

## **Transformation of Living Space in Hutongs through the Process of Urban Development\***

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### **Abstract:**

During the process of urbanization, traditional living space, in my case—hutongs in Beijing, are experiencing tremendous changes. The fate of Hutong is almost a thesaurus to devastate the traditional way of living, but to maintain the traditional outlook. This article presents findings of ethnographic research in Hutong community, where housed the most authentic indigenous people in Beijing. I have conducted fieldwork by living and visiting Hutong areas in the East District and West district of Beijing for ten months with subsequent visits later on. By exploring the symbolic meaning of hutong elements, how Hutong, as a historically significant residential space mean to the dwellers, how the dweller make sense of their self identity by living within this community and how Hutong has been differentiated into diverse use, such as tourist site in the trend of urbanization, I unveiled the current three statues of Hutong community, which are simultaneously in existence at present. This transformation to the physical level of space at Hutong, somehow alternate the mechanic that residents used to group and interact with others, which are the social level of space. The Hutong residential community thus has been shifted from a “face-to-face group” into a “stranger group.”

**Key words:** Hutong, Space, Urbanization

## 1. ORIGINS OF “HUTONG”

In terms of semantics the word Hutong, probably of Mongol origin, first appeared during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). This term means lane or bystreet, with traditional courtyards situated on both sides. It is a traditional residential form built within the Old City or Inner City in Beijing<sup>1</sup>, where most of the indigenous Beijingers dwell. The majority of the houses in these Hutong areas are very old and shabby, with no modern facilities like bathrooms or toilets built in (Yang 2014: 1). Zhang Qingchang, a Hutong study specialist, has pointed out in his book that the pronunciation of the word-Hutong, first appeared in the Jin Dynasty (1115-1234) and more supportive evidence has been found that the word Hutong was used to describe living space in the Yuan dynasty (Zhang 1990:23). From then onwards, “Hutong” gradually turned into one of the quintessential urban residential forms. A Japanese scholar Teichi Tada (多田贞一) mentions in his book *Beijing Local Names Ethnography* (1944) that the word Hutong originated from Mongolia. In Mongolia, a settlement larger than a village is called a Hutong. The use of this name not only appears in Beijing or Mongolia but also some other places in the northern part of China such as Harbin, Jilin, Liaoning, Hebei and Tianjin. Now the word Hutong is mainly used as a way to describe an old street in a residential area.

From antiquity, the most common characteristic of a settlement has been its close proximity to a water source. Interestingly, the word “Hutong” linguistically means “a well”. This has been proven by a number of scholars. In his book, *Beijing Hutong Discussion* (1981), Prof. Cao Er Si mentions that the word Hutong firstly appeared in a Yuan opera song (元曲). Linguists assume it came from the word Hottong, which means original residents assembling. This word in Mongolian also means “well”. Prof. Zhang Qingchang, a linguist confirms that the word “Hutong” has the same meaning as Hottong (浩特) in Mongolian. Prof. Zhang also mentions in his book *Hutong* and elsewhere that the word “Hutong” appears in numerous northern city areas of China and stands for a residential place (1990).

According to the scholars mentioned above, the word “Hutong” is Mongolian in origin and is used to describe a collection of residences. Although the Mongolian meaning of “Hutong” is “well”, a well or a water source was the essential reason for a tribe to choose a certain place to settle down. Similarly, the construction of Hutong was according to a location suitable for human beings to dwell in. This deduction is in line with my fieldwork experience. One of my informants, Mr. X, who lives on Xianyukou Hutong in the Qianmen area of Beijing, once pointed me to the entrance of this Hutong and told me, “This used to be named little bridge (小桥)”, although you could not see the bridge or river water anymore. But the name was a clear clue that there had to be a water source there. Once the water supply system is built up, humans can expand away from

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<sup>1</sup> During the time I conducted my fieldwork, there were four districts in the inner city of Beijing: Chongwen District, Xuanwu District, West District and East District. In 2013, Chongwen District and Xuanwu District were merged with East District and West District respectively. Therefore, there are now only two districts in the inner city of Beijing. Chongwen and Xuanwu Districts used to be where the lower classes lived and are not very well developed, so it is said that this move was in order to promote the city construction and pull up the development of these two districts.

the original water source. So it is obvious that wherever a place is called Hutong, it must be a place where human beings have dwelled for a long while.

## 2 SYMBOLIC MEANING OF HUTONG ELEMENTS

The Hutongs built in ancient China, mostly in the Yuan Dynasty, function as historical museums, reflecting the residential pattern at that time. They were built with many special features some of which no longer function practically, for example, the special stone for getting on and off a horse and also the masonry to tie a horse (Yang 2014: 46).

