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# BRIEFINGS FROM THE LAND OF THE DRAGON: THE OLD HOUSE



*The orient brings with it a secret charm of Zen stereotypically unknown to the West. The author's journey to find his dream house in China, a traditional 'Chinese House', throws a different light on Chinese culture and underscores the not-so-subtle changes that rapid modernization is inducing.*

**“DID** you find the Chinese style Old House yet?” asked Li Qing Fu, one of my Chinese friends. That was a painful reminder to my oft-postponed quest to find a traditional Chinese style house. I always coveted living in such a house, the direct effect of all those Zhang Yimou’s movies (of the “Raise the Red Lantern” fame) I saw while I was in the United States.

When I relocated to China in 2003, I thought living in a traditional Chinese Style House was definitely on top of my agenda, and ranked high up on the “coolness” index. Soon I realized that cities and towns in China are not the way I expected. Whole of China is undergoing a mad rush to modernity that lends scant regard to houses and buildings with Chinese style architecture. The old buildings and houses are being demolished at a bewildering pace to give way to citadels of glass and concrete. Cities and towns in China today are bristling with a brash display of skyscrapers announcing the emergence of the new Superpower. First-time visitors to Shanghai are often shocked at the sophistication and modernity of this city that competes with Paris, New York and

Tokyo all at once.

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Undaunted by the unfettered adoption of modernity all around me, I decided to give one last try to finding my dream house. The fact that the lease for my current apartment was expiring gave a fresh impetus to my quest. I spread the word that this time I was hell-bent on finding a Chinese style house. This was in a city 100 miles west of Shanghai. I urged my company’s staff to contact their friends to help find an “Old House” (in Chinese language, a traditional Chinese House is translated as “Old House”).

Comments such as “Chinese people no longer want to live in traditional Style Houses”, “If I have money, I would rather live in a modern house”, “This foreigner must be crazy to want to live in an Old house”, etc... fell onto deaf ears. Weeks passed by with no leads. Impatience set in and I decided to take matters in my own hands.

I hopped onto a taxi and asked the driver to take me to the Roast Duck Restaurant where I remembered seeing a couple of old Chinese style houses. The Taxi Driver told me it was a futile attempt as only native folks live in such houses and they are not available for rent. Even if they are available they are in a bad condition, no toilets, no bathrooms etc. “You foreigners have money. Why don’t you live in a modern house?” quizzed the Taxi Driver. I just nodded, as I didn’t want to engage in a philosophical debate. Undaunted I pressed on.



Traditional Chinese style homes

I stopped by a clothing store and asked the store lady if she knew of a real estate office that rents old Chinese style houses. She peered at me, intrigued, and wondered if I was insane. But she indulged me and handed the real estate section of the newspaper going so far as to give me a few tips on how to call the real estate

agents. I called a few numbers but no answer. Hmm... I thought, maybe it's lunchtime. So I walked around the neighborhood only to stumble into the house of Qian Zhong Shu, now converted into a museum. He is a well-known novelist known all over China for "Fortress Besieged", the book's theme being "those who are outside want to get in, and those who are inside want to get out". I couldn't resist mentally acknowledging the analogy to my quest for the "old house". Here I am, a foreigner desperately looking to live in a Chinese style house, when most of the Chinese are trying to get out of these and get into modern ones.

I must have been the only visitor to the museum that day. The caretaker was startled to see a foreigner at the museum. I paid the entry fee and took a quick walk around the house. Then I said, "Yes! This is exactly the kind of house I want to be living in". "Sir, this house is not for rent. This is a museum!" reminded the caretaker with a smirk on his face. With all the poetic Chinese I could muster I explained why I would like to live in such a



Modernity looming over the Ancient (at Nan Chang Jie)

house, and why I came all the way from India and the United States to live in such a house. He must have been moved by my eloquence. He said, "No such houses exist in the city anymore. But, my friend, I will write down the name of the oldest neighborhood in this city. You could try your luck there". He scribbled on a piece of paper the details of the neighborhood in the city where it was likely that I would find old Chinese style houses.

