterday enters through the glass panes*

*Day breaks through ice crackles  
Patterns of infinite change follow a principle  
But do not obey rules  
The spontaneity of nature  
The beauty of imperfection  
The liberation of artistic endeavours*

*The words of Hong from his Vegetable Roots Discourse echo*

*When a single lamp flickers like a firefly and  
the many rustling sounds are hushed,  
it is time for my quiet repose. At dawn,  
I rouse from my dreams. Activities of the  
day have not yet begun, and it is time for  
me to come forth from primal chaos.<sup>1</sup>*

*Music and poetry with the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove  
Still vividly heard in the mind  
As one emerges from slumber  
The ancient scholars who  
Renounced the formality and pretense of court  
And retreated to art and the freedom of nature  
Their silhouettes dissolve  
In the light that shines  
On their spiritual successors*

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<sup>1</sup> Hong Zicheng, *Vegetable Roots Discourse: Wisdom from Ming China on Life and Living*, trans. Robert Aitken and Dnaniel W. Y. Kwok (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006), 1:146.



Fig. 3.40  
Artists' residence - sleeping area behind patterned lattice screens.



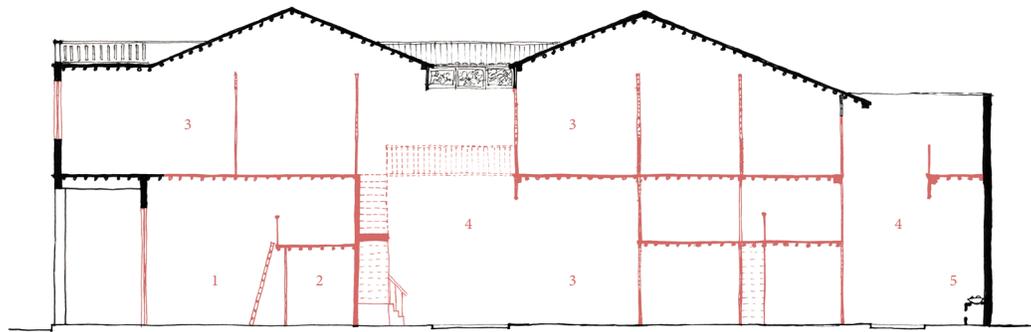
## The Cooling House

There is a sentimental phrase in Chinese, commonly used towards the nostalgic revisit of a once-familiar place waning to the passing of time: *ren qu lou kong* 人去楼空, people are gone and the building is empty. The simple words express a profound yearning towards a bygone age to which one cannot return. Chopsticks Street, in its present state, is a perfect encapsulation of *ren qu lou kong*.

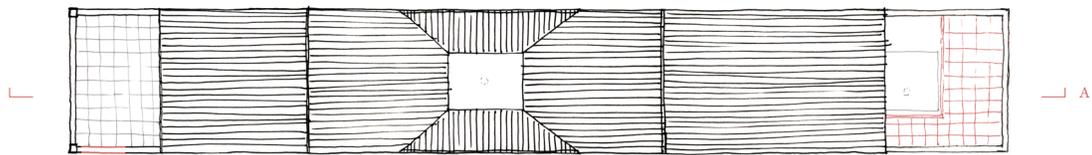
While emptied building refers to the absence of inhabitants, furniture, and scenes of daily life, it is curious to know whether further emptying of the interior space – of architectural elements from walls, floors, to stairs – can somehow be more evocative of the past lives that once occupied the building. The cooling house tells the stories of a qilou through traces, the former presence of inhabitation reminiscent only by residues of wall tracks and beam pockets, layered with stains and material wear from human touch and weathering. It is an absence that provokes a mnemonic chase to interpret the missing elements and rituals that left these marks.

Following the footsteps of ancestors is one mode of experience. Contrasting convention by introducing a foreign flight of slow-rising stairs traverses the qilou like a spirit drifting through the past, confronting the building at unusual sectional locations and thereby bringing into sight details that typically evade consciousness. The trajectory is further layered with symbolic narratives drawing from traditional values and ancient literary texts.

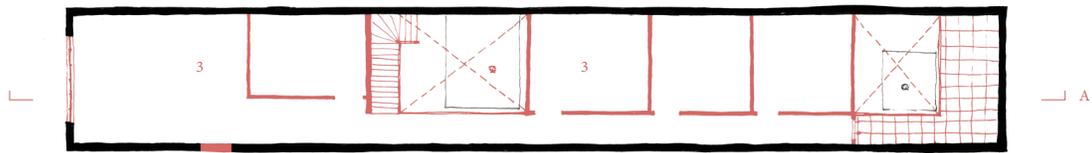
In this setting, the cooling house receives casual visitors likened to an urban parklet, spontaneous, interactive, curious, and reflective.