This mysterious architectural form of rich connotations is the typical representative of traditional urban China, or you could say that the Hutongs themselves are a live archive of history.

One of my informants, Mr Li, who lives on Dajiang Hutong, told me: "symbolic meaning and metaphor can be found through considering the ways in which Hutongs are built. For instance, the normal citizen couldn't build their house with a double layer of tile. Only those who were relatives of the royal family could do so. The buildings outside the Forbidden City could not use yellow or golden tiles because this was an offense to the emperor as the colours yellow and golden were emblematic of the emperor". My conversation with Mr Li took place outside the courtyard where he was living. He pointed me to the Men Dun<sup>2</sup> and explained to me: "There are secrets hidden in these men dun. If you go and look around these formal courtyards you will find most of them have men dun, which tell the visitors information about the household. For example, a box shaped men dun means that the master of the family is a civil official; while if it is a drum shaped round men dun, then the master of the family is a military officer. If there is a lion on the men dun, then the master of this family must be related to royal kinship. If the lion is in a standing posture, then this family has a higher social status, while if it bends over, then it means it is from a relatively lower social level. I cannot finish this explanation in a few words! When people choose their marriage partner, one basic and traditional standard of selection is men dang hu dui (门当户对)<sup>3</sup>. This means the gate of the two families, which shows the family status, should be the same social level, including the bricks, piles, stair height, size of the gate, men dun etc. should match each other. This saying is still widely used nowadays and now you can see where it originated from."

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<sup>2</sup> two stones with exquisite sculptures and symbolic patterns on it, one placed each side of courtyard gate frame.

<sup>3</sup> This term literally means *similar gate, matching household*, which can be understood to mean two families have similar social hierarchy.

Below is a picture to show what the men dun typically looks like.



**Men Dun**

The picture is taken by the author at Di an men

As the urban way of life has changed rapidly, many of those features of a courtyard have become redundant, for example the masonry for tying a horse, but these physical remnants are like vessels of memories and history, passing down from one generation to next. For the residents who are currently living in this traditional residential form, such items, though no longer actively functional, are what makes them proud of who they are or where they live.

The structure of the courtyards, the roof sculptures, the way of laying the tiles and the shape of the pillars of the gateways, all these details contain significant meanings in term of history and oriental architecture and aesthetics. Much research has already been undertaken by architects, but there are not many social-scientific studies on these matters.

Alexander has observed that the design of the Hutong protects the privacy of the dwellers and also resists the wind in winter. To make a more appropriate place to live, most of the house owners would grow plants in their yards (Alexander et al. 2004: 2-7). According to what I have seen in the Hutongs, they are built with scientific concern as a residential place. They serve as a connection to link different compounds and blocks. Additionally, it also protects the privacy of those who dwell in them. Compared with the typical modern urban outlook, which is crammed with skyscrapers and high-rise buildings, a Hutong in its original form is narrow, without any car traffic. Its original width allows only pedestrians and bicycles to pass by, so it is a haven for kids to play in without fear of an accident. The courtyards built within the Hutong areas fence off the private life of Hutong dwellers from the outside passer-by because of the way of design. Hutongs are also a place where the dwellers can harmonize their personal life with nature. From what I have learnt from my informants, most of the plants they choose to grow will have a “lucky” meaning.

Mr Cao is an indigenous local Beijinger. He is in his early 60s. Mr Cao lives in a single-family courtyard near Di An Men (Yang: 2014:10). Mr. Cao has different kinds of plants in his yard as is shown in the picture below.(The picture is taken by the author at Di an men)



The tallest tree is a pomegranate. Because the pomegranate fruit is composed of a large number of seeds which are symbolic of descendants, the pomegranate is a symbol of having much posterity and is a commonly planted tree for families living in courtyards. Beside the pomegranate is a persimmon, which is pronounced similar to Shi (事). There is a Chinese dialect which spells it as Shi Shi Ru Yi (事事如意), which means everything happens as you wished. So persimmon is also a plant that stands for good fortune, Mr Cao told me.

As a residential area, the Hutongs do not only serve as a connection of different households or communities, they also serve as an extended area of the residents' homes.

### 3 AN EXTENSION OF HOME

As Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones noted, "The house and the body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person: like an extra skin, carapace, or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect. House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds". This argument can be applied in a modified stance when it comes to the case of living in Hutong communities. (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995: 2)

A Hutong, as I mentioned above, is a lane, connecting living compounds and allowing pedestrians



and bicycles to pass through. In this way, a Hutong itself is a public space. But according to what I have experienced in the Hutongs during my fieldwork, I found the way the dwellers behaved in Hutongs illustrated that the extension of themselves was not limited to their own house. It penetrated, beyond their house to the courtyard and spread into the public space of the Hutong. There are clear signs to prove this.

