



Tõnis Kimmel (left) and his Drawing Shanghai members. — Ti Gong

“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,” said Kimmel.

The owners of homes in Shanghai’s old town often used poetry to decorate their entrances, so that a walk in the old town would easily become a Chinese poetry trip, Kimmel said.

Elegant houses

Members of the Drawing Shanghai group once visited 96 Daochuan Lane (倒川弄96号) where two elderly people inhabited one of those elegant houses.

There was a grandpa who always welcomed the group. He told them that the archaic typeface used to write the three characters above his back portal was tricky and the rightmost character was not 夹 (*jia* meaning “in-between” in Chinese), although it looked like it.

A Tongji University professor, the grandpa recalled, had once told him what it actually meant, but his memory was playing hide and seek with him.

The group later found out that the line might come from the tail of the poem “Late Spring (暮春)” by Song Dynasty poet Lu You (1125-1209) that roughly translates as “several straw-thatched huts also serve as my home(亦吾庐).”

When Drawing Shanghai visited Daochuan Lane around June, 2021, eight families that used to live there had been relocated. By early December last year, the lane was demolished for an urban renewal and relocation project.

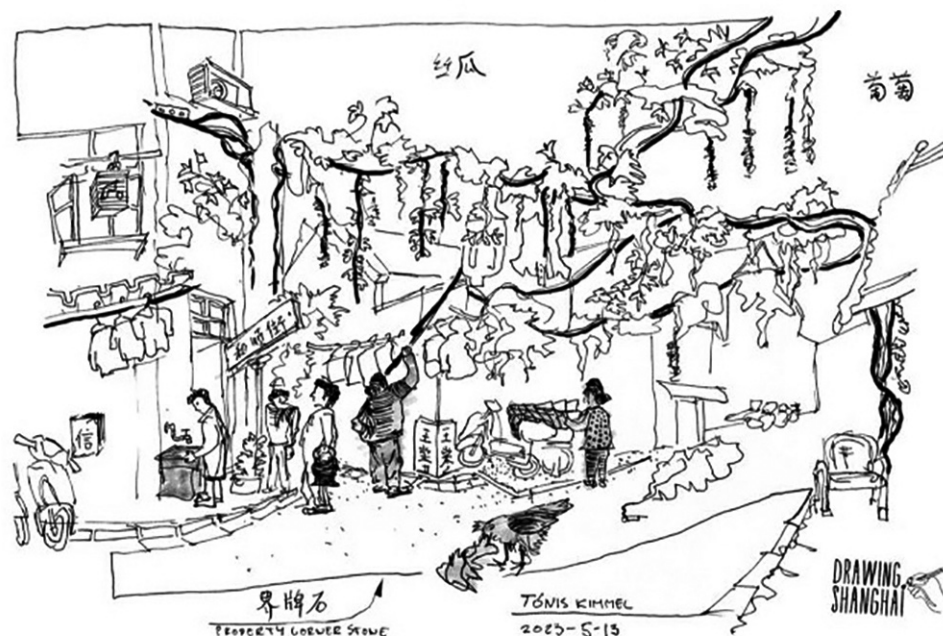
Historically, the lane was another river reclamation road. And its name Daochuan (倒川), part of a Chinese phrase 倒川横四 (make a quarter turn of 川 and maintain 四 in its current shape), is said to derive hieroglyphically from merchants’ secret bargain of the number 三十四, or 34, in the past.

Shuyinlou, or the Hermit’s Library, which had weathered 258 years of vicissitudes, became state-owned in 2020 and went through rescue maintenance by November 2021.

The mansion, first constructed in the Ming Dynasty, was set back from the narrow Tiandeng Lane (天灯弄) and hidden behind a wall 10 meters high. It had over 40 rooms and three interior courtyards. Being one of the oldest residences in Shanghai, its last inhabitant was a woman named Guo Yuwen.

Shanghai rose from a county town in 1291 in the Yuan Dynasty to the most populous county in all of China by the end of the 15th century, according to Katya Knyazeva, a Russian scholar on the old town.

By the 16th century, periodic bans on



In the lanes of Shanghai’s old town, people grow grapes and cucumbers above their heads.



A grandpa who lives in the old town explains that living space in his home is very limited.

marine trade imposed by the Ming Dynasty court hindered Shanghai’s port business and gave rise to a rogue economy of coastal plundering. Shanghai too suffered from repeat pirate raids. The assault, however, mobilized landowners to raise funds to build a defensive wall against invaders. An earthen rampart, about 4 kilometers in circumference, was erected in just three months, surrounded by a wide moat.

That formed Shanghai’s old town, which is circled half by the Renmin Road (人民路) and half by the Zhonghua Road (中华路) now, according to Knyazeva’s book “Shanghai Old Town: The Walled City,” which had inspired Kimmel’s later adventures in the first place.

The citywide urban renewal project, which had also put the old town in its demolition plan, is drawing to an end now. The last section of the old town, which a visitor still has a chance to witness, is around Mianjin Lane (面筋弄) in

Huangpu District.

In February last year, Kimmel and his Drawing Shanghai members held an exhibition at Urbancross Gallery in downtown Xuhui District displaying their portrayals of the old town they had ventured into.

“Each time I sent out an advertisement calling on people to join the sketching event, I was afraid that few people might care and were willing to come. But each time the event proved to be quite popular and bustling with drawing members,” said Kimmel.

“Shanghai’s old town lies under the shadow of tall buildings and is split by highways, but its street life reflects an environment that is centuries old. The network of lanes formed slowly, chaotically, following the contours of garden estates and creeks, and many neighborhoods here still express the free-spirited, entrepreneurial and resilient character of the old port,” wrote Knyazeva.