



A vacant pigeon loft in Shanghai's old town after dwellers were relocated to better living conditions following an urban renew project



A woman in an old town household hangs her clothes using a long pole, while her husband rests on the sofa.



Some of the house owners in Shanghai's old town raised racing pigeons on their rooftops. — Illustrations by Tõnis Kimmel

# Old town sketches capture a way of life fast disappearing

Yang Yang

**T**õnis Kimmel, an Estonian architect who has been working in Shanghai since 2010, has spent eight years sketching the city's old town with his Drawing Shanghai group members.

"One night around 2015 or 2016, I was on my way home on foot from Pudong to Puxi (Shanghai is divided into Pudong and Puxi areas by the Huangpu River). Then I passed a kind of urban village and felt an immediate attachment to it. The windows of the houses were set low, so I had a chance to peek through them into the interior life of the dwellers.

"Back in Estonia, people always drew their curtains at night. I visited the place later frequently because it was so fun," said Kimmel.

The architect invited a group of friends to sketch scenes. Later it dawned on him that the "village" was part of Shanghai's old town. Many Shanghaiese used to live there.

People in the "village" were also more willing to start a conversation with him.

"There was an estate called Shuyinlou (书隐楼), or the Hermit's Library, around Xiaonanmen (小南门) in Huangpu District. We found the place on an online digital map among geographical names such as the Bund and the People's Square," said Kimmel.

Then a member of Drawing Shanghai made a phone call asking for entry. A granny surnamed Guo allowed the group in.

"The lane which connected the estate was so narrow. As we walked in, then all of a sudden we were in a garden and saw those Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) and Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) houses with sculptures and wooden carvings," said Kimmel.

The granny still lived in the estate during the group's visit. She was the last generation of a former wealthy family.

"And there was a man who lived in

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As an architect, I am thrilled by the way how ordinary people in China made their houses when they had a freedom to do this, and especially when their budgets were limited.

**Tõnis Kimmel**  
Estonian architect

a four-story house in West Tangjia Lane. On the ground floor he offered shampooing service for pet dogs and put up his bathing hut. On the second and third floors he was probably living, and on the roof he raised pigeons," said Kimmel.

Back in the 1950s and 1960s when entertainment facilities such as shopping malls or cinemas did not exist or were rare, men of the old town in Shanghai would raise pigeons in a rooftop cage for fun. Then they competed. They would take their pigeons to a faraway place, such as Hefei in Anhui Province or Datong in Shanxi Province, then set them free. Whose pigeons returned to their homes in the old town in Shanghai the quickest would be the winner.

The tradition has been preserved till now and in some households in the old town in Shanghai, we may still have opportunities to see pigeons cooing, fluttering their wings or bursting their way suddenly into the sky.

"In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, the old town dwellers started to mend their houses. They built an additional kitchen here or a storage room there. They planted climbing sponge gourds and raised cocks and hens.