In the Hutong called Changxiang er tiao (长巷二条) and Xingfu Street (幸福大街) where I conducted my fieldwork, many of the local dwellers wear pajamas and walk around their Hutong at ease especially in the morning. It indicates that the Hutong dwellers take the Hutong as an extension of their home, where they could unfold what would be restrained beyond this. It is clear that the concept of home to Hutong dwellers is larger than their house. To the Hutong dwellers, home is not only constrained within the house boundary that has been registered on the house property ownership certificate, but stretches into the extended Hutong they dwell within.

The Hutong dwellers like to decorate the Hutong in their own way. Below is a picture to show how the yard owner grows plants and sets a pergola in his Hutong. The pergola connects the houses on both side of the Hutong. In the summer time, the plant becomes green and it welcomes the neighbors living nearby to sit underneath the shade and chat with others. So it becomes an assembling spot that accommodates random chat. It is not difficult to tell that the dwellers consider the Hutong to be an extension of their own home through the way they maintain it. Home is a place to rest and relax, and the way the inhabitants construct the Hutong is making it such a place for every inhabitant. There is an old saying that best pictures the peace and tranquility within the Hutongs: pergola, fish tank and pomegranate tree; sir, chubby dog and overweight kid. This old saying pictures a contrast to the so-called “urban life”, which is busy, rushed and noisy. Life in the Hutongs is peaceful, enjoyable and full of ease. Although the hutongs serve as thoroughfares, they are not merely a cold physical space. Lefebvre has an intellectual way of describing space:

...first, the physical-nature, the Cosmos; secondly, the mental, including logical and formal abstractions; and, thirdly, the social. In other words, we are concerned with logico epistemological space, the space of social practice, the space occupied by sensory phenomena, including products of the imagination.... (Lefebvre 1991: 11–12)

I would like to summarize the three levels of space accordingly as physical space, abstract space and social space. The abstract space and social space are built through everyday interaction with the physical living space and with neighbors living nearby. The social practices of inhabitants serve to cultivate the abstract space, such as the pergola they build; and Social space is built through the social interaction with neighbors. They have emotions, memories and feelings attached to the physical Hutong in which they live. All of these tangible and intangible things

make Hutongs into places full of life which are strongly connected to the inhabitants dwelling there.

#### 4 INTERMEDIATE REGION

The way that Hutong dwellers act within their living areas seems to show that they take the Hutong as what Erving Goffman calls “Back region”, in the symbolic interaction perspective. In other words, the back region for a Hutong dweller is no longer merely what has been typically considered as private space, such as their house, or courtyard, but has been extended to the Hutong.

Erving Goffman is best known for his Major figure in the symbolic interaction perspective, Dramaturgical Perspective. One of his remarkable works is *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, published in 1956, with a revised edition in 1959. It is the first book to treat face-to-face interaction as a subject of sociological study.

According to Smith: “Goffman treated it as a kind of report in which he frames out the theatrical performance that applies to face-to-face interactions”(Smith 2006:33-34). Trevino interpreted from Goffman that when an individual comes into contact with other people, that individual will attempt to control or guide the impression that others might make of him by changing or fixing his or her setting, appearance and manner. At the same time, the person the individual is interacting with is trying to form and obtain information about the individual(Trevino 2003:35).

Ritzer summarized it in this way:

In social interaction, as in theatrical performance, there is a front region where the “actors” (individuals) are on stage in front of the audiences. This is where the positive aspect of the idea of self and desired impressions are highlighted. There is also a back region or stage that can also be considered as a hidden or private place where individuals can be themselves and set aside their role or identity in society (Ritzer 2008:372).

The front region and back region clarification are key concepts in the discussion of dramaturgical perspective. In between the front region and back region, there should be a channel serving to connect the two. What I have seen from my fieldwork experience suggests the existence of an intermediate region in between front stage and back stage. It is a connection and transition from the back to front stage, which Goffman only pointed out briefly. Goffman may have inconspicuously alluded to it in an example in his book:

When a neighbor dropped in to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door into the cottage. Since lack of Physical obstructions outside the cottage and lack of light within it usually made it possible to observe the visitor unobserved as he approached the house, islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door. However some visitors, in appreciating that this examination was

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occurring, would blindly adopt a social face a long distance from the house, thus ensuring the projection of a constant image.(Goffman 1959: 19)

The way through the cottage and the door is what I want to unfold here. I would like to define it as the intermediate region.