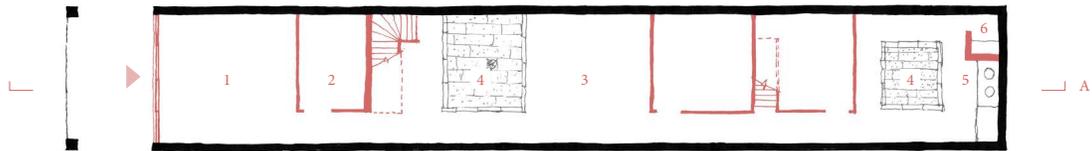
Section A



Level 3



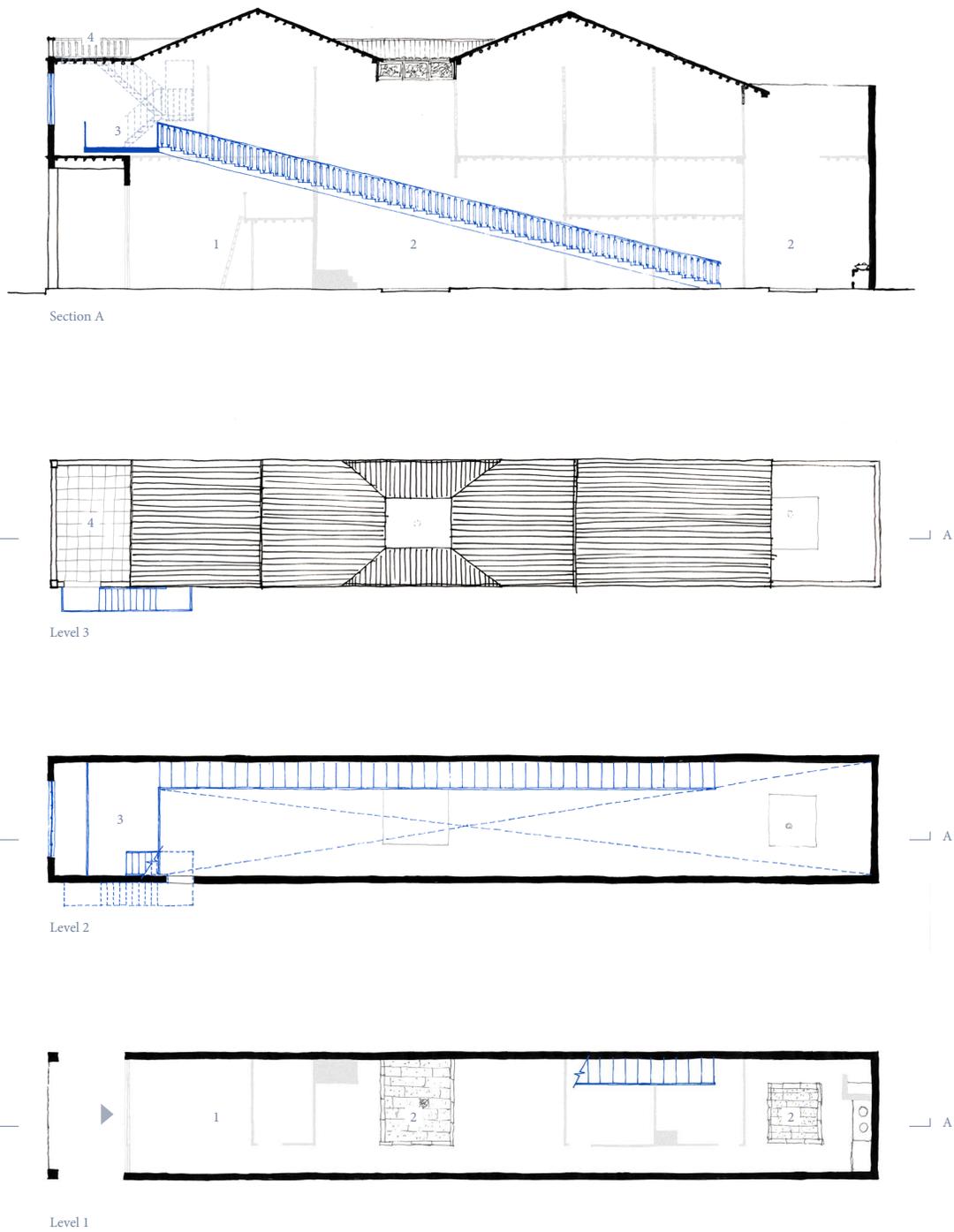
Level 2



Level 1

- 1 Shop
- 2 Back room
- 3 Residential quarters
- 4 Skywell
- 5 Cooking stoves
- 6 Privy
- Proposed removal

Fig. 3.41  
Speculated existing layout.



