NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN AND PUBLIC LIFE:  
LESSONS FROM BEIJING'S HUTONG AND SUPERBLOCKS

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ABSTRACT

Beijing’s *hutong*, centuries-old neighborhoods composed of narrow streets and courtyard housing, are famous for harboring a tight-knit social fabric and a vibrant public realm. Over the past thirty years, large-scale redevelopment of *hutong* neighborhoods has occurred, and new neighborhoods in Beijing and in much of China have primarily come in the form of high-rise buildings arranged in superblocks. This model of neighborhood design has been criticized for its energy inefficiency, auto-centric nature, and perceived lack of respect for traditional Chinese urban forms. Less explored to date is the fact that residents of superblock neighborhoods often complain about a lack of community interaction and public life, particularly as compared to *hutong* neighborhoods. This thesis examines this phenomenon and asks the following questions: What accounts for the disparity between community interaction in superblock neighborhoods as compared to *hutong*? Can urban design and the built environment play a role in fostering community and public life in contemporary Chinese neighborhoods? What lessons can be drawn for urban designers and planners in regards to the impact of neighborhood design on public life?

The thesis begins by reviewing a history of major urban form changes throughout Beijing’s history with a focus on neighborhood design. A field study undertaken in Beijing in January 2015 provides the primary data for the research, including resident interviews and observations of public space use in a *hutong* and two superblock neighborhoods. Using the data generated through the field study as well as secondary sources related to Chinese neighborhood design, a set of conclusions is drawn regarding how the built environment affects public life and community interaction in Beijing neighborhoods. Finally, a series of design recommendations is presented, focusing on the ways that urban design can support an active public life while meeting the high densities required in rapidly urbanizing contexts.
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INTRODUCTION
NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN AND PUBLIC LIFE IN BEIJING

FROM HUTONG TO HIGH-RISE

There has been ample praise of Beijing’s historic urban pattern and architecture. In 1951, the respected Danish urban planner and architect Steen Eiler Rasmussen began his book Towns and Buildings by proclaiming, “Peking, the capital of old China! Has there ever been a more majestic and illuminative example of sustained town-planning?” Rasmussen goes on to say, “The entire city is one of the wonders of the world, in its symmetry and clarity a unique monument, the culmination of a great civilization.” American urbanist Edmund Bacon later called the old city of Beijing “possibly the single greatest work of man on the face of the earth,” while famed Chinese planner and architect Liang Sichen once named the city “an unparalleled urban planning masterpiece.”

These comments were made in a time when most of Beijing was composed of narrow residential streets known as hutong, a central part of the urban layout that had been established by Kublai Khan in 1272. The basic design of the city included broad, rectangular blocks, with the main buildings laid out in a symmetrical central axis with a palace—the Forbidden City—in the center. The historic residential quarters, Beijing’s hutong (which means “lane” in Beijing Chinese, and is generally used to refer to the entire area of low-rise housing in the historic center of the city) consisted of narrow alleys lined by one-story courtyard houses constructed from gray bricks. Until the 1950s, these neighborhoods remained in largely the same layout and form as they had during the Yuan dynasty.

The hutong are famous for harboring a tight-knit social fabric and a vibrant public realm. “The hutong should be celebrated,” Zhang Jinqi, Chinese author and hutong resident asserted, “because of the person-to-person network of friends, neighbors, colleagues, classmates, and relatives, all interacting in this setting’s stores, hostels, bathhouses, schools, and markets.” With little car traffic and an intensely human scale, the tree-lined alleys are quiet yet bustling, and filled with cyclists and pedestrians socializing, shopping, and strolling. Life is intensely public in the hutong; on a walk through one of the iconic neighborhoods, one might pass a group of old men huddled around a chess board on the side of the alley, a newspaper vendor cycling through the lane while shouting out the day’s headlines, a group of people waiting by a young lady flipping meat on a barbecue, and grandparents chatting while they watch a small child playing. The environment is uniquely Beijing, and as the local saying goes, “If there are no more hutongs, then there will be no Beijing.”

China has experienced incredible changes over the past century. The oldest generation of Beijingers may still remember China’s civil war and the Japanese occupation that lasted until 1945; the formation of the communist People’s Republic of China in 1949; the “Great Leap Forward” campaign of rapid industrialization and collectivization, which led to the Great Chinese Famine and resulted in the death of tens of millions of people; the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, which forcibly displaced tens of millions and destroyed many historical, cultural, and religious artifacts and sites; the opening up of China and the economic and social reforms of the late 1970s and 1980s; and the violent government crackdown on Tiananmen Square student protesters in 1989. During the past thirty years, China's urbanization has shown to be the fastest and largest in world history. In 1978, less than 20% of Chinese citizens lived in urban

1 Rasmussen, Towns and Buildings. Page 1.
2 Hou, “The Transformation of the Old City of Beijing, China—A Concrete Manifestation of New China’s Cultural Reconstruction.” Page 42.
3 Liangyong, Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing. Page 6-7.
areas. Since then, over 500 million people have moved from China’s countryside to its cities. Today over 50% of Chinese are urban residents, and it is estimated that 70%—around a billion people—will live in cities by 2030.5

During this time, Chinese cities have also seen an incredible transformation in terms of urban design and urban form. Until the 1950s, the hutong covered almost the entire extent of Beijing and nearly all residential neighborhoods followed their traditional pattern of narrow lanes. Since then, Beijing’s boundaries have expanded considerably and urban developers have experimented with new neighborhood models, which have been predominantly high-rise and automobile-oriented. Inner city redevelopment of the hutong neighborhoods has also occurred at a massive scale: between 1990 and 2002, 25 square kilometers of the historic city center was redeveloped, usually changing in form from hutong to high-rise, which resulted in the displacement of as many as 700,000 people.6

Many activists from Beijing and other parts of China as well as internationally have condemned this trend, decrying the lack of historic preservation.7 In 2003, 125 elementary school students wrote to the mayor of Beijing, asking, “If a city does not have its culture and history, what makes it different from all other cities? … Our hutongs and courtyard houses are unique in the world, while the skyscrapers that we are building are commonplace.”8

Some believe that China is importing old western models that are now seen as mistakes by many urbanists: gated neighborhoods, Corbusian tower-in-the-park developments, and mono-use areas that are accessible only by car and are inhospitable to bikers and pedestrians. Yan Song, the director of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s program on Chinese cities, once remarked that Chinese planners have been making “essentially all the mistakes that have been made in the western world before.”9

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7 For example, see Goldman & Ratti (2004); Sorkin, (2008); and Kaiman (2012).
8 O’Neill, “Home Truths.”
9 Bosker, “Why Haven’t China’s Cities Learned from America’s Mistakes?”
Left: Historic illustration of the *hutong* neighborhood of Dongsi, one of the case study neighborhoods for this thesis. The form of the neighborhood has changed little since the Yuan dynasty.

Right: *Hutong* architecture juxtaposed with a high-rise building.
CHAPTER 1 | INTRODUCTION

Some critics have also argued that by importing western superblock models, Beijing has been robbed of its unique local character and has lost the opportunity to learn from its traditional form as China modernizes. In a 2006 paper on the scope of past research on Chinese urban form, J. Whitehead and Kai Gu assert (emphasis mine):

In a country whose urban areas are extending and internally transforming at such phenomenal speed, the challenge for urban research and urban planning is exceptional. In the case of urban morphology, the amount of research, though increasing rapidly, is tiny in relation to the scale of urban development. The supplanting of indigenous Chinese urban forms by western importations, notably the traditional courtyard by the multistory block, has brought with it problems and issues that are at once morphological, social, economic and cultural. In considering the response to the challenge this presents, attention will be focused here on a particular need: to accommodate great pressures for transformation in ways that respect the major legacies that Chinese cities embody in their physical forms.  

This thesis aims to contribute to this need. By interviewing residents, observing street activity, and studying the urban design of traditional hutong as well as contemporary neighborhoods in Beijing, this research tries to understand what hutong design principles could be adapted for the higher density neighborhood form that China’s cities need to accommodate continuing rapid growth.

PUBLIC SPACE, PUBLIC LIFE, AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION

In particular, the thesis focuses on the decline in public life and community interaction in modern Chinese superblocks and tries to understand how these qualities could survive past the hutong model. In the following chapters, “public space” refers to areas that lie outside of private apartments, on streets, alleys, and other shared spaces of the city. “Public life” is defined as social interaction in these shared spaces and “community interaction” is social contact between neighbors.

As previously noted, hutong neighborhoods are famous for containing tight-knit social communities, a feature that our interview subjects valued very highly. Hutong residents often feel a disconnection from their past way of life after being moved to high-rise developments. In particular they complain about lacking a sense of community in the new neighborhoods. Even after living in a high-rise superblock for ten years or more, many of the people interviewed for this thesis still felt that they had not found a new community. One high-rise resident said:

I’m still not used to it here. I really recall my time in the hutong fondly. Sure, there were bad things about it, but the social relationships were really friendly… We moved here in 2003, and haven’t gotten used to the environment. When you open the door, no one knows anyone.

What accounts for the disparity between community interaction in contemporary superblock neighborhoods as compared to hutongs? Can urban design and the built environment play a role in fostering public life and community in modern Chinese neighborhoods? Many scholars believe that well-designed public spaces can encourage social activity. “When public spaces are successful,” scholar Stephen Carr wrote, “they will increase opportunities to participate in communal activity. This fellowship in the open nurtures the growth of public life, which is stunted by the social isolation of ghettos and suburbs. In the parks, plazas, markets, waterfronts, and natural areas of our cities, people from different cultural groups can come together in a supportive context of mutual enjoyment. As these experiences are

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10 Whitehand and Gu, “Research on Chinese Urban Form.”

repeated, public spaces become vessels to carry positive communal meanings.”

Many scholars see public space as a reflection of the overall health of a city. Well-used public spaces in which residents socialize freely are seen as a crucial determinant of the vibrancy of a city or community. As public space theorists Anthony Orum and Zachary Neal put it, “The question of how [public] space is used and who uses it is not a trivial matter at all; indeed, it is one of deep theoretical importance, grounded in the notion that public space is a basic and authentic reflection of circumstances in the larger social order.”

Orum and Neal go on to describe that within this overall premise, there have been three major approaches to the study of public space. The first approach posits that public space plays an essential role as a place where people can socialize and freely express their opinions. This is the view championed by Jane Jacobs’s seminal work, The Death and Life of Great American Cities. In Jacobs’s view, cities need to provide quality public space for people to gather because it is in public space where a sense of community forms.

White (1980) and Anderson (1992) wrote in this same vein. All three theorists saw public space as the central location of community building.

A second view considers public space as a place where the public can perform cultural activities. Lee (2009) proposes that parks and plazas not only offer the opportunity to socialize and exchange political views, but also to express a sense of cultural and collective identity through public dances, performances, and other cultural activities.

A third lens into public space studies focuses on the increasing tendency of cities around the world to be gripped by a concern for security and violence. A common manifestation of this fear in the world of city planning and design has been to implement gating, surveillance, privatization of public space, and other tactics that are intended to increase public safety. Theorists who examine this phenomenon (for example, Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1995; Caldeira, 1996; Mitchell, 2003; and Kohn, 2004) generally agree that local governments and other power players, notably private developers, have increasingly limited the public’s ability to socialize freely in public space. This school warns that the increasing control and surveillance of public space may limit its ability to perform the social and cultural functions identified by the other two groups of theorists.

All three of these lenses play out in the Chinese context. This thesis will argue that the urban design of hutong neighborhoods creates an environment that is conducive to social interactions and community building, in some part thanks to characteristics similar to those that Jane Jacobs observed in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. In regards to Lee’s view of public space as a staging ground for activities that reinforce cultural and collective identities, one could point to the long standing tradition of public group dances, music playing, singing, and story telling in parks and other public spaces in Beijing. In reference to the third group of theorists, the majority of new neighborhoods in China are gated, and often surveilled by CCTV or other monitoring tactics (this phenomenon will be described further in Chapter 2). Activities in parks, plazas, and other public spaces are increasingly monitored by the police.

Given that public spaces play an important role in the vibrant and healthy city, it is worrying that studies suggest Chinese people are spending less and less time in them. For instance, in a study in Tianjin, a city 140 kilometers from Beijing,
80% of randomly sampled active elderly people remained at home inside during a holiday. Another study found that 82% of children in the six largest Chinese cities spent after-school time inside their own apartments or inside friends’ apartments, rather than outside in public areas.\textsuperscript{15}

This thesis takes as a premise that public life—life spent in public space and time spent on the streets and open spaces of a city—is vital to a vibrant, connected, and human city. Moreover, it assumes that, in the words of urbanist Jan Gehl, “the more time people spend outdoors, the more frequently they meet and the more they talk.”\textsuperscript{16}

Fieldwork for this thesis, including interviews with residents of \textit{hutong} and superblock neighborhoods, revealed that one of the major differences between Beijing’s neighborhood types is the strength of community ties and the amount of social interaction in public space. Community ties were much stronger in the \textit{hutong} environment, and residents praised this as one of the best features of their neighborhood. Superblock residents complained that they didn’t know their neighbors and wished that their neighborhood had a more connected community life. This research examines how the built environment impacts the amount of time that people spend socializing in public and identifies ways that urban design can help encourage public life in Chinese cities.

**STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS**

Now is the time for a new urban neighborhood model for Chinese cities. Fortunately, there is a strong contingent of power players in the Chinese government that understand that what is being built is flawed. Pilot projects are underway to test new neighborhood types—including models that are walkable, bikeable, transit-oriented, and with small blocks, in many ways more similar to the \textit{hutong} typology than to the modernist one.\textsuperscript{17} In this thesis I aim to contribute to the discussion about how Chinese cities should continue to grow and house an estimated 13 million new residents each year between now and 2030.\textsuperscript{18} I do so with a particular eye toward urban form that encourages public life.

Chapter 2 reviews a history of major urban form changes in Beijing’s history, particularly

\begin{align*}
\textsuperscript{15} & \text{Miao, Public Places in Asia Pacific Cities. Page 180.} \\
\textsuperscript{16} & \text{Gehl, Life Between Buildings. Page 13.} \\
\textsuperscript{17} & \text{Calthorpe, “Does China’s Urbanization Spell Doom or Salvation?”} \\
\textsuperscript{18} & \text{“Building the Dream.”} 
\end{align*}
in residential neighborhoods, with a focus on a changing relationship to public space and public life.

Chapter 3 describes the field study undertaken in Beijing in January 2015, including resident interviews and observations of public space use in a hutong and two superblock neighborhoods. The chapter discusses observation themes and a synopsis of interview responses.

Chapter 4 describes a set of conclusions related to how the built environment affects public life in Beijing neighborhoods, including its influence on residents' ability to form local community ties. The conclusions draw from the field study as well as a review of related literature and past studies.

Chapter 5 presents a series of design recommendations for neighborhoods in Chinese cities. These recommendations aim to learn from the successes of the hutong context while meeting the densities required in rapidly urbanizing contexts.
HISTORY OF BEIJING’S URBAN FORM
EARLY LAYOUT OF THE CITY (1272-1948)

Until the 1950s, most Beijingers lived in courtyard houses (siheyuan) in neighborhoods with narrow hutong lanes. Beijing’s earliest hutong neighborhoods were laid out as early as 1272 by Kublai Khan. For centuries, Beijing was a horizontal city with mostly single-story courtyard homes, occasionally punctuated by brightly colored taller temples and palaces.