The intermediate region is a transition zone in which the actors do not need to tensely focus on performance, but still cannot as relax as in the back stage. An actor in this intermediate area cannot do what he wants to do as he may when in the back stage, yet he does not need to project a totally different version of himself. The intermediate region physically should be a connection between the front stage and back stage, while to the actors, depending on the distance to the front stage, the intermediate region will bring actors a different level of tension. The length of this intermediate region varies from situations. It can be either very long or very short.

My experience with Hutong dwellers tells me that indigenous Beijingers like to socialize with their neighbors by sitting in a corner of their Hutong. It is a typical scenario that after lunch, they take a wooden stool and sit in front of their own courtyard to chat with their neighbor. Their topic can be very casual or private. For example, one of my informants complained that her son did not take care of her well, in order to show her poor status in the family. In this way, she might be able to release her anger and gain more moral support for herself. Even though I sat beside her as a stranger to the community, she would still keep on talking about what happened domestically. Sometimes she looked for my opinion on the issue she discussed. This scene confused me: they were dressing casually, talking with their familiar neighbor, without any 'setting' on the stage, even if the topic was a domestic private issue. Seemingly, they considered this public lane as their back stage. But on the other hand, she started the conversation with the purpose to convince the audience of her tragic situation and look for a strategy to change her embarrassing situation. From the very beginning, she became the focus of all the others' visual attention. During her statement, she could check with a listener, if he or she was convinced or not through questioning them: Isn't it annoying? Isn't it uneasy for me? If they did not actively agree with any of her questions, she could add more evidence to support her viewpoint. Meanwhile, it seemed obvious that a performance took place on the front stage.

Or I have to say a good actress will make her audience feel like they are entering a real world rather than make them feel they are watching a performance. And a Hutong is such a place, since many back stage elements or symbols exist there. People can joke with each other here, some of them could be found walking while singing the Peking opera loudly or greeting another passerby, some of them play chess in the communal area in Hutong as easily as in their own house.

So to most of the inhabitants, the Hutong itself is an intermediate region linking the back stage of their own courtyard or house with the front stage of the main road. They can relax in this region, but at the same time, they should also be concerned about the judgments of others.



The picture is taken by the author at Qian men

## 5 PLIGHT OF HUTONG UNDER THE PROCESS OF URBANIZATION

In the process of urbanization, the current situation of the Hutong areas shows that this traditional living space is facing a new fate. Some of them have been preserved in the name of the cultural and historic protection of Beijing. Some of them have been dismantled to meet the needs of city reconstruction. The government has 25 blocks designated as a preservation area. Most of the traditional buildings will be preserved within that area, but the way of preserving varies from one Hutong to another. The government has invested to install modern facilities such as electronic heaters, gas pipes etc. to improve the living conditions of Hutong dwellers. In the meantime, the outside of the yard is painted and reinforced. The picture on the left is to show the finished look of the reconstruction of the inside.



Some of the courtyards were considered too shabby to be repaired. So they were pulled down and rebuilt according to how they were expected to look like. But the techniques used to rebuild were completely different from those used in the original construction, for example in building the walls. Originally, each brick was grey and needed to be polished before use. In the process of piling, one should fit with the other tightly and closely. In this way, the whole wall would be absolutely flat. It seems this way of re-building was no different from how other houses were built. The renovation aimed to keep the original outlook of the yard with grey walls and red doors.



During this process, some of the old stone was painted with mud, to make it look as it originally would have done. The picture on the left was taken by myself in a refurbished Hutong area. We can see the house has been built with brick inside and painted with grey mud outside.

Some other Hutongs are not so “lucky”. They have been demolished for different reasons, such as broadening roads or to be replaced by high-rise buildings. Some of them are outside of the 25 preservation areas, while others were dismantled before this protection policy come into effect. When I arrived into Qianmen, Xian yu kou area, I found there was a set of Hutongs named ‘long lane second’ (chang xiang er tiao 长巷二条) and ‘long lane third’ (chang xiang san tiao 长巷三条), if I translate it literally. I asked the local people with curiosity where to find the ‘long lane first’ (chang xiang yi tiao 长巷一条). They teased me with a sarcastic tone by asking me: “Can’t you find it?” I replied to them: “No I can’t.” “It will be impossible for you to find it. It is over there. Now it has been turned into the main street. The courtyards on both sides have been knocked down. This is what used to be called chang xiang tou<sup>4</sup> tiao(长巷头条)”.