- 1 Voided space
- 2 Skywell
- 3 Viewing platform
- 4 Roof terrace
- Proposed addition

Fig. 3.42  
Proposed layout for the cooling house.

六月天, 孩儿脸, 说变就变

*The sky of June*

*The face of a child*

*From one moment to the next it swings*

*Popular sayings chant old truths*

*The unexpected inbuilt in the expected*

*The sudden downpour in the subtropical climate*

*Yet the surprised pedestrian scurries for cover*

*The qilou anticipates*

*Fat drops splatter*

*The gaze weighed down*

*Buildings plink in puddling reflections*

*Colours appear not the theme of the street*

*A kaleidoscopic window or a rippling mirage?*

*But fat drops splatter*

*The gaze held down*

*And the drench chases the feet forward*

*Will the mirrors still delude when the sky dries up?*

*Will it be known?*



Fig. 3.43  
Cooling house - reflection of the qilou in rain puddles.

*The front unguarded*

*The shop absent*

*The chambers fallen*

*Has time seen a void so thorough?*

*What do the brick pockets pulsate?*

*Who demarks with the plaster troughs?*

*Why are stain spots squared in quartets?*

*Where will the next skywell punctuate?*

*When did firewood last billow the sweet scent of cooked rice?*

*Has heart known a reminiscence so full?*

*The rivulet trickled off does not turn back*

*But through the fissures*

*Time takes away and leaves behinds*

*The past seeps every brick and tile*

*They write and tell of every age*

*As every age tell and write on every brick and tile*

*Silence echoes lingering yesteryear into tomorrow*

稀里哗啦

Xi-li-hua-la

*The sky pours a bucket*

噼里啪啦

Pi-li-pa-la

*The earthen pot collects Heaven's blessings*

*Is it true? That some things stay constant amidst change?*

*Did rain smell the same in grandma's childhood?*

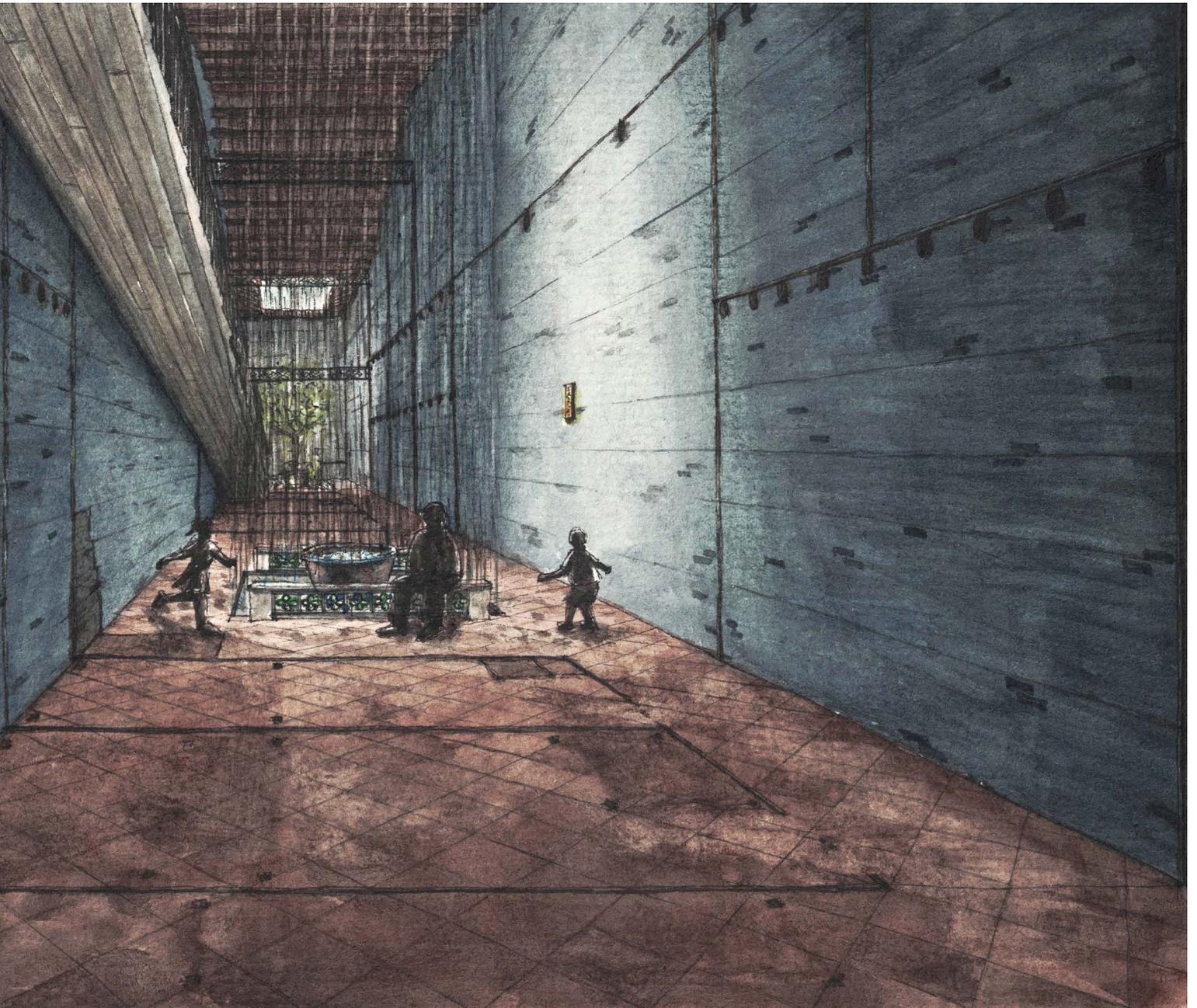
*Will granite and splatters duet alike in the infant's old age?*