As a housing form, the siheyuan dates back to the Han dynasty (200 B.C.-300 A.D.). In their traditional form, siheyuan were arranged on a north-south axis and usually contained four pavilion structures that surrounded a central courtyard, separated from the street by walls. The main pavilion faced south. Siheyuan traditionally had a wooden framework, gray brick walls, and tiled roofs. The courtyard acted as a flexible space that allowed for a variety of outdoor activities, greenery, storage, and accommodation for relatives and visitors. Foliage in the courtyards stretched over the siheyuan walls so that hutong lanes were all tree-lined, even though many of the lanes themselves were too narrow to support healthy tree growth on the street.

In the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the area within the old city walls of Beijing was divided into 29 blocks that measured 750 meters on each side. Within these larger block units, main north-south streets housed a majority of larger-scale commercial, religious, and political uses, whereas narrow, residential hutong lanes ran east to west, forming a sort of fishbone urban fabric. The hutong lanes were placed 80-100 meters apart. The hutongs themselves vary in width between 20-500 meters; the narrowest hutong is 60 cm wide, and the widest is 6 meters wide.1

SOCIALIST PLANNING ERA (1949-1977)

The first group of major changes in this historic form came when the Chinese communist party, led by Mao Zedong, established a socialist government in 1949. The new administration rejected many historical planning principles and saw the existing urban layout as a symbol of the old, feudal order. During this time, many historical monuments were destroyed, including the historic city walls, which were turned into the Second Ring Road highway. Other monuments, such as the Forbidden City, were spared and used

for propaganda purposes to celebrate the power of the state.

Three major changes in neighborhood form occurred during this period. First, a system of work units (danwei) was introduced as the new fundamental unit of city planning. The danwei system was strongly influenced by the microdistrict (microraion) typology of Soviet Russian planning. Under the new system, the government provided low-cost housing to all members of a work unit within one danwei, which were comprised of three- to seven-story concrete buildings arranged in barrack-like complexes next to job sites.

A central goal of this system was to promote socialist thought, particularly the ideal of equality: in general, employers and employees lived in the same compound, often in the same building and with identical unit sizes and layouts. Another objective was to control traffic congestion and create a city that was built at the scale of bikers and pedestrians, critical in the Chinese context in a time when bicycles and buses were the primary travel options. Therefore work locations and housing were often co-located within the compound, along with all daily necessities, including cafeterias, bathhouses, groceries, kindergartens, health clinics, and small parks. (The co-location of work and living spaces in the Chinese danwei was the main departure from the Russian model, which considered commutes of up to forty minutes on public transportation acceptable.) During this time, most new developments were built outside of the historic core—indeed, until 1987, over 80% of new housing was built in suburban areas of Beijing.

The second major change that the socialist planners oversaw was a new emphasis on industrial land uses. Again influenced by Soviet planning, the Party saw industrial development as the driving force of urban development, in contrast to the historical focus on commerce and administration. Chinese planners thus aimed to convert the primarily consumption-focused cities of the time into producer cities. Therefore the majority of public investment in Beijing during this time was directed toward industry, especially heavy industry, which began to create serious pollution issues. During this era, only 1-3% of investment on urban fixed-assets was directed toward civic infrastructure (in contrast, the UN

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2 Ma and Hanten, Urban Development in Modern China. Introduction.
recommends that 10% of fixed-asset investment be used for this purpose). Chinese cities, particularly the outer areas and edges, became more and more industrial as civic spending was redirected from infrastructure, housing, social services, and recreation.

Finally, under socialist planning the urban cores of Chinese cities were seen as the center of politics, so public investment in city centers was directed toward projects that symbolized the power of the state. During this era, the government developed large, public squares appropriate for political gatherings and enormous, monumental government buildings arranged along wide, intimidating boulevards. In Beijing, Tiananmen Square was built next to the Forbidden City, surrounded by new, massive political and cultural buildings, including the Hall of the People, the Museum of the Revolution, and the Museum of History. Under socialist planning, urban cores became low-density and civic, in contrast to the high-density, commercially based centers of many western cities of the time.

During the Socialist Era, the traditional courtyard housing stock began to deteriorate and become overcrowded. The Communist Party saw housing as a social right and a non-productive good, and there was little investment directed toward housing maintenance, particularly the siheyuan, which were viewed as a symbol of China’s feudal past. In the 1950s, the government subdivided the formerly single-family courtyard homes to house Beijing’s growing population. Courtyards were infilled during the redistribution and subdivision of private homes, which turned complexes that previously housed one family into homes for as many as ten families.

In 1957, private ownership of siheyuan was abolished, and many homes were converted to work unit housing. Without any one owner of a given siheyuan present, there was little incentive for residents to spend money on structural maintenance. The infilling of courtyards accelerated following the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, when many homeless families were put up in “temporary” shelters built in hutong courtyard spaces. Many families stayed, however, and the majority of the earthquake housing remains today. As time went on, open space in the courtyards became smaller and smaller as more informal housing structures were constructed, including self-built structures.

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6 Whyte and Parish, Urban Life in Contemporary China.
7 Zhang, "Informal Construction in Beijing’s Old Neighborhoods."
for cooking, bathing, and other functions to make up for a lack of living space in individual units.

This new housing typology—the infilled courtyard homes—became known as \textit{dazayuan}, or cluttered courtyard houses. In addition, as migrants entered the city for work opportunities, low-quality imitations of traditional \textit{siheyuan} proliferated throughout the city. Overcrowding became common; one scholar found that over time, informal additions increased the FAR in courtyards from 0.5 to 0.8.\footnote{Ibid. Page 8.} Another scholar estimated that some courtyard houses that once housed one extended family had been converted to shelter as many as 40 families.\footnote{Gaubatz, “Changing Beijing.” Page 86.} The deterioration of housing conditions and overcrowding that took place during the Socialist Era would set the stage for the massive redevelopment of hutong neighborhoods that began in the 1990s.

\textbf{REFORM ERA (1978-PRESENT)}

During the Reform Era (1978-present), urban China has seen unprecedented transformation and growth. This growth was in large part spurred by the inauguration of the pragmatic Deng Xiaoping in 1978 and the major shift in governance philosophy under his leadership. Under Deng, the Party began to focus less on issues of class struggle and equality and instead turned its eye to the issue of economic development and growth. Deng’s 1997 obituary in the \textit{New York Times} (“Deng Xiaoping: A Political Wizard Who Put China on the Capitalist Road”) noted: “Mr. Deng symbolized the Chinese aspiration to move beyond the ideological extremism that had marked the Maoist era and reclaim for the Chinese a long-denied prosperity.”\footnote{Tyler, “Deng Xiaoping.”}

During the Reform Era, major changes occurred in China: the country’s economy was opened up and integrated with the world economy, the state economy was liberated and major privatization occurred, migration controls were reduced, and the housing system was privatized. Since 1978 a huge housing boom has occurred in Chinese cities, in part spurred by the existing housing shortage that was caused by the almost complete lack of residential construction during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and the Great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976. Between 1979 and 1982, over 15 million square meters of housing was constructed.\footnote{Gaubatz, “Changing Beijing.” Page 87.} By 2000, Chinese cities had over 44 million square meters of residential floor area—a figure that had nearly quadrupled since
1985. In Beijing alone, between 1985 and 1997 over five million square meters of housing were built every year on the city outskirts.

In terms of changes in neighborhood design, the Reform Era has seen two important developments. First, the form of new housing has been very different from both the danwei and hutong that came before it. Under conditions of economic liberalization, an existing housing shortage, and massive urbanization, the development of large-scale, master-planned residential quarters exploded. The form of this development was usually tall towers in gated communities. In Beijing, much of this new housing stock was built on former agricultural land beyond the Third Ring Road, involving a massive relocation of people from the city center.

The second important trend in Beijing’s residential typologies is that central Beijing has experienced a large amount of redevelopment, primarily for commercial purposes, and since the 1990s a massive destruction of the hutong fabric has occurred. A campaign of road building and road widening further transformed the built environment of Beijing and other Chinese cities and has led to the destruction of more old buildings.

**Inner City Redevelopment**

The redevelopment of Beijing’s historical center has received plenty of attention both in China and internationally and has elicited concern about the destruction of the historic architecture, urban form, and tight-knit social fabric of hutong communities. The destruction of hundreds of thousands of hutong residences, mainly justified through the rhetoric of slum clearance and social betterment, has been pejoratively compared to the United States’ own history of urban renewal in the 1950s through 1970s. Between 1990 and 2002, at least 25 square kilometers of Beijing’s historic core was redeveloped, generally involving a conversion of the hutong typology to high rises. According to city officials, between 1991 and 2003, 500,000 households were displaced by redevelopment, mostly in the historic urban core (the area within the Second Ring Road where the ancient city walls once stood). Unofficial sources estimate that this number is much higher, and that as many as 700,000 people were relocated during this time, more than the population of Washington D.C.

The inner city redevelopment process began in earnest in the 1990s, when a set of government reforms, especially the liberation of the housing and land market from complete government control, made large-scale redevelopment possible and profitable for the first time. Previously, housing had been provided under a centrally planned public housing system. All land was managed by the state. Under a series of reforms, a market-oriented housing industry was built, and while the state still owns all urban land in China, in the 1990s private entities could for the first time acquire land use rights, often under a lease of 70 years. Thus in the 1990s it became possible for private developers to capture value from redeveloping central locations of Beijing, which were at the time predominantly in the form of single-story siheyuan residences along narrow hutong alleys. The real estate industry experienced an incredible boom: between 1990 and 1995, the number of real estate companies

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14 For example, see Heping (2002), Stone (2008), Meyer (2010), Weinmin’s (2012), and Kaiman (2014). The Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center, a grassroots NGO, works to preserve cultural heritage across China, with a focus on hutong neighborhoods in Beijing.
15 Zhang and Fang, “Is History Repeating Itself?”
19 For a review of the different land policy laws passed over the 80s and 90s, see Ding, “Land Policy Reform in China.”
A 2008 New York Times feature showing the extent of hutong demolition and redevelopment in the old city. Demolished hutongs are shown in orange and red.
in Beijing increased from 20 to over 600, or over 300%.\textsuperscript{20}

Selling land rights quickly became key to government revenues across China. In the 1990s, nearly 20% of Beijing’s municipal revenue was from land rights transfers, averaging $361 million each year.\textsuperscript{21} In 2013, municipal governments were in debt by over 10 trillion RMB (US$1.6 trillion), and 55% of municipal revenue came from land sales.\textsuperscript{22} Thus since the liberalization of the land market occurred, municipal governments across China have had a great incentive to sell profitable land to developers to pay their own bills.

Under these new conditions of a nascent real estate industry and a government incentive to sell valuable land to developers, the Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal (ODHR) program was born. Much of the redevelopment of hutong areas in the inner city occurred through ODHR, which was launched in 1990 and was the main vehicle that carried out urban renewal in the inner city. ODHR was created with the stated motive of improving the wellbeing of residents living in crowded and dilapidated conditions, as well as tapping into the city’s master plan which envisioned the central city as having a decreasing share of residential land use and an increasing share of office, commercial, tourist, and service land uses.\textsuperscript{23}

At first, ODHR schemes re-housed many residents on the sites of their former homes and sold market-rate housing and commercial developments in order to break even on the endeavor or perhaps gain a small profit. Later, most residents who were beneficiaries of ODHR’s urban renewal program were moved to inexpensive land in the distant suburbs while the valuable central city land was converted to luxury housing or high-value commercial developments (the law stated that as long as residents were resettled somewhere, developers could do whatever they wanted with the land.\textsuperscript{24}

A government planner noted in 1997, “Without spending any of its own revenues, the municipal government can push renewal forward simply by making land available for development. However, in order to profit from the sale of centrally located commodity housing, developers must relocate as many existing residents as possible to cheaper suburban land. As such land grows increasingly scarce, residents must move farther and farther away.”\textsuperscript{25}

Resident satisfaction following relocation was mixed at best; in one study, 76% relocated households said that in their new homes “service and management were not as good as in the Old City”; 73% said that their costs of living had increased because they were now located far from work; and 50% of families said that the most notable “impact of relocation” was that “life has become boring.”\textsuperscript{26}

In 2001, the city reformed the ODHR program’s compensation policy. Previously, evicted

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{20} Meyer, The Last Days of Old Beijing. Chapter 4.
\bibitem{21} Ibid.
\bibitem{22} Bloomberg News, “China’s Soviet-Style Suburbia Heralds Environmental Pain.”; Bosker, “Why Haven’t China’s Cities Learned from America’s Mistakes?”
\bibitem{23} Lü, “Beijing’s Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal.” Pages 60-61.
\bibitem{24} Meyer, The Last Days of Old Beijing. Chapter 4.
\bibitem{25} Lü, “Beijing’s Old and Dilapidated Housing Renewal.” Page 61.
\bibitem{26} Goldman, “From Hutong to Hi-Rise.” Page 22.
\end{thebibliography}
residents were assigned to new apartments. Starting in 2001, residents were paid 8,020 RMB (around US$1,000) for each square meter of living space in their homes. While residents could use the reimbursement as they wished, in nearly all cases the compensation was not enough to purchase or rent an apartment within the Second Ring Road, or even anywhere that could be considered central Beijing: in 2007, apartment prices within the Fourth Ring Road averaged 13,000 RMB (US$1700) per square meter, but the 2001 compensation rate remained unchanged.27

Accompanying this large-scale redevelopment was a systematic approach to road widening and road planning which had an enormous effect on the urban fabric of both old and new areas of the city. The highest infrastructural priority in the master plan that governed Beijing’s growth in the 1990s was to “enlarge the road area as well as increase the road network density to combat congestion.” In the old city, the plan proposed to increase the amount of roads that were six meters wide or wider—then just 10% of the roads in the old city—by 160%. To achieve this, existing streets would be widened and new streets would be added.28 Today, many roads in Chinese cities are enormously oversized, as planning guidelines specify that an eight-lane or wider arterial road must be placed every kilometer and a main urban road must be placed every 500 meters.29 In Beijing, the road widening campaign played a large role in the destruction of many hutong neighborhoods.

The Superblock Form of New Developments

During the Reform Era, new developments in Chinese cities have mainly taken the form of huge, master-planned superblocks. In the new Chinese superblocks, block lengths usually range between 400 and 800 meters; in comparison, Tokyo’s block lengths are 50 meters long on average, and Paris, London, and Manhattan’s are 120 meters on average. The contrast with the traditional Chinese housing form is stark. Besides the different scale of the blocks, the new developments generally come in the form of high rises. While historical Chinese blocks have a building coverage ratio of 50-65%, the superblock ratio falls between 15% and 25%. This typology makes it difficult to have program diversity. As a World Bank report pointed out, “in an area

of less than four Chinese superblocks, the city of Turin houses hundreds of buildings, many plazas and monuments, 40 kilometers of facades along streets, and 15 kilometers of facades along internal courtyards."30

Why are most new Chinese neighborhoods built in such a large scale? For one thing, building cookie-cutter superblocks within mega-scale communities is the simplest and fastest way to bring real estate assets to the market in the face of China’s unprecedentedly rapid urban development.31 Sources indicate that many planners believe that building in this way is advantageous for creating economies of scales.32 Developers would agree, as they are usually required to include public amenities and road improvements in the new neighborhoods, and can do so in a cheaper and more efficient way when building mega communities.33 From a developer’s standpoint, massive real estate development is incredibly lucrative, and increasingly so: In 2007, twelve of the top forty richest people in China were real estate moguls. The combined net worth of the top forty increased from US$38 billion in 2006 to US$120 billion in 2007.34

A Major Shift in Planning Philosophy: Increased Commuting in China

The new neighborhoods stand in huge contrast to both the danwei system of housing and the traditional hutong neighborhoods. First, Reform Era development trends have been accompanied by a new lifestyle of commuting that was previously very uncommon in urban China. In the hutong and danwei systems, residents usually lived within walking distance of their places of work. Today, while most employers still provide housing or housing subsidies, direct proximity of residence and workplace is no longer expected. Residents now commute, which represents a fundamental change in planning philosophy in China.