## 6 HUTONG TOUR ITINERARY

The Hutong areas themselves do not only represent places of residence for the dwellers; they are also of great importance to artists, photographers, tourists and even those who used to live in the Hutongs but who have since relocated. As a traditional residential form, Hutongs have been developed into tourist sites in recent years. In Beijing, there are several major companies running this Hutong tourism. Some of the local residents are also running their own private tourism business “unofficially”.

When I first got to Xian yu kou Hutong, a man riding on a rickshaw was waiting in the entrance of the Hutong, and seeing me holding a camera he assumed that I was a tourist and said to me: “Get in the rickshaw and let me tell you a story or two about the Hutongs in this area.” I asked him: “Are you living here?” He laughed: “I was born and raised here. Because my company went

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<sup>4</sup> here the word tou means first, top, which is equal to one.

bankrupt, I found another way to earn my living.” It seems some of the Hutong dwellers are ready to open their lives to the public.

I first became interested in this research topic in 2005, when I joined a photography group. The members of this group were indigenous Beijingers, who grew up in the Hutongs, and had relocated into high-rise buildings. They wanted to catch a picture of their childhood, so they took their cameras and walked around the Hutongs to record their memories photographically. So Hutongs themselves no longer merely belong to the residents living within them. Because of the beauty of the architecture and the historic significance, Hutongs have connections with numerous outsiders. In a way, I feel the Hutongs themselves are like museums.

Some of the commercial businesses running in Hutong areas attract foreign visitors, and it seems that by taking part in the activities going on in these spaces, visitors may connect to Beijing's past. My Western friends who have been to Beijing have mentioned to me that they really enjoyed their stay in the Hutong Inn. They ordered ‘Great Leap Forward Brew’ together with a ‘Hutong Pizza’, which brings the tourist a sense of participating in the past and traditional culture. In this way, I feel the Hutongs are no longer just a place for the old Beijingers to dwell in. The experiences which Hutongs bring to other outsiders are more rich and diverse. The physical architecture together with the way these dwellers live within this very space forms an expansive and living museum. With this newly implemented tourism ‘function’, it is possible to describe the Hutongs as a three dimensional museum.

What makes a museum? The OED has this definition: ‘A building or room in which antiques or other objects of historical or scientific interest are collected and exhibited’.<sup>5</sup>

The Canadian Museum Association is more specific:

*Museums are institutions created in the public interest. They engage their visitors, foster deeper understanding and promote the enjoyment and sharing of authentic cultural and natural heritage. Museums acquire, preserve, research, interpret and exhibit the tangible and intangible evidence of society and nature. As educational institutions, museums provide a physical forum for critical inquiry and investigation. Museums are permanent, not-for-profit institutions whose exhibits are regularly open to the general public.*<sup>6</sup>

The above definition hints that four significant elements constitute a museum: Firstly, a physical space, where the institution dwells; Secondly, some collections for exhibition that possess historical, culture or scientific significance; Thirdly, the contents should interest the public; Fourthly, the museum should be a non-profit institution.

## **6.1 Hutongs as a Museum--The First Dimension**

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from The Oxford Paperback Dictionary

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from: [http://www.museums.ca/en/info\\_resources/reports\\_guidelines/museum\\_definition/index.php](http://www.museums.ca/en/info_resources/reports_guidelines/museum_definition/index.php)

If the above assumptions make sense, then the Hutongs should be counted as a museum. Firstly, they have a physical existence. As residential places, Hutongs accommodate inhabitants and their personal and social lives. The design of the Hutongs and each courtyard beyond them, the way people socialize with one another, the sculpture of the bricks and stone etc. are similar to the collections in a museum, which possess historical, cultural or scientific significance. What is more, Hutongs are distinct exhibits made unique among other museum features by the residents living within and the way in which they carry out their everyday lives. All of these could be seen as the exhibits within the “museum”, which fits the second criteria for a museum.

For a long time, Beijing has been a place that attracts tourists from all over the world, not least because of its political position as the capital of many Chinese dynasties. In recent decades, Hutong tourism has become more popular than ever before. There are companies in Beijing that run Hutong tourism. They have their own rickshaws, along with a special way of decorating them and interpreters who have been well trained with Hutong history, as well as basic knowledge of Hutong courtyard architecture. The directors at the Hutong tourist company have data in hand to show that since 1994 the total numbers of tourist participants have increased by 30% annually. The only exception happened in 2003, at the time of SARS. So the Hutongs do not only interest a small group of researchers or scholars, but are also popular with many from all over the world. Hutongs offer a contrast to the royal emperor related tourist sites; Hutongs show the citizen’s everyday life to visitors. And so Hutongs fit the third criteria of a museum: interest to the public.