My mobile phone rang and I got a fast-talking real estate agent on the other line. Like any eager salesman he promised to get back to me soon. Lo and Behold, he did get back to me in

20 minutes and told me he had a house exactly like what I was looking for. I wasn't confident he really understood my requirement. The real estate agent took me to the Nan Chang Jie neighborhood. The street was very cramped and it looked like some narrow street in Karol Bagh, Delhi.

This was the first time I have seen such a dirty street in eastern China. There was a canal cutting through the neighborhood and all I could see the dark water and smell the decaying garbage probably getting stronger with the onset of the warm spring weather. I couldn't see how a well-maintained Chinese style house could exist in that neighborhood. The neighbors wondered what a foreigner was doing in their neighborhood. The landlord eagerly received me and showed me into a cramped house. I discovered the house was an old-modern apartment and not an old-Chinese style house. "Ah! I have become a victim of the ambiguity in the Chinese language", I mumbled to myself



Nan Chang Si Temple

loudly (Traditional Chinese style house, also translates as “Old modern-style house”). The agent sheepishly apologized for the miscommunication and like any good salesman said he would contact me once he found the real “old-Chinese style” house. So my search for the old-house went in vain. (This was one of the rare instances where I saw such a dilapidated neighborhood in eastern China away from all the glitz of urban China. I would bet in another 3 to 4 years this neighborhood was going to be razed to the ground to give way to a flashy apartment complex or a shopping mall).

In the evening, I want to try again to find the Old House. This time, I asked the taxi driver to take me to Nan Chang Si, a famous temple in the city. “This temple is certainly built with Chinese-style architecture”, the driver agreed, “but you cannot live in there. This is a temple! This is only for tourists to visit, to pray and to take pictures”, he explained. I said I was trying my luck to see if there are any houses around the temple that are old school. I got off the taxi

and took a walk around the temple. The area around the temple was a tourist area with lots of souvenir shops, beauty clinics and fancy restaurants. “Hmm...”, I thought. “This doesn’t sound like a place where I can find Chinese style houses”. Before I turned to head back home, I spotted a teenager showing off his acrobatic skills on his bicycle. He promptly invited me to check out the dance studio upstairs where his friends were practicing Hip-Hop. I found about 20 odd-teenagers with long hair, baggy pants coming out of the class. They looked like any Hip-Hop kids hanging out in suburban malls in the U.S. I was intrigued. One of them took the initiative to invite me to come to watch their class – scheduled to be held on Wednesdays and Thursdays. For obvious reasons I didn’t bother to ask if they knew about Old houses.

Walking around the temple area, I stumbled back into the Nan Chang Jie Street that I visited that afternoon. This time the stores around the Nan Chang Jie were almost closing. The only

stores open were odd-looking Barbershops with cheerful girls milling inside waiting for customers. Obviously, very few folks go into these stores for a real haircut. These are places where prostitution is rampant. These barber shops are not in seedy area, but right where other businesses and residential areas are. I walked through the neighborhood. Later I was told these are equivalent to the slums. Some of the houses seemed to be ok with all modern amenities (microwave ovens, refrigerators, air-conditioners etc). Lots of people were sitting around the dinner table and playing mahjong or cards.

I walked to the other end of Nan Chang Jie and hit a main-road. Right in front of me were four gigantic malls. From the Chinese characters, I gathered they were selling home furnishings. They were very modern stylish buildings – akin to a fancy shopping mall in Palo Alto. I was surprised at the disparity in wealth between Nan Chang Jie and these malls. It was already 11 pm and I waved a taxi back home. The taxi driver was really excited to speak with a Chinese-speaking foreigner. “Who wants to live in those houses?” chimed in the Driver. The Old houses represent the past, and Chinese are eager to demolish them to give way to modern structures. “We want to embrace modernity”, he said. That was the epiphany for me that day. The next day I promptly called my Landlady to express my intention to extend the apartment lease. But my dream of living in an “Old House” still lives on.

Maybe one day I will fulfill it...



Shanghai’s citadels of glass and concrete