It is also interesting to note that under the danwei system, residential mobility was extremely uncommon in China. Because there was a direct connection between place of employment and place of residence and housing was generally provided by work units, it was extremely difficult for individuals to relocate, even within a city. In the 1960s and 70s, 1% of Chinese urban families moved residences each year. The average stay in an apartment was 18 years.35

The transition from the danwei and hutong systems to the new superblocks also created a change in lifestyle even outside of the workday. Whereas on a hutong lane and in a danwei complex, all daily needs and errands were

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30 Ibid. Page 141.
31 Calthorpe, “Does China’s Urbanization Spell Doom or Salvation?”
33 Abramson, “Haussmann and Le Corbusier in China.”
34 Stone, “Farewell to the Hutongs.” Page 44.
35 Whyte and Parish, Urban Life in Contemporary China.
provided for within walking distance, in the new superblock neighborhoods this has been less common, although the new large-scale communities do generally have a limited amount of amenities within their gates, such as green space, playgrounds, community centers, and (less commonly) shops. Thus residents now commute for both work and errands.

**Gating and Permeability**

Special consideration should be taken in regards to the gating of neighborhoods, a practice that increased rapidly during the Reform Era, when almost all of the new housing stock came in the form of gated communities. *Danwei* units were often walled, but were permeable with multiple entrances. Furthermore, starting in the 1980s, a trend began to take down the walls in *danwei* communities or at least increase the number of entrances substantially. So although gating was not a new concept—indeed, gating has existed in one form or another throughout much of China’s history—during the Reform Era, the increase in the gating of old neighborhoods and building new neighborhoods that are impermeable to the outside street grid has been a change of course.

Readers familiar with the phenomenon of gated communities in the United States should note that there are several major differences between Chinese gated communities and their American counterparts. First, Chinese gated communities are much larger than American ones, and 5-10 times more dense: American gated neighborhoods are generally single-family communities with 12-15 families per hectare, while Chinese gated neighborhoods are usually high- or mid-rise and have 120-180 families per hectare, or sometimes even more in the central city communities. Chinese gated neighborhoods generally cover 12-20 plus hectares and house 2,000-3,000 families.

Whereas gated neighborhoods in the United States are primarily for rich or middle class families, gated communities have become the housing form for the majority of Chinese families, regardless of income level. Chinese gated communities are often mixed income, especially those that were built before the Reform Era, when socialist planners put work unit employees together in same building in identical units, regardless of their position in the workplace hierarchy.

The purpose of gated communities is also generally not the same in the two countries. Scholars have argued that the general purpose of gated communities in the United States is “to prevent outsiders from using privatized public amenities, to ensure prestige, or to increase protection.” On the other hand, Miao (2003) argues that in China the primary reason for gating is “always security.” Although crime rates in Chinese cities remain low by Western standards, crime has increased markedly during the Reform Era. Perception and fear of crime has grown with it, particularly among populations that have negative and fearful attitudes toward migrant workers. From the supply side, the government is very concerned with maintaining social stability in Chinese cities, and gating is seen as an easy way to control crime and thus has been encouraged on a large scale: in September 2001, three Beijing city government bureaus issued a joint order “requiring that all residential quarters fit to be gated should be so.” On the demand side, some scholars have argued that residents in the U.S. choose to live in gated communities because it gives them some form of control over their physical environment: “Gates are reassuring in the face of anxiety levels

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37 Zhang and Chai, “Un-Gated and Integrated Work Unit Communities in Post-Socialist Urban China.”
38 Huang, “Collectivism, Political Control, and Gating in Chinese Cities.”
42 Miao, “Deserted Streets in a Jammed Town.”
Model of a typical new gated superblock development (Miao 48).
heightened by economic, demographic, and social change. They shield us from a world we feel vulnerable.”43 If this is true, then Chinese citizens should have even more reason to be attracted to gated communities than their American counterparts, given the enormous demographic, political, social, and environmental changes that have occurred in Chinese cities since 1978.44

Miao (2003) offers several critiques of the widespread gating in modern Chinese development. First, although the top rationale for gating in China is to increase security, there are conflicting reports as to if the practice actually makes neighborhoods safer, and many of the reports that indicate that gating does reduce crime rates were produced by people with vested interests in the continued manifestation of the practice. Second, although some gated neighborhoods are mixed income, many are not. Some theorists have hypothesized that decreased interaction with other economic groups and may actually result in increased fear in wealthy populations: having limited everyday contact with members of other economic classes makes it easier for wealthy classes to demonize the “other.”45 Third, gating harms public space sharing. Fourth, gating prevents renqi, a traditional Chinese concept that describes the energy that is found in areas with bustling street life. The damaging effect that gating has on street life and community interaction and more information on the concept of renqi will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

The Loss of Public Life
A final note on the new superblock neighborhoods, which is central to the main focus of this thesis, is the following: in general, the superblocks lack the vibrant street life that is so characteristic of Beijing’s hutong alleys and other traditional neighborhoods throughout China. In “Deserted Streets in a Jammed Town: The Gated Community in Chinese Cities and Its Solution,” urban design scholar Pu Miao states:

These days, if a visitor ventures into one of the new residential areas outside Shanghai’s Inner Ring Road, he or she will hardly forget the eerie feeling present in the urban scene as compared with the bustling streets of the central city…you see few souls on most of these sidewalks! The entire urban space looks like a giant stage set without actors.46

Studies have also indicated that community ties in superblock neighborhoods are weaker than in traditional neighborhoods: anthropologist Qingqing Yang, who lived in a hutong neighborhood and a superblock community and explored residents’ experiences of each living situation, recounts:

The first impression I got when I entered the high-rise apartment compound was of independence. All buildings are independent from one another. All households are independent from one another. It is like a box of uncooked rice, even though they are in the same container; they have no interaction with each other…While the relationship among dwellers in the Hutong is more like a box of rice porridge, independent but with some communal stage which makes them stick to each other.47

The next chapter recounts the field study undertaken in a hutong and two superblock neighborhoods in Beijing in January 2015. Through observations and interviews, I sought to understand what accounts for the discrepancies in street life and community ties in traditional and modern neighborhoods, with an eye to lessons that can be drawn for built environment practitioners.

43 Blakely and Snyder, Fortress America.
44 Miao, “Deserted Streets in a Jammed Town.”
NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN AND PUBLIC LIFE IN BEIJING
METHODS

The field study investigated the impact of urban design on public life and community interaction in traditional and contemporary neighborhoods in Beijing. The specific research questions were:

- How do residents experience and use public space in the traditional hutong and the contemporary neighborhood typologies, and how does this affect quality of life?
- What is the relationship between urban design, public life, and community interaction in the different neighborhood typologies?
- Can contemporary neighborhoods be designed in ways that encourage public life, learning from the urban form of the hutong?
- Can existing contemporary neighborhoods be adapted in order to encourage public life?

I used multiple methods to investigate these questions, including semi-structured interviews, structured observations, and case study research. To develop data for the thesis, I observed three neighborhoods in Beijing over a two-week period. Each is prototypical of three different urban form typologies: a traditional hutong alley neighborhood, a slab-type enclave development, and a tower-in-the-park superblock development.

In selecting the case neighborhoods, I looked for areas that had similar socioeconomic characteristics and were located relatively close to one another. By selecting neighborhoods that were similar in most respects except for urban form, I hoped to isolate the effect of built form on street life and community interaction. In the end, the tower-in-the-park case neighborhood was quite far from the central city, because it proved very difficult to identify a more central neighborhood of that type that had been built as affordable housing. Based on consultation with local academics, sources on relocation areas (including a University of Hong Kong thesis on relocation neighborhoods), and several scoping field visits, I chose Dongsi as the hutong neighborhood, Songjiazhuang as the slab enclave neighborhood, and Tiantongyuan East as the tower-in-the-park neighborhood. All three communities are located along Line 5 of the Beijing subway.

1 Zhang, “Refactoring Neighborhood.”
I conducted 8-10 semi-structured interviews in each neighborhood with the help of Sihui Zhang, a PhD candidate studying Architecture at Tsinghua University. Interviews were used to understand residents’ general perspectives on livability in their neighborhoods, how they socialized, and how they used public space. Interview questions were open-ended and asked about what informants liked and did not like about their neighborhoods, if they knew their neighbors well, where they socialized, what activities they did outside and inside, what forms of transportation they took to do errands, etcetera. See Chapter 6: Appendices for a full list of interview questions.

In the superblock developments, we aimed to speak with residents who had formerly lived in h**utong** neighborhoods and could speak to the differences in each environment. We approached residents on the street and tried to get a representative mix of ages and genders using an availability sampling method. However, given the fact that some of the interviews were carried out during weekdays, a majority of informants were elderly retired people. We also visited the local community offices in Donsi and Tiantongyuan to gather information on the development and history of each neighborhood and identify possible contacts. The Songjiazhuang community office was closed on both site visits.

In addition to interviews, I conducted structured observations of each neighborhood. I observed block lengths, widths of street elements, setbacks, building heights and densities, frontage types and widths, demarcation of public and private space, street types (e.g. commercial versus residential), and spatial adaptations. I also observed human activities, including what activities occurred with what frequency in different public spaces as well as circulation patterns. Finally, I conducted transportation and pedestrian counts in each neighborhood within a two-minute period.

The fact that the field study was carried out in January was a significant limitation to observing street activities. I am familiar with the hutong context, and I know from past experience that street life and public social interactions are much more active in warmer months. Because I am less familiar with the superblocks that I studied, I do not have as good of a sense of the differences between warm and cold weather street life.
A resident tells us about life in her courtyard home.
DONGSI:
TRADITIONAL HUTONG

Dongsi is a traditional hutong neighborhood in Dongcheng District within the original boundaries of the ancient city of Beijing. The area has existed since the 1300s and is known as one of the best surviving examples of the original checkerboard layout of Dadu, the capital city that Kublai Khan created where Beijing now stands. In 1999, Dongsi was designated as one of Beijing’s 25 “protection areas” due to its historical and cultural value.

The area studied in this thesis, which lies between Dongsi Beidajie, Chaoyangmen Beixiaojie, and Dongsi Third and Eighth Alleys, covers an area of 48 hectares and is home to over 6,681 households and over 18,006 people. I focused my interviews around Dongsi Fourth Alley because it is a prototypical hutong with a mixture of commercial and residential strips.

Neighborhood Layout and Street Hierarchy

Dongsi has a distinct hierarchy of streets and public spaces. The largest streets are those that mark the edges of the Dongsi hutong district. Dongsi Beidajie, or Dongsi North Avenue, is the main such street that we explored. These main streets are the most car-oriented: Dongsi Beidajie has two traffic lanes and two parking lanes along most of its length. But it is also pedestrian and bike-oriented, with four meter-wide bike lanes that are usually separated from the street by a raised sidewalk covered in trees, bicycle parking, utilities, bus stops, or other physical objects (these buffer zones are generally around two meters wide). Sidewalks are generally wide (3.5 meters), and where they are not the bike lane becomes a dual bike-pedestrian zone. Dongsi Beidajie is a mostly commercial street that bustles with pedestrian activity alongside a mix of local

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4 200 Figure. Kitsuka, “Survey on Development and Management System of Public Toilets in Beijing.” Page 317.
Population: 18,006
Population Density: 375/hectare
then walk along a quiet residential section before hitting another cluster of small shops.

There are also narrower north-south *hutong* alleys that are usually purely residential. These see even less car traffic and are often half the width or less of the main east-west *hutong*. They sometimes meander or twist whereas the east-west alleys generally follow a strict grid.

Finally, there are the courtyard spaces, or *yuan* in Chinese, which once served as private outdoor space for one extended family living in the pavilions. Today, each *siheyuan* (courtyard complexes) usually house multiple families who share the inner courtyard space. The highly embellished courtyard entrances are generally left open and unlocked to the outside during the day. Residents can collectively decide if they want to lock the doors after a certain hour.

**Street Activities**

There is a diversity of activities on the street in Dongsi, even in the cold Beijing winter (during the field study, the temperature hovered between 30-40 F). Local residents sit on plastic chairs on the alley playing chess, smoking cigarettes and chatting, and sipping yogurt drinks next to outdoor stalls. Some areas of the *hutong* have individuals vending goods and services from carts or blankets set out on the lane, such as a cart selling small household pets, including a wide variety of fish and birds, and a bike repairman waiting for customers while chatting with friends on his break. Meanwhile, others hang laundry between the trees that line each *hutong*, string up fish or spices to dry in the sun, and push baby carriages down the alleys. Despite the fact that the *hutong* has a vibrant street life, the lanes are quiet due to a lack of car traffic.

**Frontages and Shopping**

The *hutong*’s narrow storefronts, which vary from about 75 centimeters to 3.8 meters wide, house a diversity of local services including salons, tailors, dry cleaners, foot massage parlors, real estate offices, home supplies shops, tea shops, small vegetable shops, convenience stores, billiards bars, police stations, sewing shops, and medical clinics. There are also a wide variety of small eating establishments, including traditional Beijing snack shops, a nut vendor, noodle shops, barbeque stalls, and small restaurants, with food from various provinces around China including Sichuan, Yunnan, and Xinjiang. Restaurants and food shops are concentrated around the edges of the *hutongs*, closest to the main streets of Dongsi Beidajie and Chaoyangmen Nei, and local services are interspersed throughout the *hutong*’s quieter, more residential sections.
Photographs from top to bottom: Dongsi Beidajie, a very successful example of a major vehicular circulation street that also provides a comfortable experience for pedestrians and cyclists; Dongsi Fourth Lane, a typical east-west major hutong street with a mix of residences and shops; a narrow residential hutong lane.
In general, storefronts are very open and permeable to the hutong. Grocers leave the front doors of their shops wide open and display some of their goods outside. Salons have full glass facades giving pedestrians a clear view inside. Restaurants and snack shops have window service so that pedestrians can grab food on-the-go without exiting the lane. Convenience stores have outdoor tables stocked with Beijing’s popular yogurt snack, where customers can pay 7 RMB to take their ceramic yogurt container to go, or only 2.5 RMB to stay and linger while drinking the treat, leaving the cup behind for the vendor to clean and reuse. Because of the openness of storefronts, buying is an activity that often happens in public space on the edges of the hutong alleys. On the other hand, the edges of the residential sections of the street are very closed (except for the decorative entranceways), and frontages are mostly grey brick walls with some small high windows that let light into the courtyard complexes.
Transportation

The hutongs contain a diversity of transportation modes, from walking and biking to skateboards, motorcycles, electric bikes, and once in a while, a car slowly making its way down the narrow alleys. Two-minute transportation counts revealed a 55% pedestrian and 45% bicycle ratio along the hutong and 51% pedestrians, 30% motor vehicles, and 19% bikes on Dongsi Beidajie.