The following picture could be another good proof of how the Hutong museum interests the public.



The picture is taken by the author at Qian men

It is not difficult to approach the conclusion that Hutongs, if they could be counted as a museum, are non-profit. Anyone can enter free of charge, no matter whether you are a tourist or a passer-by, because Hutongs function as city roads as well. The essence of free admission makes the Hutongs a real non-profit “museum”. In particular, Hutongs appear to be a museum that goes beyond its walls

## **6.2 An Interactive Museum -The Second Dimension**

What makes the Hutong museum stand out from other typical museums can be found in the remaining two dimensions. Almost all the collections in a typical museum do not have real life. This means that the exhibits are not able to respond to the visitors' inquiries or comments. The significance of the exhibits can only be interpreted by the visitors or researchers, and these exhibits won't speak for themselves. But the exhibits in the Hutong museum have the capacity to do so.

For the photographers and tourists coming inside the Hutongs, in most cases, both are able to have a conversation with the Hutong residents. Sometimes, the “exhibits” will talk to visitors initially. In my experience, when I first entered a hutong area, some locals would discern that I must be from outside that community and questioned me, “What are you doing”? After I explained what I was interested to see, they pointed me to where I should go. Once when I expressed my interest in the Hutong they lived in, a man who was coming out from his courtyard started to tell me, "This Hutong is called Da Jiang (first tone) Hutong (大江胡同). The one parallel to this Hutong on that side is called Xiao Jiang Hutong (小江胡同). It used to be named Da Jiang (third tone) Jia Hutong (大蒋家胡同) and Xiao Jiang (third tone) Jia Hutong (小蒋家胡同). During the Cultural Revolution, the name was modified because the word Jiang (蒋) seemed related to one of the Chinese Nationalist Party leaders, Jiang Jie Shi (蒋介石), which was politically sensitive. A long time ago, there was a big family who lived here, and their family name was Jiang (third tone), so the Hutong was named after the dweller's family name...." Telling stories like this is very common from what I saw during my fieldwork.

As these courtyards are not in a formal walled museum, the tourists are allowed to touch the bricks of the courtyard houses just as they might touch those of any random buildings, to feel the fine sculpture with their fingers, to experience the height of a perron<sup>7</sup> with their own feet.

This interaction might happen very naturally, sometimes not. On some occasions, visitors or tourist guides seem to forget this is also a living space for the dwellers, which is not completely public. There should be a boundary between the so-called exhibits and the visitors. I heard my informants complain to me that some tourists went straight into their courtyards without giving any notice in advance.

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<sup>7</sup> The courtyard has a perron as part of the gate frame. If visitors want to get into the courtyard, they will then need to stride over the perron. My informants told me that the height of the perron distinguishes government officers from civil citizens, in a way by which to discern their social status.

From the visitor's side, it is a luxury for them to have the chance to get first-hand knowledge from the 'exhibits', and at the same time, have interaction with them. To put it in another way, the 'exhibits' are not only there to be judged or studied but also to give reply and feedback to the visitors, because the displayed exhibits are courtyards and housing in which the everyday life is carried out by the Hutong dwellers, who are simultaneously part of the exhibits.

What the Hutong museum offers is more than the above. It even allows visitors to be part of the museum to better understand exhibits. This is similar to the ethnographic technique of participant observation.

### **6.3 A 3-D Museum-The Third Dimension**

There is a very popular tourist option, a program called 'Tasting the Hutong pattern of living'. This allows the visitors to stay with local inhabitants, eat with them, and have fun with them. In a word, being thoroughly involved in Hutong life gives tourists a chance to taste the Hutong living pattern. That is to say, the tourists themselves could become part of the displayed objects in the living museum. This is what I have called the third dimension: the opportunity for public outsiders to participate and to be one of the exhibits in the living museum in such a way that the tourist does not only know 'what' the living museum is and what it contains, but also know 'how' and 'why' Hutong life is like this by transferring into the role of resident for a while. (This is more or less like the frequently used method in anthropology called participant observation.)

This newly affiliated tourism function enables the Hutong community to harmonize its relationship with the societal mainstream in a very unique way compared to impoverished parts of modern-day inner cities, one might say, such as the ghetto community described by Hannerz (Ulf 1969). Despite there being discord of a kind between Hutong and mainstream lifestyles, the changing function from traditional living place to tourism place allows a friendliness to prevail. The mainstream Beijinger does not consider the Hutongs to be unpleasant places, rather to be full of funny and mysterious old stories.