*When the city outside becomes unrecognizable*

*Can the blue brick walls still promise the tales once known?*



Fig. 3.44  
Cooling house - voided interior.



*The absent wall screens obstruct not passage  
Yet to traverse the imprinted boundaries  
Defies compulsive instincts*

*To obey the plan  
In a sudden realization  
Tricks the feet onto trodden tracks*

*Do scratches lighten the most walked tiles?  
How many years for dust clings to darken unreached patches?*

*The terracotta plates recount  
Disremembered steps  
Disremembered paths  
Disremembered routines  
Disremembered domesticity*

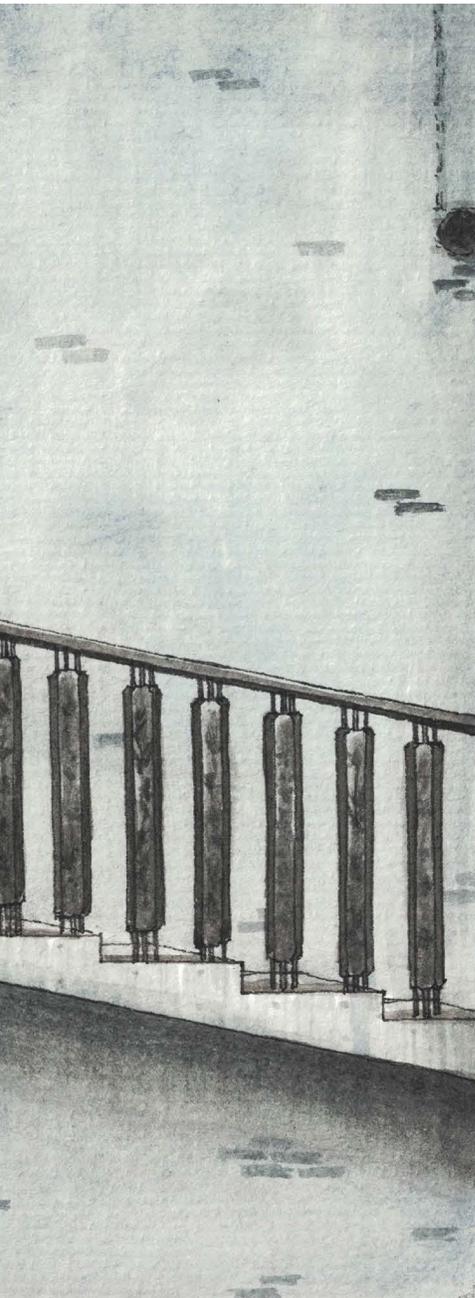


Fig. 3.45  
Cooling house - traces on terracotta tile floor.