Services and deliveries are often carried out on bicycles, e-bikes, bicycle-carts, or motorized carts, including the delivery of wares bought from large websites such as Tao Bao, the Amazon.com of China. In Mandarin, yaohe is a term used for the local services that are carried out by mobile hawkers who travel down the lane shouting out their services as they go. Common yaohe services in Dongsi include trash recycling, repair work, and the sales and delivery of newspapers, water, heating oil, coal, foodstuffs, and commercial goods. If hutong residents hear something that they need, they can simply step outside onto the lane and ask the vendor to stop.

Interviews

It was easy to find interview subjects as plenty of people were on foot, hanging out on the street, or working in local shops. Most informants were very happy living in Dongsi and frequently praised their close relationship with their neighbors, the ability to live on the first floor and connect with diqi (being connected to the earth’s energy, a concept that is believed to be healthy in traditional Chinese medicine), and the central and convenient location of the neighborhood.

Some residents also expressed pride about the historic nature of the neighborhood and the important people who had once lived there throughout Dongsi’s 700 years of history. Several also explained that the names of many of the alleys related to the original inhabitants in times when Beijing’s streets were commonly segregated according to occupation. One informant stressed the importance of conservation:

The streets in the hutong represent an important cultural characteristic of Beijing. We need to protect this traditional culture, first by conserving the old “stuff”—meaning the urban pattern of the hutongs. If we build too many high buildings, the beauty of this street will be lost. We also need to make sure that the old people can stay here. If all the residents moved out and all houses in the hutong were filled with outsiders, the special culture of this street would be lost too.

Tied to this interest in local history was an appreciation for hutong architecture and aesthetics. Several informants talked about the architectural details in many of the courtyard entrances and the building palette of gray, red, yellow, and green. Some residents lamented that many old buildings were in a state of disrepair and had not been renovated in many years.
CHAPTER 3 | FIELD STUDY

by subway. There was no consensus on residents’ favorite streets but many strong opinions, which varied on personal preference and how much individuals valued commercial buzz, quiet, tree-lined streets, or other qualities that vary across the hutong. The imageability of the hutong was strong; it was easy for residents to recount which streets they preferred and why, thanks to the distinct character of each lane.

One point of consensus appears to be that residents do not like walking on alleys that have too many parked cars and moving car traffic. One informant went as far as to suggest that hutongs should be closed to cars and trucks. The amount of cars on a given hutong depends on the street width; in alleys with enough space, cars park on both sides of the street, which interferes with storefront functions and room for pedestrian street life. Similarly, hutong that are wide enough for a car to comfortably drive through sees more car traffic, as in Dongsi Sixth Lane, the widest hutong in Dongsi, which residents complained is constantly jammed with cars and difficult to traverse as a result.

Strength of Community Ties

The strength of community ties and relationships was the most frequently cited reason that residents like living in Dongsi. All residents that we spoke with had some degree of friendship with their neighbors. Informants told us that they love that they can count on their neighbors for a helping hand, that they always have friends nearby, and that they know that they can always share a meal with their neighbors. One informant noted:

The neighbors here are very familiar with me and if I have some troubles, some of them will come to help me. Most people living in tower buildings are not familiar with their neighbors. In that type of place, if I have some troubles, I wouldn’t be able to find anyone to help me and I’d have to call my sons.

Social intimacy seemed to be related to the interesting and unique hierarchy of public, private, and semi-private spaces that exists in the hutongs. The strongest level of community is within each individual courtyard area. Several people told us that these neighbors are the ones that they are closest with. Traditionally, courtyards served as private outdoor spaces for one family, but now that several or more families share most siheyuan complexes, courtyards have become semi-private spaces that are open and generally left unlocked to the outside street. At the same time they are physically enclosed by the pavilion walls and used for personal purposes such as gardening, game playing, relaxing, and storage (6/8 informants said that they store things outside their homes).
"WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?"

"Of course, I love it here! I think the hutong contains rich traditional Beijing culture. Look at how beautiful the green bricks, gray tiles, and the entrance gates are."

"I love living here. If one day I move into towers, I don't think I could get used to that kind of life. Living in the hutong is very convenient and I like not having to go up stairs. The neighbors here are very familiar with me and if I have some troubles, some of them will come to help me. Most people living in tower buildings are not familiar with their neighbors. If there is something in that type of place, if I have some troubles, I wouldn't be able to find anyone to help me and I'd have to call my sons for that."

"I like living here because the hutong has a strong atmosphere of daily life. It has great renqi."

"I like living here, because we're located in the center of Beijing and we have very convenient transportation."

"I like living in this neighborhood. I've been living in this hutong since childhood, and so I have deep feelings towards the place."

"I like living here. We have made a number of upgrades: we bought a heater, so we're never cold, and we can use the public bathroom if we are out and about or this private bathroom that we added in our home. Also, living in a single-story house is great because we can put both feet on the ground and connect with diqi. It's really convenient here—it's near shopping, hospitals, and parks such as Jingshan Park and Beihai Park and the transportation is very convenient."

"I think the hutong is very special for me. I like the tight-knit community here. I never feel like I have to lock the door to my courtyard, and I always feel that I can stop by for dinner in any of my neighbors' homes."
Some people also store things or conduct private activities in the hutong alleyways outside their own courtyards. Thus even the main hutong alleyways, which may technically be classified as “public” realm, are also used for private purposes much in the way that the courtyards are, although to a lesser extent. Besides storage, other uses in the alleyway include laundry hanging, spice storage, food drying, gardening, and chess playing.

Residents spoke about the presence of a strong neighborhood community group, led mostly by elderly and retired people. The group helps contribute to the tight-knit nature of the neighborhood by organizing activities such as singing, dancing, handicraft making, and a meal delivery program for seniors. There are also local “safety committees” in the hutong comprised of volunteers who sit together on the side of the lane and watch over the hutong.

Neighbors also self-organized in informal groups to address local issues. One informant told us about how the residents of Dongsi Second Lane banded together to resolve their parking problem recently.

Recently our community started an initiative on Second Lane to solve the parking problem and to make this street more tidy. There is not enough parking space for everyone because a
Division between New and Old Beijingers

Although most informants said that they loved living in the hutong and feel a strong sense of community there, many people also referenced a division between “old Beijingers” and “new Beijingers.” Several “old Beijingers” alluded to the fact that they liked the hutongs better before the influx of newcomers, both because courtyard infilling has caused crowding and because they feel that newcomers don’t integrate very well:

“In the 60s and 70s, there was almost no transient population in this neighborhood. But now there are too many people doing business and working in Beijing... I know all the old residents who have lived here for many years but I don’t know many of the new tenants, who move often for job hopping or other reasons.”

“I think everything in the hutong is good, but some people say the streets in the hutong are not clean. I think this is the fault of the outsiders in the hutong. Our native Beijing people are full of quality... I know all the old neighbors but I don’t know many of the new tenants.”

In general, longtime Beijingers seemed to like the neighborhood more and have stronger community ties than the newcomers. Longtime residents tended to see the hutong conditions in an optimistic light, acknowledging that although there are issues such as crowding, lack of personal bathrooms, or litter, living conditions have improved over time. New Beijingers seemed more bothered by these problems, perhaps because they are not used to urban life or because they live in lower quality, self-built infill housing.

Crowding and Small Living Spaces

One of the newcomers to the neighborhood, who has lived in Dongsi for four years, was very candid about what she doesn’t like about the neighborhood. She was one of the few residents who reported living in formerly self-built infill housing and the only informant who does not like living in Dongsi:

“I don’t like living here. I have no choice. Most houses in this neighborhood have suffered more than 100 years of wear and tear and are very old and poor. There is only a clapboard separating my room and my neighbors’ room, which does a bad job of sound absorption. Because of that there is no privacy in my room... I have seen one family with five people living in a nine square meter room. They divided their one-floor house into three stories, just like bunks on the train. Specifically, the old grandparents live on the first floor, the little child lives on the third floor, and the middle-aged couple lives on the second floor.

Crowding, and particularly courtyard infilling, came up frequently as an issue among both new and old Beijingers.
SONGJIAZHUANG: SLAB ENCLAVE

Several areas of the Songjiazhuang neighborhood, located near the south Third Ring Road, were developed as an affordable housing project in 2007. Since then, the neighborhood has absorbed a large number of *hutong* residents who were displaced by inner city redevelopment. Songjiazhuang has developed quickly in recent years and has emerged as a new southern transportation hub (Songjiazhuang Station lies at the intersection of subway lines 5 and 10, as well as the Yizhuang line which departs from Songjiazhuang toward Beijing’s southern suburbs).

We focused our study on the Zhengxin Yuan housing complex, where we had heard many displaced *hutong* residents now lived. According to the management office of the development, 4,000 people live in Zhengxin Yuan. The most expensive apartment in the complex is 3,860 RMB per square meter.

As soon as we disembarked from the Songjiazhuang subway stop, we were confronted by walls. This would be a major theme of the visit. Outside the metro, a large group of informal transport operators waited for customers, a common sight in areas where transport lines do not serve all needed routes. Tall towers arranged in superblocks dominated the landscape, and gates and walls were everywhere.

On a map, the Zhengxin Yuan complex appears to be a mere 350 meters from the subway. The most direct route winds through the first residential complex next to the subway. When we tried to walk this way, we found that the community was gated and guarded. At the end of the road, we reached a concrete wall and realized although we could see the towers of Zhengxin Yuan right ahead, there was no way to enter the complex without going around the adjacent gated neighborhoods. We turned back and proceeded past several more gated communities. Because of
Population: 4,000
Population Density: 563/hectare
The walk from the metro station to Zhengxin Yuan complex takes the pedestrian past a series of gated neighborhoods. Gates are marked here in black.

The lack of street connectivity into the complex, the walk from the subway is in fact 975 meters.

The area outside Zhengxin Yuan does not present a pleasant walking environment. Although there are wide sidewalks on both sides of the street leading north from the subway, they are covered with legally and illegally parked cars. The cars act as a barrier between the sidewalk and commercial shops, which are large-scale storefronts set back far from the street. Most of the route from the subway to Zhengxin Yuan runs along old concrete walls or gates. This demonstrates the energy efficiency of gated communities—both cars and pedestrians must consistently circle to enter or exit the community.

**Neighborhood Layout and Street Hierarchy**

There are two entrances to Zhengxin Yuan: one for cars, which has no sidewalks and a guarded drop gate, and one for pedestrians, a dark alley cutting a hole through the first story of the slab building. Entering as a pedestrian is daunting.

The complex’s 11-20 story, slab-type buildings are arranged in rows along wide swaths of parking, pedestrian paths, and green spaces. Streets are 5-12 meters wide. Many sidewalks are 3 meters wide, but often have cars parking on them. Most of the public spaces are for show only: surrounded by dense shrubs, they are inaccessible and not usable for any activity. A few open spaces are not completely walled off, but they lack sitting areas.

**Frontages and Shopping**

The development contains few commercial uses. Stores wrap the base of several buildings (see
map, above). These include a real estate office, furniture store, barber, women's hair salon, small convenience store, print shop, small restaurant, bank, kindergarten, and hair salon. Commerce within the complex seemed quite unsuccessful: besides at the barber, a small restaurant by the gate, and the convenience store, we didn't see any customers while we were there. There are many old vacant storefronts, including a shuttered fruit shop, restaurant, cigarette and alcohol store, and several more whose previous uses could not be identified. We hypothesized that the lack of permeability in the gated neighborhood had reduced the market to residents only. The internal population is clearly insufficient to sustain these businesses, especially when people don't seem to spend very much time outside within the gates.

Most neighborhood services are located outside the entrance to Zhengxin Yuan and on adjacent streets. Outside the north gate, there is a commercial strip with a large parking lot setting it off from the street. Storefronts are 3.5-6.5 meters wide, wider than in the hutong (which generally have 1-1.5 meter wide storefronts, with a maximum width of 3.8 meters) and include a supermarket, bank, cellular provider, hair salon, two chain real estate offices, a dentist, and a few smaller restaurants.

**Street Activities**

Inside the complex it is distinctly quieter than outside, and there were barely any pedestrians on both of our visits, including on the weekend. Most of the few people that we saw in public areas were walking on their way somewhere or were elderly people or parents strolling with strollers and small children. The other main activity was dog walking, generally a solo activity. Unlike in Dongsi, we saw no one hanging laundry, growing plants, drying spices, or storing anything outside. The property manager told us that these activities are strictly prohibited in public space. Any objects stored in public or other spatial modifications would be removed.

Informal vendors are also prohibited from the complex. However, right outside the entrance
to Zhengxin Yuan, informal vendors sell fruit, dried goods and nuts, fresh barbeque, and toys out of carts or on pieces of plastic laid down on the sidewalk.

**Interviews**

It was difficult to find interview subjects because the few pedestrians that we saw were often in a hurry on their way somewhere. The majority of our informants were elderly people who were retired and often taking care of their grandchildren. We tried to find subjects who used to live in *hutongs* so that they could compare between the two neighborhood types (7/8 of our informants fulfilled this criteria).

Most interviews took place on a strip of road in the center of the complex. This was a major activity site and walking route in the complex. We occasionally saw people come here to wait, talk on their cellphones, or walk with baby carriages. One informant told us, “There are no good streets to walk around in this complex, but I walk here because there is sunshine.” Another later said, “I don’t have many friends here, but when I do spend time with my neighbors we usually spend time over here in the sun.” Indeed, this small strip of pavement is one of the few places in the community that catches sunlight during winter. Microclimatic conditions came up often as a determinant of spending time outside or not—the property manager said that some people play cards in an underground bomb shelter because it is less windy there than in the wide open spaces between the slab buildings.

Many informants had been displaced during the widespread redevelopment that occurred in preparation for the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics and have lived in Songjiazhuang since the project first opened in 2007. People were generally not as interested in chatting as *hutong* residents had been, and they had less strong opinions about their neighborhood, except for a few very vocal residents who preferred their former *hutong* environment and negatively described their lives in Songjiazhuang.

**“WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD?”**

“*Our apartment is 100 square meters. It is much bigger than our *hutong* house. Plus, tower apartments have more modern living facilities.*”

“I don’t like this neighborhood at all. There is no space for public activity; people have to play cards by the road. There are not many trees here. I miss my life in the *hutong*, even though it’s not equipped with modern amenities.*”

“*Hutong* life and tower life have many differences. I can’t evaluate which is better. For me, they are just different. But I think my living standards have increased in this neighborhood, because our new house is quieter and cleaner than in the *hutong*… overall I think it’s good, we have a convenient commercial facility and it’s close to the supermarket and subway. Most of all, our apartment value has increased ten times than the price we paid for it.”

“I like that this neighborhood is close to the vegetable market and supermarket.”

“It’s just so-so. I think my life here is not as good as my life in *hutong.*”

“I don’t care about the neighborhood. I am not from Beijing and I just want to make some money here.”