The most special features which makes the the Hutong 'exhibits' unique among other museums are the residents living within: the way they carry on their everyday life. With the photographer and tourist coming inside the Hutong, the residents gain self-satisfaction from the visitors' admiration of their houses and their story-telling ability. Hutong tourism is becoming more popular than ever before, as stated.

This is what I, as someone who is not an indigenous Beijinger, have learnt about their life from a macro-level before I moved in. The Hutong has transformed its major function from a residential place to a tourist site as a way to harmonize with the mainstream. After staying with residents in a courtyard in a Hutong for ten months, I found out that the indigenous local inhabitants have a way of understanding their current every day life that is very much different from what I thought before I moved in to stay with them.

Seemingly, what should be displayed is decided by the local inhabitants in the Hutong; it looks as if the inhabitants are holding the right to choose whether to be modernized or not which is against MacCannell's argument: 'modernization simultaneously separates these things from the peoples and places that made them break up the solidarity of the groups in which they originally figured as cultural elements, and brings people liberated from traditional attachments into the modern world, where, as tourists they may attempt to discover or reconstruct a cultural heritage or a social identity'(1989:13).

Driven by the economic benefits, the Hutong residents unavoidably open their doors to welcome the tourist visitors, which might bring them life support financially, if the government doesn't change their attitude towards the definition of a historical and traditional city and intervene in traditional culture protection. Although the traditional remnants of the hutong are released into the modern world, the people and things still maintain solidarity as a group. Because traditional elements are the selling point to the consumers oriented market, which is a good way to develop economy. Therefore the Hutong dwellers and authorities would consciously try to keep them. This bittersweet way of keeping the tradition may be the only point worth celebrating.

Giving up their privacy and the abandoning of their life routine to get involved in the tourist business is like a tolerance to a modern world's requirement. To put it into another way, the construction of abstract and social space, based on the physical space, has been modified intentionally. Yet those traditional courtyards and dwellers, who live there for many generations have been kept together. The museum is still there with life.

## 7 AN EMPTY SHELL MUSEUM

One new emerging tourist site in Beijing is Nan luo gu xiang (南锣鼓巷). This Hutong area is under the protection of the government and has been put on the list of 25 preservation areas. This area is one of the most traditional Hutongs still in existence in Beijing. It was built when the Yuan dynasty set the capital in Beijing. During the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, Nan luo gu xiang was the downtown area, where many distinguished princes, business men and artists dwelt. Their finely built courtyards are now refurbished, and have been put into commercial use. Some of them have been modified into schools, hotels, office sites, dormitories, etc. The original dwellers are no longer living there. The main street of Nan luo gu xiang is a bar street that is full of souvenir shops, cafés, street food and bars. Below is a picture to show how it looks now on the main street.



The picture is taken by the author at Nanlou guxiang

When I walked into this area and talked to the shop owners, all of them were renting the units from the locals. The original inhabitants had moved elsewhere. Some of the house owners have a strong will to stay, although the outside appearance of the Hutong is just a commercial street instead of a residential community. One of the courtyard owners put a notice on their gate to warn the tourists not to disturb their life, as can be read from the picture below: 'Don't visit us, we need privacy'.



The picture is taken by the author at Nanlou guxiang

We can see it is not easy to stay where they used to, as from outside the courtyard, the whole function of area has been shifted into a tourist site. The Hutong is no longer an intermediate region for the dwellers, instead, it is a public space or front stage. The facilities that served this community for decades are out of use, for example the grocery shop pictured below. The neighbors who have been living nearby for many generations have moved away, and even maintaining their own life in their personal yards is challenged by the innocent tourist wandering in. It is not because the tourists are bad mannered: they assume this area has been completely modified into a tourist site.



The picture is taken by the author at Nanlou guxiang

There is more than one place like Nan lu o gu xiang in Beijing: the compound opposite Nan lu o gu xiang- Bei lu o gu xiang, is now in the process of reconstruction and the aim is that it should become an extension of Nan lu o gu xiang. It is not difficult to name other examples, say Houhai, another huge hit with tourists to the north east of the Forbidden City central area. One of my informants, Mr Tang used to live in Houhai. He is thirty-nine years old and is working at a digital product company as a senior manager. He is an indigenous Beijinger who really appreciates Peking Opera and is good at traditional Chinese 'cross talk'<sup>8</sup> both writing and performing. In his

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<sup>8</sup> This is an art performance. It is usually performed by two actors joking with each other on a certain theme in order to entertain the audience.