Fig. 3.46  
Cooling house - slowly ascending stairs traversing sectional traces on walls.



*But to obey does not satisfy  
Does it not intrigue more to contradict?*

*A concrete flight  
Takes off  
To foreign heights  
An elongated pace  
Let unfamiliarity tell what it comes across*

*Between the void and the wall  
The slow rise spans  
Along the length*

*The stretched ascent  
Traverses the sequence and rhythms  
Like the light that diffuses from the skywells  
Like the air that knew not porous boundaries  
Like the humidity that coalesced onto the wall  
Weathered memories*

*The overhead beam pockets lower humbly in sight  
Have hands after the builder's touched the bricks at this height?*

*Chrysanthemums bloom  
On baluster plates in view from the storied void  
Tranquility forgets the tower crane plots*

*Its noble character lauded by the ancients  
Famously known to be loved by Tao Yuanming (365–427)  
of the Jin dynasty*

*He who withdrew from civil society  
Recluse in the simple authenticity of countryside  
Distant from the sordidness of court  
Uncumbered by the greed for wealth  
A poet, a farmer, a wine drinker, an occasional host*

*The chrysanthemum embodies Tao  
The qilou pursues the chrysanthemum*



Fig. 3.47  
Cooling house - stairs baluster carving visible from the void.

*Abruptly it came*

*Abruptly it went*

*The sky dries*

*The sun penetrates the saturated air*

*Wet shoe prints do not hurry to evaporate*

*Shadow elongates*

*The lattice transom*

*That until now made not itself known*

*In the line of sight*

*Iridescence reminds of an unanswered curiosity*

*Whence they come?*

*To whom they belong?*

*Are they real?*

*For all that are tangibly present are blue bricks and clay tiles*

*The head spins around to search*

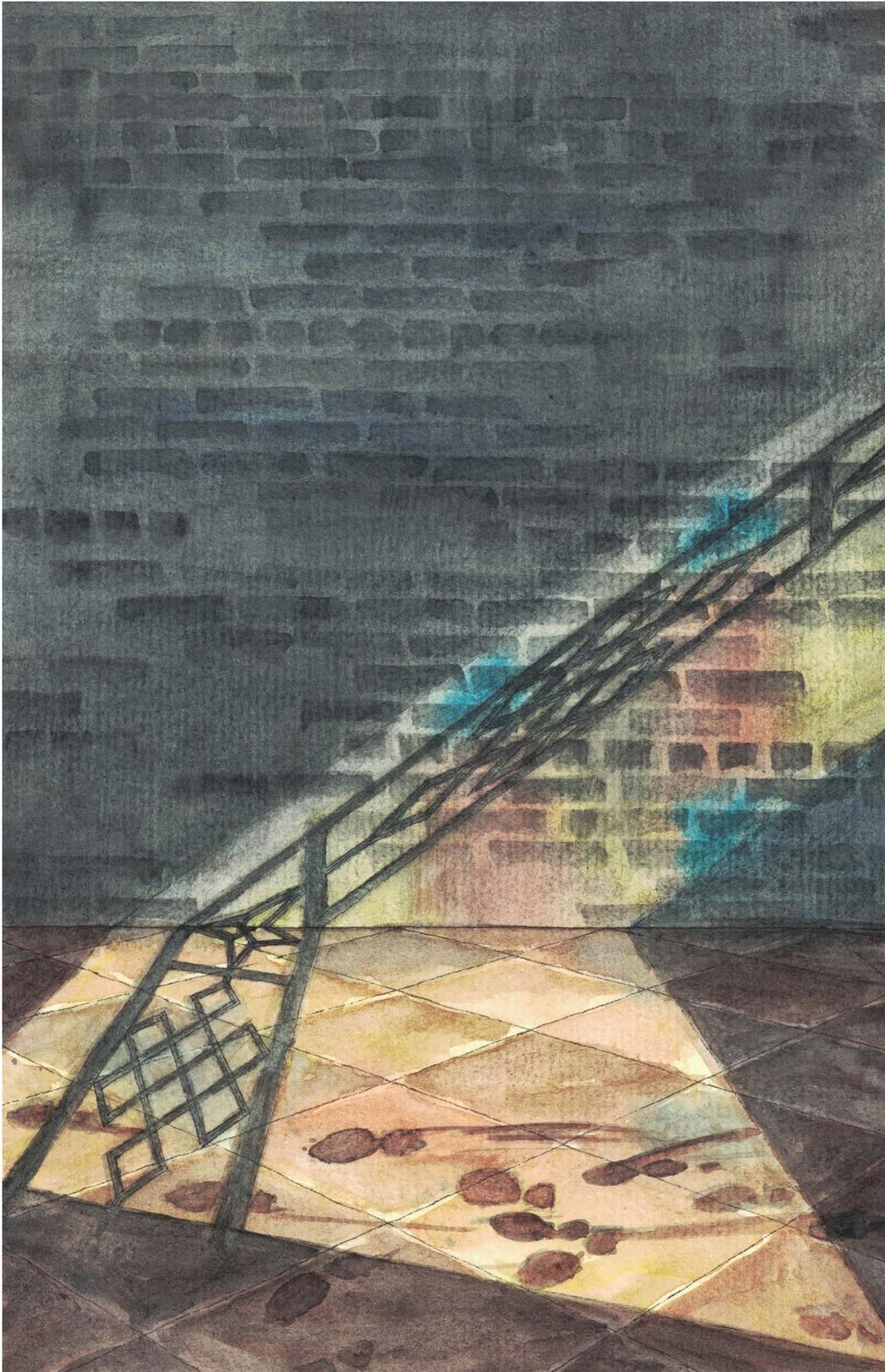


Fig. 3.48  
Cooling house - traces projected from environmental conditions.

*There exist few who would turn  
Their backs on radiant opulence*

*A straight, easy ascent  
Each tread bathed in properous promises  
Steadily, surely  
Success and wealth await at road's end*

*Peonies escort the path  
Beloved king of all flowers  
Cultivated by hands of Great Tang (618–906)  
A bloom that thrived  
In the most glorious chapter of five thousand springs  
Celebrated then  
Celebrated now  
The bloom that celebrates prosperity and wealth*



Fig. 3.49  
Cooling house - stairs baluster carving seen on the



ascend.