“It’s just okay.”
A dog walker in Songjiazhuang's Zhengxin Yuan Complex.
When we asked what people liked about living in Songjiazhuang, responses varied. Several people spoke about the improved living circumstances in Songjiazhuang as compared to the *hutong*, particularly in reference to larger apartment sizes and private bathrooms. Several people appreciated that the neighborhood is close to a grocery shop and the subway station. Some struggled to come up with things that they like in particular about the neighborhood or seemed ambivalent, saying things like, “it’s not bad,” or “I don’t really care about my neighborhood situation.” Several people were unwilling to answer the question “what do you like” and instead launched into what they didn’t like about living in Songjiazhuang, which generally had to do with unfavorable comparisons to the *hutong*. (It should be noted that we usually did not prompt this comparison.)

Songjiazhuang residents also didn’t have as strong opinions as Dongsì residents about their favorite streets or areas of the neighborhood. There were a few opinions raised—for instance, one resident noted that she likes one street because it has an entrance to the east where she can see outside of the community; another said that she likes the path that is often in sunshine. But most (6/8) said that they don’t have a favorite or least favorite street or area of the neighborhood.

Many expressed extreme distaste for the streets outside of the compound, which they perceive as dirty, chaotic, traffic congested, and difficult to walk on, and said that they prefer the interior roads because they are more peaceful.

Many informants were retired. Most of those who are not take the bus or public transportation to work. Drivers were the minority. Two-minute transportation counts within the complex yielded a ratio of roughly 90% pedestrians and 10% bikers (a total of 10 people passed in two minutes). We rarely saw cars driving in the complex, although there were many parked cars. On the street outside the north gate, 50% pedestrians, 21% bikers, and 29% cars were observed.

When asked what they didn’t like about living in Songjiazhuang, 6/8 of informants said that the lack of community interaction bothers them. This seems like a particularly significant number, considering that they were not primed about the topic of this study at the time. Most (5/8) said that they don’t have any friends who live in the community (one additional resident said that he has only one friend in the community) and half of respondents don’t have family living nearby. Informants complained that they don’t know their neighbors and that people are not warm to each other in the hallways or on the street. A few said that they thought that the huge scale of the community makes it impossible to feel connected to their neighbors.

Several people attributed the lack of community to the physical form of the neighborhood, including a lack of recreational areas or places to socialize in public. Some were unsatisfied with public spaces and thought that might play a role in the lack of socializing. Residents complained that there were too many cars parked in public spaces and that there were hardly any benches. Many people complained about the lack of exercise areas. One person told us that there used to be exercise machines in one of the open spaces between the slab buildings, but the management company moved it when someone complained about noise. The new location was in a small plaza where the police station was tucked away behind a series of narrow pathways between tall buildings. We never saw anyone use the machines, perhaps because they were out of the way and felt uncomfortable being in an enclosed space next to nothing else except the police station.

Several people said that they didn’t like living on upper floors because they felt disconnected from *diqí*. One hypothesized that low-rise living may
COMMENTS ABOUT LACK OF COMMUNITY IN SONGJIAZHUANG

“People here don’t say ‘hello’ to each other and we have few opportunities to connect with our neighbors… This place is not as good as the siheyuan. The siheyuan was better. The only thing that was worse about the siheyuan was that our house didn’t have a personal toilet, so we had to use the public toilet. That wasn’t convenient, but I don’t think it was that big of a deal… It’s true that most people here preferred living in the siheyuan. I really think that the siheyuan was great. We had diqi there, and people chatted.”

“The people in this neighborhood don’t want to communicate with each other—I even don’t know who lives in my neighborhood. I think the compound should provide more facilities for recreational activities… I’m not used to it here. I really recall my time in the hutong fondly. Sure, there were bad things about it, but guanxi [social connections and relationships] was really friendly… We moved here in 2003, and haven’t gotten used to the environment… when you open the door, no one knows anyone.”

“People never talk in the elevator here—I hate it!”

“I think the bad thing is people don’t have good relationships here… There are too many people here, not enough space, and the kids have nowhere to play… I liked it better in the siheyuan because guanxi was better there—here no one talks to each other… In the siheyuan, people were more respectful, basically here in the towers, even though you have a lot of neighbors, when you go out nobody helps each other.”

“I think this neighborhood is better than the hutong because we have better quality of life and more greenery. The only problem is that the guanxi is not as close as before.”

“There is no public space here; the outdoor areas lack sunshine in the afternoon. We have no opportunity to communicate with our neighborhood… Guanxi was better in the hutong than here… Before, when you’d go out, everyone knew each other. Now, it’s nothing like that.”
be more conducive to socializing, saying, “maybe people don’t visit each other here because they have no way of telling when people are busy or not—you can’t tell with these tall buildings.”

Overall, the lack of community interaction was enough to make many residents wish that they could live elsewhere. Most stayed in Songjiazhuang for financial reasons because they had been able to buy cheap apartments when they first moved there. As mentioned previously, many had been displaced during redevelopment leading up to the 2008 Olympics. During this time, the policy was to compensate displaced residents with 4,000 RMB per square meter of living space (not including courtyard space). One resident recounted, “When we moved out of the hutong we were given 4,000 RMB per square meter, which was not nearly enough. We did not have an agreeable reaction to this but there was nothing we could do. So we had to buy an apartment all the way out here.” Another woman laughed and told us, “Of course if I could buy a courtyard, I would.”

Toward the end of our visit, we found an area with much more public activity and socializing than other areas of Songjiazhuang. In a small open area in a corner of the complex, ten men huddled in a patch of sunlight playing Chinese chess, an old man walked his wheelchair back and forth for exercise, and a grandmother with a small child on his tricycle socialized with another elderly woman carrying a baby. We were fascinated to find that this space had similarities to the small, enclosed activity hubs of the hutongs: tucked away and intimate in scale. We also saw that the residents there, hidden from the main space of the complex and perhaps therefore less policed by the management company, were able to hang up their laundry outside and grow a few plants in public space. This was the only public space claiming that we saw in Songjiazhuang.

Three activity zones were observed. The first was located in a parking lot. Several people said that they go there because it has sunlight throughout the day. The second area was in a semi-enclosed space between the southeastern-most building in the complex and a one-story building. The area had good sunlight and was adjacent to one of the complex’s few entrances. The third area was in the entranceway to another one of the southern buildings.
Tiantongyuan is the largest residential complex in Asia, with a total population of about 400,000. The “community”—if a complex with the same population as Miami can be defined as such—is divided into four districts: Tiantongyuan North, Tiantongyuan Central, Tiantongyuan East, and Tiantongyuan West. Tiantongyuan is located along the three northernmost stops of subway Line 5, outside the 5th Ring Road and about 13 kilometers north of the city center. The entire district covers over eight square kilometers and has over 600 million square meters of living space. The scale of the community is massive: residential superblocks are 800 meters on one side with very few if any cross streets through them.

Tiantongyuan was planned and developed by the Beijing government to deal with the enormous housing demand following the 1990s phase-out of the danwei system (under which workers were provided with low-cost housing but had no ownership rights) and the 1998 termination of welfare housing for state workers. When the housing market was first privatized, a huge demand for affordable housing ensued in a time when the average apartment price was around 5,000 RMB, or about US$600 per square meter. The government responded by creating tax incentives for developers to build affordable housing. Tiantongyuan was one of the first housing projects to be developed through this

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5 Zhang, “Refactoring Neighborhood.”

Population: 10,000
Population Density: 324/hectare
system. In 1999, Tiantongyuan apartments were initially offered at 2,600 RMB per square meter (US$315). Property prices have since risen to 5,000 RMB in 2001 and almost 20,000 RMB in 2007.\(^7\)

We focused on Tiantongyuan East Second District, where we had heard that there were many residents who had previously lived in now-demolished hutong neighborhoods. The complex opened in 2001 and combines tower-in-the-park urbanism with the slab typography of Songjiazhuang. According to the local government office, the subdistrict houses 10,000 people. Although it was built as affordable housing, and initial rents were around 2,000 RMB per square meter, today it is much more expensive—the local neighborhood official estimated that most apartments currently cost 30,000 RMB per square meter. Later, a resident quoted the same figure, while another said that the going rate is now 10,000 RMB per square meter.

**Neighborhood Layout and Street Hierarchy**

Getting to Tiantongyuan East Second from central Beijing is an undertaking. After disembarking at the second-to-last stop on the north end of Line 5, the pedestrian arrives in a sea of high-rise towers next to an eight-lane highway. The 30-minute bus ride from there was crowded at 11 AM on a weekday and passed row upon row of identical towers in Tiantongyuan's gated communities. The bus passed few commercial areas on the way to Tiantongyuan East Second.

Large-scale establishments with wide frontages cluster around the north gate of Tiantongyuan East Second: a kindergarten, some restaurants, and a doctor's office. There are also some informal commercial activities by the gate, including a few people selling fruits and vegetables on plastic tablecloths on the ground. The north entrance, a large gap in the first few stories of a seven-story slab building, is near the bus stop.

\(^7\) Hu, “New Homes, New Hopes.”
The borders of the gated community create a rectangle that is 700 by 450 meters. There are four entrances, one on each side. Inside the gates, the 10-meter-wide streets have two driving lanes with parking lanes on each side. There is additional parking in underground lots. Sidewalks are generally two meters wide. There are 19 seven-story slab buildings on the east and west sides of the complex, interspersed with 10 seven-story U-shaped slabs. Eleven 19-story towers cluster in the middle section. There is a lot of open green space, and some beautiful, manicured paths through wooded areas, but the majority of open spaces are not functional for human activity. There are no commercial activities within the gates of the community.

Unlike Dongsi and (to a limited extent) Songjiazhuang, there is no personalization of the spaces around the towers in Tiantongyuan. Everything is completely public and standardized—slab building after slab building, tower after tower. Like in Songjiazhuang, the district is filled with parked cars, so many that some cars must park on top of pedestrian sidewalks because there is not enough space for them elsewhere on street or underground lots.

**Street Activities**

It felt somewhat eerie to know that 10,000 people lived in Tiantongyuan East Second District, given that we barely saw anyone on foot during our two visits to the neighborhood. The one place where we saw anyone interacting was in one of three central plazas, which had exercise equipment, benches, and plantings. In a community of 10,000, we saw a maximum of ten people using the complex’s central public space at a given time during our two visits. The plaza furniture and exercise equipment are spread out, forcing people to be physically far from one another. While we were in Tiantongyuan we never saw more than two people interacting together in the plaza—a parent with his or her child, or an older couple walking together. Most of the people were alone.

The limited street activities included using the exercise equipment, sitting on benches, playing...
with children in the playground, and walking dogs.

Interviews

This plaza was the location of almost all the interviews. Although we had been told that Tiantongyuan East was home to many residents who were displaced by redevelopment, we did not meet many former *hutong* dwellers, and we could not be as selective as in Songjiazhuang and Dongsì because so few people passed by during site visits. One informant estimated that 80% of residents in Tiantongyuan East Second District were relocation households; however, we later found out that they were mostly people who had lived near the Fourth Ring Road (which does not have a history of *hutong* neighborhoods) before being displaced to Tiantongyuan.

Most of the people that we interviewed had lived in Tiantongyuan East for five or six years. Several had lived there since the neighborhood opened in 2001. Although we did not observe it, the interviews revealed that there may be slightly more interaction among neighbors here than in Songjiazhuang: Half of informants said they know “most” of their neighbors. Around half said that they have no friends in the neighborhood, 2/8 said they have “some” friends there, and 2/8 said that “most” of their friends live there.

Several informants said that they don’t like that there is not a strong sense of community in Tiantongyuan. One informant compared it to his previous home, which was in a *danwei* unit: “I miss my neighbors and colleagues in Dongzhimen [a neighborhood in Dongcheng District, within the Second Ring Road]. My last house was a *danwei*

allocated by my previous company. All of the residents in our building worked in the same company. We had that in common, so we had a closer relationship than ordinary neighbors.” In contrast, in Tiantongyuan there are no offices and few shared services besides the kindergarten, leaving neighbors with little in common.

About half of informants said that the best part of living in Tiantongyuan is the clean air and the abundance of parks and greenery (one person also noted that she appreciated that the apartments are much bigger here than in her

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**AMBIVALENT AND NEGATIVE RESPONSES TO, “WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT LIVING IN TIANTONGYUAN?”**

“I think the good side of living here is that you can save money, because there are few places to buy things or go out. For example, I have to cook breakfast every day, since there is no place to buy it nearby.”

“I think it’s not bad. I am basically satisfied with most places in this neighborhood, except the poor sanitation. Actually, I don’t pay much attention on the public space and I am more concerned with my apartment space.”

“I don’t like this neighborhood now. Because the transportation here is very inconvenient, especially after the bus lines were changed.”

“I don’t like this neighborhood. After my former house was demolished, we had to move here.”

“It’s okay, don’t you think? There is no concrete reason for why I like living here. I am living here so I make myself like it.”
previous community). “The air quality here is better than in central Beijing,” one told us, “When I lived downtown we had to put up with vehicle exhaust every day. Now I never have that issue.” When asked what types of activities they do outside in the neighborhood, all informants reported that they sometimes go for walks in the nearby parks. Several (2/8) said that when they socialize with friends, they often meet them in nearby Qinghuying Country Park. One person said that she usually meets friends in the central plaza where the majority of the interviews were conducted. Most people (5/8), however, said that they seldom meet friends in the neighborhood.

Half of the residents that we interviewed were relatively enthusiastic about living in Tiantongyuan because of its green space, clean air, and in-apartment amenities. The other half of respondents responded either with ambivalence, backhanded compliments, or couldn’t find anything good to say about the neighborhood.

Many (5/8) complained that the location was inconvenient. When we asked if she likes living in Tiantongyuan, one informant said, “It’s no use asking if I like it—I have to live here, and there’s nothing I can do about it. I don’t like it because it’s not convenient. Really, everything is so inconvenient because I’m a common old Beijinger and I don’t have a car.” Most informants work in the center of Beijing and take a combination of bus and subway to arrive there (the other two people commute by car). One person works nearby, but had only recently started doing so because the commute to his previous workplace was so arduous: “This year I started to work nearby here. Even though the salaries here are not as high as in central Beijing, I couldn’t stand the problem of traffic congestion anymore. Now I go to work on foot or by bike. I also save a lot of money on transportation costs.”

One respondent was especially passionate about the difficulties of getting to work and getting things done:

I think living in this neighborhood is very inconvenient. It seems like Tiantongyuan is not really part of Beijing, because it’s so different from Beijing. Actually, this place is just like a suburb. Because of the remote location, it is difficult for us to go shopping, to work, and especially to school. If I could I would move back downtown.

First I want to talk about the problem of jobs and transportation. Because this place is all residential, there are few job opportunities here for us. So we have to work in other places far away. My previous workplace is near Olympic Park. To get there, I would get on the bus at the north gate of Tiantongyuan East and 50 minutes later I would still be on the bus, still inside Tiantongyuan. I really hate living here, but there’s nothing I can do. After that, I decided to go to work by bike instead because of those terrible traffic jams.

Second, I want to talk about the education problem. When I moved here initially, my son was still at school. At that time I had to take him to his school near the China Puppet Theatre every day by bike for six years. After that I transferred him to another school in this area, because I didn’t want him to be so tired on the long journey every day. But the teaching quality here is not as good as in Beijing, so now I think I made a bad choice.