words, "I practiced these skills by playing with other kids living nearby while I was little." His parents and grandparents used to live in that area and he also grew up there. In the year 2002, they all moved to the Tong Zhou district of Beijing, over 28km to the east of the city centre, because they couldn't bear the noise after Houhai had been modified into a tourist site, and that being done regardless of the feelings of those dwelling nearby. He said: "There are tourists in the day time visiting the Yin ding bridge, and the Yan dai xie Street etc. To meet the need of the tourists and to make good income, many courtyards have been bought or rented to open restaurants and gift shops. It is no longer a suitable place to live as it used to be. It is terrible especially at night when the clubs and bars start their business that will last until 2 or 3am. Most of them have bands and singers, playing loud music or singing loudly. How could aged people bear this? They don't want to go outside of the house because they will no longer find peaceful or tranquil surroundings. Instead, it is noisy, restless and edgy. The Hutong we lived in years ago died." Because of its central location and the romantic natural environment --there is a lake and many famous historic people used to live there--thus it has been gradually turned into a café and bar commercial area. The neighbors living nearby couldn't bear the noise coming from the band performance at night, so some of them moved out. My informant Mr Tang is one of them. This is his and his family's first time living outside the inner city of Beijing. He told me: "My parents are getting old. They are not in a very good health condition. Living in a place like this makes it worse. Also I need to go to work every morning. It will be difficult for me if I don't get a good sleep. We have no other choice." Unlike some other neighbors who have moved out, they didn't rent their house out to those who want to run business in the Hutong. They want to keep it how they think it should be.

## 8 CONCLUSION

As can be seen from the above discussion, the Hutong space is originally suitable for a sound living. It is comprehensive and composed with three levels of space as Lefebvre has described. This living space is rich and full of significant meanings to the dwellers and even the outside visitors. Through the practice of everyday life, Hutong residents also produced other levels of space based on the unique layout of the Hutong and courtyards. Within the Hutong community, the inhabitants managed the space with sophistication, both at a physical level and a social level, to live a harmonized life. Hutong did not merely provide the inhabitants a place to live in; more importantly, the abstract space and social space built on top of this physical space made them live cohesively. The Hutong area is an extension of their homes, since it is neither the front region nor back region, but an intermediate region that serves as a transitional area.

Later on, to answer the call of modernization and meet the need of economic development, the function of Hutong space is changing gradually. Some of the Hutong communities have been turned into tourist sites, but at the same time, they implement their initial role- a living space. I describe this status as a three-dimensional museum. At this stage, the Hutong as a living space opens more to the outsiders. Because of this affiliated function, some of the traditional living courtyards has been preserved 'luckily': some have been refurbished with modern facilities

installed to ensure safer and better living conditions for those who dwell inside. As for the visitors, it is a sensational experience to have the chance to walk into the physical space of the Hutong, interact with the exhibits and even participant in the life of exhibits, being part of the museum. Although the way of life in the Hutong is changing correspondingly, yet the abstract and social spaces created on top of the physical space have been kept, as the original residents are still living within this physical space. In this process, the Hutong community has traded with its original look to keep it alive.

In the process of welcoming the outsiders by shifting the living space into a tourist site, the local Government's directions take effect and push or speed up this progress, to the point where now some of the Hutongs are no longer implementing their function as living space. This is because most of the dwellers have been dismissed and these whole areas are turned into generators of commercial tourism to attract visitors from the entire world. It is clear that the soul of the space-dwellers is gone. Also the original courtyards within the Hutongs are rebuilt. The soul of Hutongs, namely the dwellers and their way of life, has been moved away. Therefore, the fundamental level of space of the Hutongs is dismantled. The abstract space and social space built on top of it are subsequently devastated. What the tourists are consuming now is the imagination of the past of the site. The ground and roots of the Hutong space no longer exist. The Hutong exterior is still there for commercial consumption, as Yang mentions in her book: Hutong tourist businesses have been run by those who are not local, for example, running Hutong tourism and opening the Hutong Inn. Several of my Western friends who have been to Beijing have mentioned to me that they really enjoyed their stay in the Hutong Inn. They ordered 'Great Leap Forward Brew' together with a 'Hutong Pizza', which brings the tourist a sense of participating in the past and traditional culture (Yang 2014: 129). This status of the Hutongs, I would like to call a visionary Hutong museum.

After all, what has been preserved is just a traditional look but not a traditional way of life, nor is it authenticity. This is because of the emphasis on the physical space and neglect of the abstract space and social space, a neglect that is intangible but significant. Consequently, an original Hutong - an acquaintance assembled living community, or to say face-to-face group - is turned into a "stranger assembled society". One of my informants, whose painting is pictured above, commented in this way: "the Capital is still here, but Beijing has been dismantled".

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