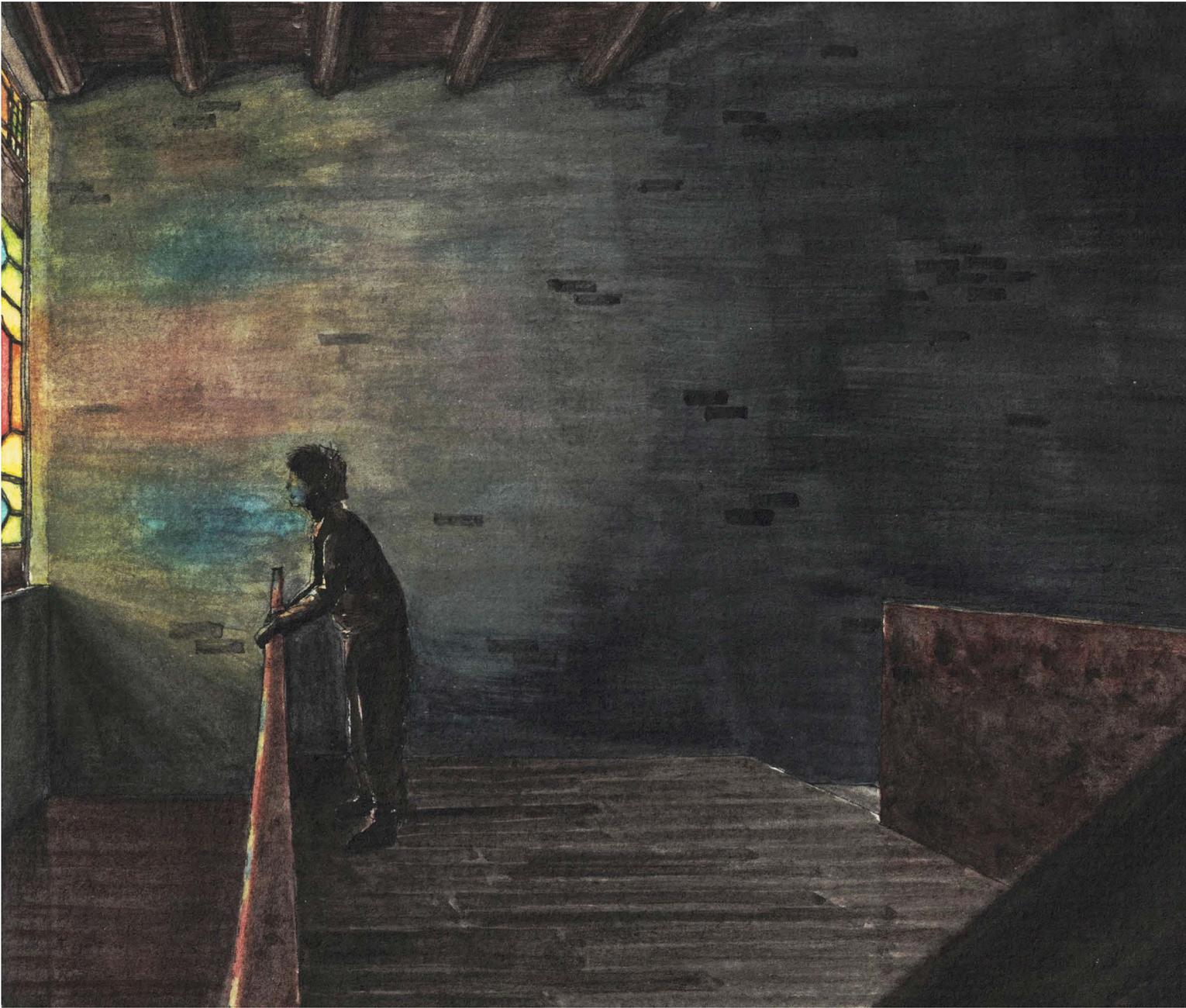


Fig. 3.50  
Cooling house - second floor viewing platform.



*But human desires know not limits*

*Kaleidoscopic glitters*

*Always within arm's reach*

*Always at arm's length*

*Will endless pursuit ever meet lasting content?*

*There is always more to want*

*The abyss of worldly cravings torments*

*A proverb borrows from the Buddha:*

*The sea of bitterness has no bounds*

*Look back to find the shore*

*Blue bricks, red tiles*

*Green moss, white smoke*

*Dewdrops trickle yesterday's gossips*

*Moonlight will glisten tomorrow's echoes*

*Who turns around*

*Shall know a humble majesty*

*Quietly*

*Enlightened steps rise*

*Lift off and beyond*



Fig. 3.51  
Cooling house - the voided space seen from the view



ewing platform.

*The rinsed air  
Crisp, plump, and sweet*

*The washed sky  
Cleansed from dusty fatigue  
Restores vigor*

*Fresh and surprised  
As this ethereal climb*

*Who has waited for moss to paint rain's kiss?  
Or pondered his reflection on the baluster's glaze?  
Or listened to breeze whistle through the lattice?  
Or wondered at a fragrance, subtle, beyond the gaze?*



Fig. 3.52  
Cooling house - stairs ascending along the outside



wall of the qilou.

*Does one descend as the same person?*

*The fragrance of lotus reminisces*

*A great sage of Song*

*Righteous civil official*

*Grandfather of Neo-Confucianism*

*Zhou Dunyi (1017–73) praises*

*In his “Ode to Lotus”:*