Lastly, because most residents living in our building are young people who leave home for work at 6AM, almost every day I get woken up by the click of high-heels in the corridor because they get up so early for their long commutes.

For the elderly people that we interviewed, the distance from hospitals was especially concerning (one noted, “when we need to go to the hospital, we waste a whole day trying to travel there and back”). Some also said that it is inconvenient to access public spaces even within the neighborhood: “The location of our house is not good. The distance from my house to this small central square where we can sit and bask in the sunshine is more than 200 meters, which is really a long way for us old people.”
The distance from services, jobs, central Beijing, and even amenities within the gates of Tiantongyuan East was also cited as a reason for not meeting with friends: one resident complained, “I hardly ever hang out with friends anymore because it’s so inconvenient to get around and meet up.” Five of eight informants said that they “seldom meet friends,” and if they do, they usually meet them near work (2/8) or elsewhere outside the neighborhood (1/8).
CHAPTER 4 | FINDINGS
CONCLUSIONS ABOUT CHANGING COMMUNITY INTERACTION IN BEIJING

This research indicated that public life is stronger and community interactions are more frequent in traditional hutong neighborhoods than in superblock neighborhoods in Beijing. Among our informants in the three neighborhoods, the Dongsi hutong residents were more likely to know their neighbors than residents of Songjiazhuang and Tiantongyuan. Residents highlighted the tight-knit community and sociability among neighbors as a feature that they enjoyed, whereas Songjiazhuang and Tiantongyuan residents disliked the fact that there was not a sense of community in the neighborhoods.

Some might point out that some hutong residents have had family ties in their neighborhoods for generations, so it is not surprising that they have a stronger sense of community than superblock dwellers. However, seven of the eight Dongsi residents that we interviewed were not born in the hutong, and the finding includes newcomers to Dongsi who hadn't been raised in a hutong environment and did not have the same historical ties to the neighborhood. Clearly, there is something more than history at play here. What’s more, former hutong residents who were relocated or chose to move to superblock neighborhoods did not establish new social communities when they left the lanes, even those who remained in the superblock communities for 10 years or more. This suggests that there is something about the new neighborhoods themselves that inhibits community interaction as compared to hutong lanes.

The new social order in China and the increasing diversity of Beijing likely plays a role in the changing nature of community interaction and use of public space. China, and perhaps especially urban China, has undergone tremendous and tumultuous political, social, and economic changes since the communist party took power in 1949. It could be argued that these changes have been especially pronounced since 1978, when Deng Xiaoping came into power and began to focus on economic growth and reform. At that time, less than 20% of the population lived in urban areas. Since then, over 500 million people have moved to cities in the largest urbanization process in world history. Today, over half of Chinese are city dwellers.1

This incredible movement has increased regional, cultural, and economic diversity in migrant hotspots like Beijing. This research found that the nature of this migration may have effects on community interaction for both the new and old residents of Beijing. First, both migrants and native Beijingers that we interviewed reported a perception that many migrants see their apartment as a place to sleep and don’t consider it as a real home, since they plan to return to their hometown eventually. (For example, one Songjiazhuang informant who was a migrant herself hypothesized, “I think that because people consider Beijing as their temporary home, they have no interest in making friends.”)

Second, many migrants work exhausting, long-hour jobs with lengthy commutes, particularly in new communities like Tiantongyuan that are far from the central city and most jobs. Thus many newcomers to Beijing may spend most of their time at work or commuting, with little time left to enjoy public space in their neighborhoods. As one superblock resident reported:

They never consider this is a home; it is merely a house to stay. So they never try to blend

1 World Bank, Urban China. Pages 3-5.
There are also certain social stigmas between people from different provinces in China and stereotypes about non-Beijingers may present a challenge to community building. Rural migrants have been stereotyped and portrayed in the media as "poor, dirty, ignorant, and prone to violence." These stereotypes and the increasing diversity of Beijing’s neighborhoods may play a role in the reported decrease in community interaction today.

However, migrants live in all three neighborhoods studied, and the changing economic and social conditions in Chinese cities impact all neighborhood types. We now turn our analysis to the physical environment of each of the three neighborhoods and how urban design and built form can impact public life and community interactions in Beijing neighborhoods. The remainder of this chapter will explore conclusions in this area, drawing from the field visit and past literature. This section was also greatly informed by Qingqing Yang’s book *Space Modernization and Social Interaction: A Comparative Study of Living Space in Beijing*, in which the author undertakes an ethnographic study of life in a *hutong* and a high-rise community in Beijing.

**CONCLUSION 1**

*The ability to personalize and ‘claim’ public space encourages public community interaction*

In Dongsi, four layers of space correspond with varying levels of public- versus private-ness, resident customization, and community interaction. Inside the personal home is the most private and familiar space. Here, space is completely private, residents customize their apartments completely as they wish, and social (usually family) relations are the closest.

The courtyard is where the next most intimate social relationships are built. The courtyard is a semi-private space—generally open and not locked to the outside *hutong* and larger community, but seen as private to those who live in the houses that abut it. Depending on the level of infill and the remaining open space, courtyards can be used as a garden, children’s play area, laundromat, outdoor cooking space, art space, storage room, and game room. In addition to these activities, residents often personalize their courtyards with decorations. Qingqing Yang’s chief *hutong* informant, “Mr. Yang,” noted that the ability to customize his courtyard made him feel at ease:

> One of the advantages of living within the courtyards is that you can decorate it in whatever way you like. Look at these green plants, they make me feel close to nature comfortably… That is what makes the courtyard different from other residential forms. *Siheyuan* is a place that is relatively isolated and independent from outside. All the inside scene is decorated and decided at your will. This is absolutely YOUR place. This I guess will be the most distinct difference from the high-rise.

The customizations in the courtyard are an additional way that residents claim public space near their homes, which makes them comfortable and at ease in their environment and provides a commonality that they share with their neighbors. One informant told us, “although you can’t see this now because it’s winter, in the warm months all of us neighbors have flowers in the courtyard. We use the space outside each of our homes for our own personal flowers, but we

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coordinate so we have a nice variety all around the courtyard, like a garden. In the summer it's really beautiful.” This common shared space provides opportunities for neighbors to make communal decisions about their most immediate surroundings and thus encourages social interaction between neighbors. Most informants said that they knew the families with whom they shared their courtyard very well.

The hutong lane represents a third level of community, with less strong ties than the courtyard but still much stronger than what was observed in the superblock neighborhoods. Many Dongsi interviewees said that they knew many people who lived in different courtyard homes along the same hutong. On the hutong level, space is mostly public, but there is still some space claiming for private uses among those who hang their laundry, store sundries, dry fish and other food, and grow plants and herbs along the edges of the lane. It is common to see residents chatting while hanging their laundry together on the lanes outside their siheyuans. and residents often bring out chairs and tables to play cards or chess outside. There are also many shared community facilities on the lane, including public bathrooms (recall that many siheyuan residents do not have private bathrooms), bathhouses, kindergartens, and small-scale shops. The shared services on the lane and the space claiming—essentially using the lane as an extended living room beyond the apartment and courtyard—reinforce a sense of community among those living nearby.

The final layer of community space in Dongsi is found on the main streets like Dongsi Beidajie. Here space is fully public, there is no claiming of space, and there are few-to-no shared services like public bathrooms.

In Tiantongyuan and Songjiazhuang, the distinction between public and private space
is less nuanced. Personal apartments are fully private, as are individual dwellings in the *hutong*. The closest equivalent to the shared semi-private space of the *hutong* courtyard is the hallways between personal apartments, but these do not serve community functions of the courtyard and *hutong* lane because residents only use them as walkways on the way to their apartments. Open spaces in between the towers are fully public, and management companies forbid residents from customizing or otherwise “claiming” these spaces. Thus although there are a few covert private activities being conducted outdoors in Songjiazhuang, such as drying laundry in the sun, these activities are very limited.

The lack of shared spaces and services in the superblock neighborhoods makes it difficult for neighbors to get to know each other because they have little in common and therefore no easy ways to begin a conversation or otherwise connect socially. Yang compares life in the *hutong* to a “TV series playing with almost a hundred characters involving one big screen,” whereas the high-rise complex could be compared to “a multiwindow screen TV” where “the TV programmes differ from window to window. They never interfere with each other. One’s story has nothing to do with the one living next to him.” She goes on to describe her own experience living in the high-rise community, where she struggled to make social connections because unlike in the *hutong*, there were no overlapping services or social spaces that they shared:

> During the 4 months I stayed in this high-rise building, I saw nobody knocking at another’s door. And nobody knocked at my door either. The only two exceptional occasions were when I ordered a delivery of food and when an expected parcel arrived. I was desperately thinking of a proper way to begin a conversation with my neighbour, and came out with no answer.5

The interviews conducted for this research supported the idea that the inability to customize space can create public spaces that feel impersonal, which can impede community

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5 Ibid. Page 57 and 61.
interaction. The inability to customize one’s own environment also sometimes prevents families from growing in place. In a study of resident satisfaction in post-hutong relocation housing, one scholar noted that it’s “hard to sustain residential satisfaction in allocated and subsidized redeveloped housing, because of household need changes and residents’ lack of abilities to adjust and modify their living situations.” Whereas in the hutong, residents may add a storey to their home or build an extra room in the courtyard, apartments in the towers are fixed. The inability to grow in place may be one of the factors behind the fact that most of the superblock informants live far from family, whereas most hutong informants live with or close to their family.

CONCLUSION 2

**Human-scale public spaces and urban fabric encourage social life**

The public spaces in the superblock neighborhoods examined in this research are too large, belong to too many people, and have too many rules to feel personal or community-oriented. Chinese superblocks can have 5,000 housing units or more (Tiantongyuan East Second District houses 10,000 people), whereas older Chinese neighborhoods usually have 300-500 units per block. This means that whereas in hutong neighborhoods, there are two layers of partially enclosed public spaces shared by a small number of people (the courtyard which is shared by 1-10 families, and the lane which is shared by 300-500 units), the superblocks often have two or three large dedicated public spaces for 5,000 units or more.

Scale can also affect the degree to which residents feel ownership over their space, which, as hypothesized in the previous pages, can encourage or inhibit public life and community interaction. In large-scale public spaces shared by thousands of people, residences feel a lack of ownership. Yang (2015) describes a private waste recycling operation near the entrance to her superblock study compound, which created huge piles of trash that residents had to pass every day on the way home. Whereas in a hutong setting, residents might organize a cleanup (similar to the way that Dongsi Second Lane residents self-initiated community parking rules), Yang concludes that in the superblock, residents would never take this sort of action:

> Residents don’t care about the public space. Because the entrance channel is being used by hundreds of residents, nobody feels it is their responsibility to argue with the owner of the recycling point for their mutual benefit. No one considers the communal entrance as part of their own living space.

Whereas hutong residents often work together as a community to improve their living environment—thus encouraging further use of public space—this type of community activism was never mentioned in the superblock neighborhoods.

In addition, smaller, more human-scaled streets and public spaces physically situate people closer together, which increases opportunities for social encounters. In Dongsi, narrow alleys ensure that people walk near to one another. Enclosed lanes make people more likely to run into each other, overhear each other, and engage with each other. What’s more, the street structure in hutongs makes it so residents are more likely to pass their neighbors on the way home each day, since everyone on a given alley must pass through that alley on the way back from one of the main arterials. On the other hand, in Songjiazhuang, residents complained that there was a lack of benches in public spaces; we noticed that the benches that do exist are small and placed far

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7 Calthorpe, “Does China’s Urbanization Spell Doom or Salvation?”

Sections of primary public spaces in each neighborhood. While the *hutong* has numerous small-scale public spaces that are built at a human scale, the superblock neighborhoods have a smaller number of large public spaces shared by large numbers of people.
Tiantongyuan (Tower in the Park)
apart in a way that would make group socializing difficult or impossible. In Tiantongyuan, the large open spaces are also designed in a way that forces people to be far away from one another and reduces the chance that neighbors will run into each other. In the complex’s main plaza, benches are placed very far apart, making it difficult for people to sit and chat together. Even the gym equipment are spaced in a way that makes it difficult or impossible to socialize while exercising. In contrast, gym areas in the dense urban fabric of central Beijing are places where friends and family members can work out while chatting, a common sight in Dongsi.

Finally, there may be a relationship between enclosure and public activities. As mentioned in Chapter 3, Songjiazhuang’s main activity zone has a more intimate scale than the other public spaces in the community and is shared by only a few buildings, tucked away in the corner of the complex with its own entrance to the nearby street. While many residents that we interviewed complained that there were “no public spaces” to spend time in in the complex, these residents found a hutong-scale plaza that felt much more intimate and personal. Two of the three Songjiazhuang activity areas were located near building entrances in enclosed spaces.

CONCLUSION 3

Biking and walking on short commutes encourage more public life than long commutes by subway and car

In Tiantongyuan, and to a lesser extent in the more centrally located Songjiazhuang, long commutes reduce the amount of time that residents can spend in their neighborhood, which has direct effects on their ability to form a sense of community. Residents who work long hours in far away workplaces can only use their apartment as a place to sleep, not a place to socialize. On the other hand, many hutong residents live near their workplaces. Having short commutes increases the time available to them to spend in their neighborhood. Thus the separation of work opportunities and residences in superblock developments, as compared to the more mixed-use forms of hutong and danwei, detracts from the ability of residents to form a community in their neighborhood.

Travel mode also matters. Walking and biking offer more opportunities for face-to-face run-ins and thus enable more community interaction. In the hutong, car use is limited by narrow streets and claiming of the streets for other uses like walking, biking, vending, and playing. Cars are seldom seen on Dongsi hutong lanes, and most taxis are reluctant to turn down the narrow streets and instead drop off users at the entrance to the alley that they wish to visit.

On the other hand, the hutong lanes are an ideal site for biking and walking. Without car traffic, walkers and bikers have a safe and enjoyable experience exploring the lanes. Commercial sites are transparent or open and storefronts are generally narrow and contain a diversity of services, all of which increases pedestrian interest. Ample space for bicycle parking along the sides of the lanes further encourages bike use. The hutong alleys that buzz with the most human activity and social interaction are those that are either too narrow for cars or have other uses of space that limit cars, such as plantings, open storefronts, or barbeques. Many informants noted that they preferred to walk and socialize on lanes with less car use, and avoided those with too much car use. As one Dongsi resident put it:

I walk around these streets almost every day after dinner. I think some of them are very neat and clean, but others are not good. I think the commercial shops in the hutongs have made these streets more lively than before and the pedestrian volume in these streets has increased as well, which is good. I think the main problem is that there are too many cars parking and running some of the streets.
The pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented lanes of the hutong encourage street life and public interaction. On the other hand, the new town developments are not pedestrian-oriented: readers may recall how difficult it is to reach the center of Songjiazhuang from the subway, which would be only a 350-meter walk if the gates didn’t exist, but is in reality a distance of 975 meters due to infrequent entrances to the complex. Within the complex, there are some comfortable walkways, but many sidewalks are very narrow and sometimes cars park on them making them narrower still. In Tiantongyuan, automobile obstruction of sidewalks was an even bigger problem. What’s more, because the community is so huge and is solely residential, informants often complained that getting anything done was inconvenient because the distance to places of errands and transportation stops was so long.