*Amongst the flowers on woods and grasses of water and land, many are worthy of admiration. Tao Yuanming of Jin loved solely the chrysanthemum; since Tang of the Li clan, worldly people loved immensely the peony. I love solely the lotus, for it rises from the mud but remains unstained, cleansed by limpid ripples but is not flirtatious. Its stem hollow on the inside, straight on the outside; it does not grow vines or branches; its fragrance drifts far and pure, it stands pristine and upright; it can be admired from afar, but cannot be toyed with up close.*

*I say, the chrysanthemum is the recluse amongst flowers, the peony is the wealthy amongst flowers, and the lotus is the gentleman amongst flowers. Alas! The love for chrysanthemum is seldom heard of after Tao. The love for lotus, who shares with me? The love for peony is certainly plenty.<sup>1</sup>*

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1 Zhou Dunyi, “Ai lian shuo” 爱莲说 [Ode to Lotus], (Northern Song Dynasty), translated by author.



Fig. 3.53  
Cooling house - stairs baluster carving perceived c



on the descent.

*Amidst muddy waters*

*Lotuses bloom*



Fig. 3.54  
Cooling house - lotuses on the roof terrace.



## *Epilogue*



“Chasing Chopsticks Street” notably concludes in three adaptive-reuse design narratives, but more importantly, it expresses my statement towards the significance and occasion presented by Chopsticks Street and its qilous – and, by extension, historic inner-cities under urban redevelopment pressure – to act as the keeper of folklore of a people.

The Chinese word for “crisis” is *wei ji* 危机. The first character, *wei* 危, indicates “danger”; the second character, *ji* 机, refers to “opportunity.” In a crisis, there is danger and, thus, opportunity.