**CONCLUSION 4**

**Gates kill pedestrianism and social life. However, perception of safety is hugely important in China and neighborhood design needs to take this into account**

As reviewed in Chapter 2, the gating of neighborhoods is popular in China. Gates are a tangible symbol of public safety and social order, a central concern for both the Chinese government and its citizens. The gates themselves are problematic for many reasons, perhaps best summarized by Miao (2003). The issues that contribute to a decline in public life and community interaction in public spaces are briefly reviewed here. First, gated neighborhoods cut off residents from the street, which has historically been the main civic space in China.9 In Beijing, streets that have greater connectivity to the street network as a whole have been found to house more street life, more local commercial activity, and more community interaction than those that are less connected to other streets.10 Gated neighborhoods in China generally only have one use—residential—and close off this residential life from the street and outside city, providing only one or a few entrances. This can have the effect of killing civic interaction. Second, gating has negative effects on walkability and wayfinding convenience because they make walking distances longer by cutting off direct routes, as we experienced in Songjiazhuang. Third, gated communities tend to eliminate the social diversity that is essential to a vibrant street life. Some have suggested that the practice of gating may actually exacerbate negative stereotypes regarding migrant workers and other low-income groups.11

Furthermore, the way that gating is implemented in Chinese communities stands in direct contrast to theories on encouraging street life and vibrant communities. In his book Great Streets, Allan Jacobs asserted that the best streets have many entryways, “as little as 12 feet [about 4 meters] apart.”12 Jacobs further suggests that there should be one intersection every 90 meters on a successful street, and noted that busier streets had even more frequent intersections.13 In Death and Life of Great American Cities, Jane Jacobs also discusses the importance of frequent intersections and short blocks, and points out that they permit “intricate cross-use” and diverse paths for pedestrians.14 On the other hand, gated neighborhoods in China provide no doorways onto public streets and have very few entrances and street intersections. Miao estimates that most commercial streets outside a gated community have one intersection every 150-250 meters; if private streets are not included, this figure increases to as much as 500 meters, or the length of one side of the residential enclave.

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10 Sheng, “A Morphological Study on the Relationship between Street Pattern and Vitality of Urban Blocks.”
11 Miao, “Deserted Streets in a Jammed Town.”
13 Ibid. Page 302.
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In sum, these issues have an effect of reducing street life and walking within gated communities. It is clear that we should question gating and its negative effects on public life. What’s more, in terms of the underlying goal of increasing safety, the effects of gating on safety in China are inconclusive at best. Some evidence suggests that residents of *hutong* neighborhoods, where Jacobsian “eyes on the street” informal community policing is at its strongest, actually feel safer than those who live in gated, guarded compounds. In his account of his time living in a Beijing *hutong*, author Michael Meyers recounts:

> Beijing’s inner-city residents were afraid of crime in the big, wide-open suburbs. It was safe in the *hutong* where eyes were always on the street and everyone knew the neighbors. It was one more reason to not want to move to a high-rise.

Regardless of the actual effectiveness of gates in providing safety for compound residents, a key takeaway is that future neighborhood models for Chinese cities must consider the need to provide perception of safety, but in a way that avoids the problematic effects of gating.

CONCLUSION 5

The structure of commerce, including attention to “renqi,” affects social activity and public life

Commercial spaces in the three study areas were structured very differently. Our observations indicated that the differences in commercial structures impact the opportunities for social interactions within a neighborhood, both with neighbors and vendors.

Before delving into the specifics of each neighborhood, it is important to address the Chinese concept of *renqi*, or “human vitality,” and its application to commercial activities and community interaction. *Renqi* describes a sort of vitality, or energy, that is found in areas with bustling street life, where face-to-face interactions are common and shoppers can conduct various activities at once, such as strolling, chatting, shopping, and eating street food. In “Contesting Spatial Modernity in Late-Socialist China,” Li Zhang describes *renqi* as “derived not only from
the density of people in a given place but also from a state of being at ease in a space that is capable of mingling everyday living experiences with commercial activities.” Zhang goes on to say that “New urban planning, by contrast, tends to overpower and alienate individuals and kill renqi. In sum, the death of the traditional street in China also means the demise of renqi and the eventual disintegration of a way of urban life centered on intimate human dynamics and close-knit communities.”

The structure and form of commercial activities in traditional Chinese streets like the hutong are conducive to renqi. Because of the diversity of local shops, many residents can complete daily tasks on foot without leaving the hutong. The overlapping of activities that is central to achieving renqi—strolling while shopping, eating while chatting—is possible in the narrow hutong alleys that shun car traffic, contain a diversity of shops and services, and allow residents to walk directly adjacent to commercial opportunities.

Besides creating an atmosphere of renqi, this diversity also keeps residents local when they are running errands and socializing, increasing the chance of contact with neighbors. The small scale of hutong shops—many shops and restaurants in Dongsi have only one or two employees—means that residents are more likely to form a relationship with their individual tailor, grocer, and handyman on their block. What’s more, many shops spill out onto the street, which means that shoppers stand on the hutong while perusing goods. In these cases, the hutong lane itself becomes the place of commerce. In other cases, shops are closed to the hutong but have glass or open frontages, which further encourage interaction with the street.

The narrow streets and lack of car traffic in the hutong, combined with the density and low-rise nature of the neighborhood, also enable a particular type of commerce that has long existed in China but has been decreasing with the rise of...
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tower development. As described in Chapter 3, *yaohe* refers to the many local services that are carried out on the lane by hawkers on bicycles, bicycle-carts, motorized carts, and e-bikes. Yung Ho Chang, former MIT Professor of Architecture and founder of the Atelier FCJZ studio in Beijing, has recalled how *yaohe* helped foster community in his childhood *hutong*: “When I was little, vendors would come to the *hutong* and you come out of your courtyard house and you may buy something and then you chat with your neighbors.” This type of delivery service brings residents out onto the street and creates further opportunities for personal contact. It also creates inexpensive shopping opportunities for residents.

Because hawkers cannot be heard from towers, particularly when they are arranged around large open spaces, the practice of *yaohe* does not exist in the superblock communities. In fact, both management companies prohibit informal commerce of any sort. In both complexes, informal vendors can be found right outside the gates, fulfilling the obvious demand for inexpensive goods that are not being provided by formally planned commercial offerings. However, the *renqi* created by these vendors is limited to the entrances of the communities and does not extend into them.

The interior structure of the superblock neighborhoods limits *renqi* in other ways. This is particularly obvious when examining the differences in shops in each case neighborhood. In Songjiazhuang, some commercial establishments are located within the complex, but they are unsuccessful and generally larger scale than those found in the *hutong*. There are also many vacant storefronts. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is likely that the stores in Songjiazhuang are struggling due to a lack of access and visibility to the city and customers outside the complex gates. What’s more, most of the shops are bordered by one or more layers of parking, making it unattractive or physically difficult to walk along the shops. These commercial strips suffer from a definitive lack of *renqi*.

Tiantongyuan has no commercial activities within the neighborhood’s gates. Commercial activities are limited to the area outside the north gate and the east-west street on the north side of the complex, facing away and not accessible from the residential complex itself. Walking to this area is therefore difficult.

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19 Cheng, “Beijing’s Hutongs.”
CONCLUSION 6

Single-story living and small unit sizes can be conducive to overlapping social lives

The structure of individual living units—the siheyuan pavilion versus the high-rise apartment—also affects social interaction in the neighborhoods studied. Specifically, the smaller unit size in Dongsi is likely one of the reasons why residents spend so much more time in public space. Abramson (2008) noted that when the siheyuans, which had been designed for multiple generations of one family, were consolidated and divided, “courtyard housing became very crowded and the hutong became neighborhood ‘rooms’, where the young could play, the elderly could watch them and socialize, and the enterprising could augment their incomes by vending and repairing small items for the surrounding households.” Because hutong residents have less space, they can’t do all their daily tasks inside like high-rise residents can. For example, in the hutong, daily activities like cooking, using the toilet, doing laundry, or taking a bath sometimes take place outside of individual residences. In the new town neighborhoods, these activities all occur privately.

It seems clear that the small unit size of hutong neighborhoods contributes to the vibrancy of street life and community interaction in public space. However, it is important to note that we should be careful not to romanticize living in tiny apartments. Of the seven informants who had negative comments about Dongsi, four of them complained about the cramped living quarters.

We originally hypothesized that because unit sizes were larger in the superblocks as compared to the hutongs, perhaps social life did continue, just inside private apartments where we could not observe it. However, when asked where they socialized with friends, “in my apartment” was a response for only one of eight Songjiazhuang residents and no Tiantongyuan residents, in comparison to five out of eight hutong residents.

The height of individual apartments also plays a role in community ties. In Dongsi, low-rise living makes community interaction convenient. Living in close quarters and sharing a communal courtyard means that hutong residents can often overhear their neighbors and therefore have a better sense of what is going on in their lives.

Low-rise living and the fact that residents’ front doors directly face the courtyard also makes it easy to drop-in for impromptu visits with neighbors. Urbanist and public life scholar Jan Gehl has written that this type of casual “dropping in” can be important for community building:

“Sitting on the unmade bed, I began feeling empty inside my heart. Partly because the room I stayed in was bigger than the one in Hutong, also as it was situated on the top floor, the sixth floor, I felt I was far away from human society, or maybe because I could hear no other sounds from my neighbours. When I stayed in the Hutong, I could hear the sound of the telephone ringing, the noise of locking bicycles, the greeting from one resident to another, the street hawking and the laughing from a group talking. All of these lively sounds had suddenly disappeared.”

-Qingqing Yang, Space Modernization and Social Interaction, page 58

20 Abramson, “Haussmann and Le Corbusier in China.” Page 236.

21 It should be noted that while many informants in this study and others—especially Yang (2015)—enjoy this closeness, others complain that the hutong has no privacy.
The possibility of meeting neighbors and coworkers often in connection with daily comings and goings implies a valuable opportunity to establish and alter maintain acquaintances in a relaxed and undemanding way... It is equally easy to ‘drop by’ or ‘look in’ or to agree on what is to take place tomorrow if the participants pass by one another’s front doors often and, especially, meet often on the street or in connection with daily activities around the home, place of work, and so on.22

Finally, being close to the ground also enables the yaohe culture, which brings residents out into the street and further contributes to public life.

Apart from these ways that low-rise living is conducive to community interaction, it should be noted that many Chinese people have a strong cultural preference in stay close to the ground because of a concept from Traditional Chinese Medicine called diqi. Diqi has to do with feeling connected to the earth’s energy, both in terms of being able to physically put your feet on the ground as well as experience the ebbs and flows of nature, including outside temperatures, precipitation, and winds. In traditional Chinese medicine, connecting with diqi is believed to be part of a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

CONCLUSION 7

Microclimatic conditions, particularly sun exposure, influence where people socialize

Microclimatic conditions emerged as an important theme that determined the level of social activity in each neighborhood. Both high-rise communities experience extremes in terms of microclimates. Tall buildings and large open spaces encourage strong winds, and public areas either experience complete sunshine or complete shadow with no in-between. The high-rise typology can provide more sun inside units, but less sun on the ground.

Access to sunlight is very important in determining where people socialize in high-rise superblocks. In Songjiazhuang, for example, the one part of the complex that has sunlight throughout the day is a main activity area, even though it is in the middle of a parking lot and road. Another well-sunned area is the tucked away corner where we observed older residents playing card games and socializing. Here, one side of the plaza faces the edge of the complex, which has one-story buildings in contrast to the regular 20-story buildings. Therefore a portion of the plaza has fairly good light for part of the day. On the other hand, the planned open green spaces and plazas, shaded by the towers, remain empty.

In contrast, the finer-grained urban fabric of the hutong gives more gradation in microclimates in outdoor spaces. Because of the low-rise nature of the hutong neighborhood, even in the winter much of the lanes and courtyards have sunlight throughout the day. Winds do not feel strong. In the summertime, the abundance of trees planted in the courtyards creates shade in both courtyard and lane and prevents residents from feeling too hot outside.

5

URBAN DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS
DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC LIFE AND COMMUNITY INTERACTION

This thesis has explored how urban design impacts public life and community ties in traditional and modern residential neighborhoods in Beijing. The research has found that many urban form features of hutong neighborhoods enable and contribute to community interaction, while many urban form features of superblock districts discourage and detract from it. This chapter draws from these conclusions to create a set of urban design recommendations that encourage neighborhood community interaction and vibrant public life.

While the urban form of hutongs has a multitude of advantages and positive features as detailed in the preceding chapters, hutong neighborhoods cannot achieve the densities that the unprecedented speed and scale of Chinese urbanization requires while still maintaining an improved quality of life and respite from crowding. In this chapter, we aim to learn from the hutong form while imagining how its positive features could be reconfigured in a higher density environment. At the same time, we try to avoid the negative aspects of superblock developments that have contributed to a decline in public life and community interaction.

RECOMMENDATION 1: SMALL UNITS, LOW RISE

To encourage community interaction and overlapping social lives, new residential developments should be compact and predominantly low-rise rather than than sprawling and high-rise. As discussed in the previous chapter, low-rise living makes movement between public and private spaces easy and convenient, creates an environment where it is easy for neighbors to “drop in,” enables yaohe, and allows residents to connect with díqi. Low-rise urban form also makes it easier to maintain sunlight in public spaces and prevents the formation of wind tunnels, making it more comfortable for residents to socialize in public.\(^1\) Although towers are often justified through the lens of needing higher density in Chinese cities, this urban form is not necessarily denser than compact, lower-rise models, due to the amount of large open spaces necessary to maintain air and light circulation. Because of this, the population density in Dongsi is 374 persons per hectare, whereas Tiantongyuan's density is 324 per hectare. Even higher densities can be achieved with a compact urban fabric and slightly taller buildings, even without towers:

\(^1\) The importance of maintaining comfortable microclimatic conditions will be discussed further in Recommendation 6: Ensure that public outdoor spaces have sunlight and avoid wind.
Manhattan’s Grand Street neighborhood has an FAR of 3.5 and 541 people per hectare, even though most buildings are only 2-3 storeys. Shanghai’s *lilong* alleyway neighborhoods can have an FAR of 1.5, a population density of 625 per hectare, and a residential fabric of just three storeys. Paris’s Plaine Monceau neighborhood has 5-6 storey buildings with shared courtyards, a FAR of 3.8, and 1,124 people per hectare.² Small units help achieve the density required forrapidly urbanizing Chinese cities as well as encourage community activities in shared public spaces. “Small units” does not mean “crowding,” however: in their current infilled state, many residents complained that the courtyards of DONGSI were uncomfortably small. By slightly increasing the height of the typical urban fabric from one to three or four stories and allowing for occasional high-rise buildings, a very high density can be achieved while still allowing for larger unit sizes akin to those of other large and dense world cities.

Design Guidelines

- Two- to four storey-residential buildings can achieve the advantages of low-rise living that are outlined above. Combining low-rise buildings with a compact residential fabric can still achieve the high densities of tower-style neighborhoods.
- Occasional mid- and high-rise buildings can provide additional density.
- Unit sizes should vary to encourage diversity of family types and income, but should be relatively small.
- Where taller development occurs, the ground level should be low-rise and human scale.
RECOMMENDATION 2: CREATE A HIERARCHY OF COMMUNITY-SCALE PUBLIC SPACES

One of the most notable lessons from the hutong is that the availability of small, community-scale public spaces creates ample opportunities for residents to interact with their neighbors. In the intimate semi-private space of the siheyuan courtyard, residents share an outdoor space with their closest neighbors and decorate and use that space together, creating a sense of community and a shared outdoor area to socialize in. Many residents also socialize in nearby larger parks, but the courtyard is where the closest community unit forms. In contrast, the large, undefined public spaces of the superblock neighborhoods does little to foster community, except in a few smaller enclosed spaces in Songjiazhuang. Future models should learn from the successes of the public space hierarchy in Dongsi.

Design Guidelines

- Residential units should be physically associated with a small, semi-enclosed, semi-private outdoor space. This space should be shared by a maximum of 20 units.
- Wherever possible, each unit should have its own door to these shared outdoor public spaces. This enables “dropping in” and also increases the physical and mental connection between the private and public shared space.
- Public spaces should be customizable: residents should be allowed to decorate their courtyards and entrances to their homes on public streets.
- A larger public space that can be used for big group gatherings, cultural activities such as group dancing, interaction with nature, and exercising should be located within a 30-minute walk of all residences. These spaces should be designed as a series of outdoor “rooms” in the style of many traditional Chinese parks (see right for a diagrammatic example).
- Street furniture and exercise equipment should be clustered close together to allow for social interaction.
CHAPTER 5 | URBAN DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 3: MIX RESIDENCES, WORKPLACES, SHOPPING, AND ENTERTAINMENT

During the Reform Era, China’s long history of having an explicit physical connection between homes and workplaces came to an abrupt end. New districts are now often planned as suburban bedroom communities and residential planning and employment planning often have no relation to one another. A lack of affordable housing in urban centers makes it even more likely that residents of today’s Chinese cities will face long commutes. As we heard from interviews in Tiantongyuan and Songjiazhuang, long commutes can mean that residents don’t have time to socialize close to home. Therefore, future planned communities should provide employment, local services, and commerce to enable shorter commutes.

**Design Guidelines**

- New residential communities should be planned in conjunction with nearby employment, shopping, and entertainment opportunities to allow residents to remain local and avoid long commutes. Mixed-use development, including live-work schemes in higher-rise buildings, is optimal.

- New neighborhoods should include local commercial corridors with small-scale local shops for everyday errands and needs. This allows residents to walk to the grocer, tailor, barber, hardware store, etcetera; increases the likelihood that a community may share local services and get to know small business community characters; and provides a diversity of jobs in the neighborhood.

RECOMMENDATION 4: CREATE A STREET HIERARCHY THAT ENCOURAGES BIKING AND WALKING

This research has indicated that pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented streets create an atmosphere that is conducive to face-to-face interactions and chance encounters with neighbors, thus reinforcing community connections and allowing for a vibrant street life. Automobile ownership and use has increased markedly in China in recent years and is heralded as a sign of progress and modernization, but urban China’s car-focused road widening agenda has created countless barriers to pedestrians and bikers in cities while contributing to the severe air pollution problems of Chinese cities. Wide streets with automobile circulation should have their place in new Chinese neighborhoods, but to optimize a vibrant public life and provide equity and comfort for the estimated 79% of Beijingers who do not own motor vehicles, many local streets should remain predominantly for bikers and pedestrians.

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3 Beijing has by far the highest motor vehicle ownership rate of any Chinese city. Shanghai’s ownership rate is 7.6%. Hao, Wang, and Ouyang, “Comparison of Policies on Vehicle Ownership and Use between Beijing and Shanghai and Their Impacts on Fuel Consumption by Passenger Vehicles.”
Design Guidelines (main driving roads)

- Large, multi-lane driving streets should be confined to the edges of the neighborhood for circulation purposes and should contain a maximum of four driving lanes.
- These streets should include bike lanes set off from the street by trees, curbs, and/or a parking lane.
- Wide (at least 3.5 meters, as in Dongsi’s main street Dongsi Beidajie) sidewalks should be provided for pedestrian use.
- To ensure that bikeways and sidewalks are used for their intended purposes and not as drive or parking lanes, strategic barriers may be used at curb cuts.

Design Guidelines (interior pedestrian and bikeways)

- Interior neighborhood streets should be narrow (ideally, 6-7.5 meters wide as in Dongsi hutongs) and used primarily for biking, walking, and some parking.
- Parking on these streets should be for residents only and could be issued by permit.

RECOMMENDATION 5: ENCOURAGE FACE-TO-FACE COMMERCE

New neighborhoods in Beijing and other Chinese cities are often planned in a way that segregates commercial and residential areas. Shopping that does exist lacks the face-to-face nature of hutong commerce, which spills into the street and provides the conditions necessary to fulfill the Traditional Chinese Medicine concept of renqi, as described in Chapter 4. The hutong’s diversity of stores makes it possible for residents to stay local while running errands, while a high percentage of small businesses means that residents may know their shopkeepers and share community services with neighbors.

Design Guidelines

- Parcels should be diverse widths with a focus on narrow parcels to encourage local businesses and service diversity.
- Extend private shop control over adjacent public sidewalks to enable outdoor vending and storefront permeability.
- Storefronts should be transparent or open to increase interaction with the street.
- Pedestrian walkways should be located directly adjacent to storefronts to encourage renqi and further enhance the connection between pedestrian and commerce.
- Informal commerce and vending should be allowed in public spaces. The practice is sometimes seen as a symbol of backwardness or poverty in China, but in reality it can provide livelihoods for low-skill workers and a convenient and inexpensive source of groceries and shopping for residents.

RECOMMENDATION 6: ENSURE THAT PUBLIC SPACES HAVE SUNLIGHT AND ARE PROTECTED FROM WIND

Microclimatic factors emerged as an important determinant of how much time residents spent outside socializing in their communities. In the low-rise hutong lanes and courtyards, sunlight found its way into open spaces even in the depth of winter and narrow streets and enclosed spaces helped shelter the community from extreme winds. In the high-rise superblock communities,
tall buildings cast shadows on most public spaces and sheer vertical towers and large open spaces created wind tunnels. To encourage street life and community socializing, public spaces in new neighborhoods should account for pedestrian comfort in extreme weather situations. Design Recommendation 1 (small units, low rise) set the basis for creating favorable microclimatic conditions in public spaces. Further guidelines are described here.

**Design Guidelines**

- Public spaces should be planned for areas with consistent sunlight.
- Enclosed or semi-enclosed public spaces can help offer refuge from wind.
- High-rise buildings should be stepped-up in the direction of prevailing winds to prevent the creation of wind tunnels.
- Streets should be narrow to prevent the creation of wind tunnels.
- Large open spaces should be avoided except for specific needs and uses that require them. Existing large open spaces can be divided with windscreen devices like trees and other physical barriers.

**RECOMMENDATION 7: PROHIBIT GATING**

Public safety has emerged as an important concern for many Chinese urban dwellers, and gating has been a tangible symbol and response to this growing fear. The negative effects of gating, including challenges to walkability and urban navigation, street life, and social inclusion, as well as the fact that it is unlikely that gating actually increases safety, have already been thoroughly reviewed in this thesis. Although perception of safety is a clear driver in Chinese urban development, urban design should address safety in ways other than the problematic neighborhood gating method.

**Design Guidelines**

- Gates should not be allowed around entire neighborhood units. Gates could be permitted in small groupings of 1-10 homes.
- All streets should be public. There should be no private or guarded roadways.
- In existing gated communities, gates should be removed and connectivity to the larger street network should be restored.
- Community policing through “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 1961) and mixing stores and other late-operating establishments within residential neighborhoods should be encouraged.

**IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This thesis has aimed to understand the role of the built environment in facilitating or discouraging public life and community interaction in Beijing’s traditional and contemporary neighborhoods. The design principles have drawn from interviews, direct observations, and consultation of secondary sources and could be used to guide...
future neighborhood development in a way that is conducive to social life and community interaction. The principles could also apply to retrofit schemes of the many existing superblock neighborhoods that lack public life.

There are several steps that would need to occur to allow for this type of neighborhood development in China, and future research should examine political and other structural barriers in more detail. Preliminary thoughts based on this study are discussed here.

Regulatory issues would need to be considered and resolved. On a micro scale, current construction regulations in Beijing would not allow some of these design recommendations to be carried out. For instance, current regulations mandate relatively wide distances between buildings, which makes compact urbanism difficult or impossible to achieve. Another example is the requirements for large building setbacks, which can prevent pedestrians from walking directly next to commercial opportunities as recommended for face-to-face commerce and renqi. Other regulations specify that an eight-lane or wider arterial road must be placed every kilometer and a main urban road must be placed every 500 meters. This runs counter to the recommendation laid out in this thesis to limit road width and car dependency.

On a larger scale, any real chance to counter the current trend of urban sprawl in China and encourage more thoughtful neighborhood planning would rely on a reform of China’s current land finance system, which creates incentives for municipalities to sell off as much urban land as possible to developers in order to finance government operations (in 2013, 55% of local government revenues came from land sales). In order to achieve the types of regulatory reforms necessary to roll out neighborhood development that is conducive to public life, there is a need to shift the perception of China’s leadership about what a progressive city looks like. Since China’s opening up and reform, urban forms in Chinese cities have selectively learned from western neighborhood types—many of which have been rejected in the west already. Fortunately, there is some indication that the current leadership is open to a change in the status quo of urban development and has begun testing more walkable, sustainable models. For example, Peter Calthorpe, the American planner famous for coining the term “transit-oriented development,” has been working with the Chinese government to pilot new master-planned neighborhoods that are pedestrian- and transit-oriented and built at a more human scale. Elsewhere in China, plans are moving forward to build car-free cities and other urban form models that are meant to be more environmentally sustainable and compact. These developments are encouraging from the regulatory standpoint.

Would these principles be attractive from the perspective of real estate developers in China? The current prevailing development model of gated tower neighborhoods is easy to roll out cheaply on a mass scale because it is so replicable, without a need to take into consideration the unique context of each area of a given city. This is, of course, bad planning and urban design, but it is an efficient and profitable way for developers to put units on the market. However, if the design recommendations outlined in this thesis were applied, the result would be neighborhoods that

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5 World Bank, Urban China, Page 141.

6 Bosler, “Why Haven’t China’s Cities Learned from America’s Mistakes?”

7 Calthorpe, “Does China’s Urbanization Spell Doom or Salvation?”

8 Davies, “China Is Building A Huge Eco-City Where No One Will Need To Drive.”
are not only more conducive to public life and community interaction, but also more energy efficient for their managers, with higher unit density and increased accessibility as compared to the current model. The livability and social factors of the design principles listed here should only make the neighborhoods more attractive to potential buyers and renters.

It is interesting to note that the urban design recommendations listed here were drawn from the very specific context of Beijing, yet many of the principles reflect contemporary trends in urban planning and design outside of China, where walkable, bikeable, compact neighborhoods have come to represent a progressive urbanism. This thesis has made the case that neighborhood design can have great impact on social life and community interaction in Chinese cities. The resulting planning and design recommendations can not only create neighborhoods that sustain a vibrant public life—they can also support efforts around the world to create more inclusive, sustainable cities.
## NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN AND PUBLIC LIFE IN BEIJING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRINCIPLE</th>
<th>SMALL UNITS, LOW RISE</th>
<th>CREATE A HIERARCHY OF COMMUNITY-SCALE PUBLIC SPACES</th>
<th>MIX RESIDENCES, WORKPLACES, SHOPPING, AND ENTERTAINMENT</th>
<th>CREATE A STREET HIERARCHY, ENCOURAGE BIKING AND WALKING</th>
<th>ENCOURAGE FACE-TO-FACE COMMERCE</th>
<th>ENSURE THAT PUBLIC SPACES HAVE SUNLIGHT, AVOID WIND</th>
<th>PROHIBIT GATING OF NEIGHBORHOODS</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GUIDELINES</td>
<td>• Regular fabric of 2-4 stories; occasional mid- and high-rise buildings</td>
<td>• Residential units associated with small, semi-enclosed, semi-private outdoor space shared by a maximum of 20 units</td>
<td>• Plan new residential communities with nearby employment, shopping, and entertainment opportunities. Mixed-use development, including live-work schemes, is optimal</td>
<td>• Street hierarchy has cars on outer streets and walking and biking on inner streets</td>
<td>• Parcels with diverse widths; focus on narrow parcels to encourage local businesses and service diversity</td>
<td>• Public spaces planned for areas with consistent sunlight</td>
<td>• Gates should not be allowed around entire neighborhood units. Gates could be permitted in small groupings of 1-10 homes</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Make it easy for residents to move between private and public space</td>
<td>• Unit have doors onto shared outdoor public spaces.</td>
<td>• Include local commercial corridors with small-scale local shops for everyday errands and needs</td>
<td>• Outer streets include bike lanes with physical street buffers, walkable sidewalks (&gt;3.5m wide)</td>
<td>• Extend private shop control over adjacent public sidewalks to enable outdoor vending and storefront permeability</td>
<td>• Enclosed or semi-enclosed public spaces offer refuge from wind</td>
<td>• All streets public</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Unit sizes varied to encourage diversity of family types and income</td>
<td>• Public spaces customizable</td>
<td>• Informal commerce and vending allowed in public spaces</td>
<td>• Interior neighborhood streets narrow (6-7.5 meters wide) and used primarily for biking, walking, and some parking</td>
<td>• Transparent or open storefronts</td>
<td>• High-rise buildings stepped-up in the direction of prevailing winds to prevent the creation of wind tunnels</td>
<td>• In existing gated communities, gates removed and connectivity to the larger street network restored</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Where taller development occurs, the ground level should be low-rise and human scale</td>
<td>• Larger public space designed with &quot;outdoor rooms&quot; located within a 30-minute walk of all residents</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Parking on these streets for residents only, could be issued by permit</td>
<td>• Pedestrian walkways located directly adjacent to storefronts</td>
<td>• Streets narrow to prevent wind tunnels</td>
<td>• Community policing through &quot;eyes on the street&quot; and mixing stores and other late-operating establishments within residential neighborhoods</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Street furniture and exercise equipment clustered close together to allow for social interaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Allowing informal street commerce and yaohu</td>
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<td>• Large open spaces avoided except for specific needs and uses that require them. Existing large open spaces divided with windscreen devices like trees and other physical barriers</td>
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Summary of urban design recommendations and guidelines.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Zhang, Li. “Contesting Spatial Modernity in Late Socialist China.” Current Anthropology 47, no. 3 (June 1, 2006): 461–84. doi:10.1086/503063.


SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- How long have you lived in this neighborhood?

- Where do you live? Where do your friends live? Where does your family live?

- What do you like about living (/working) in this neighborhood?

- Is there anything that you don't like about living (/working) in this neighborhood that you wish could change?

- Where do you usually meet and talk with friends? Do you know many of your neighbors? (no, some, most, all?)

- What types of things do you do outside in your neighborhood (garden, exercise, hang out)? Where do you do them?

- Do you find it pleasant to walk around the streets in this neighborhood? Why or why not? How could they be improved?

- What is your favorite street to walk along in this neighborhood?

- Where do you usually go food shopping? How many times a week do you usually go food shopping?

- What other places do you visit in the neighborhood?

- Where do you work and how do you get there?

- Do you ever store things outside your home (like your bicycle or shoes)?