Destruction, driven by political, economic, and ideological causes, since the twentieth century has put historic Chinese cityscapes under unparalleled menace. In particular, the unprecedented pace and scale of development since the Economic Reform devastated vernacular urban fabrics that harboured the shared memories and cultural essence of local peoples. Tower cranes raised instant cities where profit-driven skyscrapers sundered generational citizens from the familiarity of yesterday. Awakening to the loss of cultural identity and connection to one’s past, preservation efforts fervently protect historic urban relics in a more-often-than-not fallacious pursuit. Suspended between life and death, the petrified monuments declare an even more distinct disengagement from the active living world, in discordance with the traditional Chinese practice of perpetuation which inhabited the people through continuous use and periodic rebuilding. In a differing attempt, commercial-touristic development of old city districts

commodifies nostalgia in time-honoured shells that in effect induces amnesia. The romanticized exteriors and gut-renovated interiors disremember the embodied meanings, cultural rituals, and modes of life once hosted between the brick walls, widening the chasm of cultural discontinuity. The contemporary city and people are in danger of losing irreplaceable heritage – both tangible and intangible – passed down from ancestors.

Chopsticks Street presents a scarce, authentic opportunity to investigate the cultural memories of an undeveloped swatch in Foshan's historic core and to speculate the possibilities of alternative fates for its built artefacts. The street and its qilous, which I have examined, documented, and visualized quite exhaustively through hand drawing, unveil interweaving stories intimate as a local clay tile to far-reaching as the Maritime Silk Route, phantom as imperial dynastic records to vivid as the new rituals that evolved in the street's current state of dilapidation. The site and buildings embody history, climatic knowledge, social trajectory, values, superstition, modes of living, and the touch of the hands of ancestors. Chopsticks Street and the shophouses stand as an emotional anchor for the people of Foshan and a last chance to reconcile between the city's past and present.

If it was through the periodic reinterpretation and adaptation of tangible and intangible traditions that the Chinese civilization safeguarded continuity for five thousand years, then it may be likewise through metamorphosis that Chopsticks Street finds continuation. The design intervention, thus, treats the qilous not as static artefacts but as an instance in the process of unending change – a change to be orchestrated through

curated inserts and selective removal to evoke accreted pasts and anticipate interactive futures.

The herbal tea shop, artists' residence, and cooling house reintegrate Chopsticks Street into the relevance of everyday life through traditional rituals associable with daily routines. They concern not to reinstate the precise shops that previously occupied the specific qilous, but to restore the social relationships intimate to the qilou street. Likewise, the presented narratives do not respond directly to individual events of former occupation – admittedly, vaguely known from a physically and temporally distant investigation and overly broad to be addressed comprehensively – but answer with intervention approaches that invite the qilous to speak for themselves the specific tales inscribed on their wall bricks, floor tiles, and dulled steps. The qilou is perceived, rather than explicitly told, through encounters with memories that are instinctively understood, as traces and trajectories, and allegories that prompt contemplation. Incomplete scenes are narrated with visual, bodily, and metaphoric cues, which encourage personal appropriation of cultural memories through interpretation while leaving physical and mental space to anticipate the inscription of posterity. Chopsticks Street and its qilous, ultimately, open a dialogue between the past, present, and future generations.

Admittedly, this thesis may not change the course for Chopsticks Street on the city's agenda, with commercial-touristic development plans having commenced earlier this spring. Yet, here, I hope to make a statement towards the prospect of old inner-city districts. It is easy to enjoy the profitable returns of high-rise development and commercial-touristic renovation – at the

expense of the architectural and social authenticity of historic urban neighbourhoods – as the popularly loved peony that entices with wealth. The chrysanthemum and the lotus are comparable in their dignified character and persistence to uphold purity. Yet, chrysanthemum, the recluse, is seldom achievable and, should it be achieved, is aloof and ignores the status quo, as are the few preserved urban relics that cease to participate meaningfully in the contemporary city. The lotus, that which grows from muddy waters but remains unstained, does not escape, elevating it above the chrysanthemum in virtue. My proposal for Chopsticks Street and its qilous pursues the lotus. Amidst a murky swirl of looming high-rises, infringing megamalls, and more-to-come profit-driven redevelopments, Chopsticks Street will realize its most prizable value – albeit unmeasurable in numeric digits – as the host of living traditions that imprints reciprocally on the people of Foshan.

“Chasing Chopsticks Street” is one sequel of an urban vernacular building cluster for which I had the humble pleasure of directing. May our historic cities see more sequels in generations to come.



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