

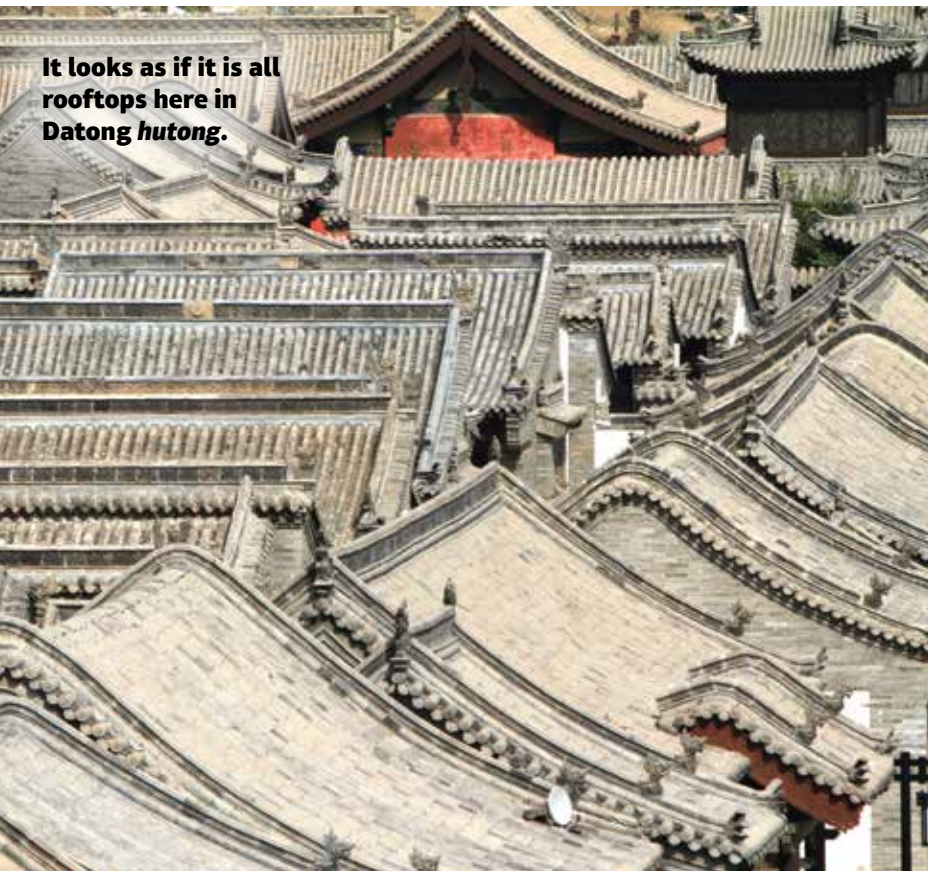
Let's Visit *Hutongs*

by Eti Bonn-Müller



A woman bicycles along a street in one of Beijing's hutong areas in 2014.

It looks as if it is all rooftops here in Datong hutong.



Nestled in the Old City of Beijing—a bustling, modern capital brimming with futuristic skyscrapers—are pockets of quiet, traditional neighborhoods known as *hutongs*. It is in these areas that you can still glimpse traces of how people lived hundreds of years ago. It is also there that elderly residents often maintain cultural traditions of centuries past. For example, some “walk their birds” to the park, where they hang the cages from tree branches as they chat or play chess with friends. (See photo on page 33.)



Bicycles are definitely the way to travel when you are in a *hutong*.

A Classic Design

Over the years, the term *hutong* has become synonymous with “neighborhood,” but it literally translates as “alleyway.” It was in these areas that a series of narrow *hutongs* connected dozens of *siheyuan* (one-story “courtyard houses” with pitched roofs), one after another. Thus, together, they formed little neighborhoods. All of the rooms within a house were built to face a central, enclosed courtyard. This classical Beijing design was conceived when the capital was established in 1267, during the Yuan dynasty when the Mongols ruled China. Some argue that the word *hutong* derives from the Mongolian word for “water well,” but no one knows for sure.

Originally, the *siheyuan* were built to house nobles and government officials. They were arranged along invisible north-south and east-west axes according to the principles of *Zhouli*, a Chinese ritual text based on **Confucianism**. Yet, look at a *hutong* today, and you will see that its shape more closely resembles that of a fishbone, rather than a precise grid. As the neighborhoods gradually formed over time, variations in the natural terrain—rivers, for example—slightly skewed the layouts. In addition, the entrance to an especially “good” courtyard house faced south. This aligned it with the precepts of *feng shui*, the Chinese practice of situating buildings and decorating their interiors in a harmonious and auspicious way (see also page 19).

As in today’s cities, a *hutong*’s name usually reflects what the area was known for: a river, lake, park, type of food, marketplace, or the like. Thus, many of these names are still in use today. For instance, you can stroll through

Confucianism refers to the philosophical system practiced by the Chinese philosopher Confucius (551–479 B.C.) that emphasizes order, moderation, and cooperation between superiors and subordinates.



The main street in the *hutong* known as Jingvang

Jin Yu (“Goldfish”) *Hutong* and *Yin Wan* (“Silver Bowl”) *Hutong*. There are even neighborhoods named for their famous “duck meat” and “chicken feet.”

A Guide to Who's Inside

The decoration above the entrance to a courtyard house tells the story of its original occupants. The number of cylindrical, wooden lintels, or “doorstops,” indicated the status of the owner’s family. For example, two doorstops told all that an official lived in this home, while 12 meant it belonged to a relative of the emperor. Similarly, the two marble piers, or drums, flanking the entrance to a *siheyuan* were symbolic as well. If the piers were circular, they showed that a military officer lived there. If they were square, the owner was a civil servant. If they had been shaped to resemble lions, the *siheyuan* was home to a member of the emperor’s family. Even the number of steps leading up to the residence



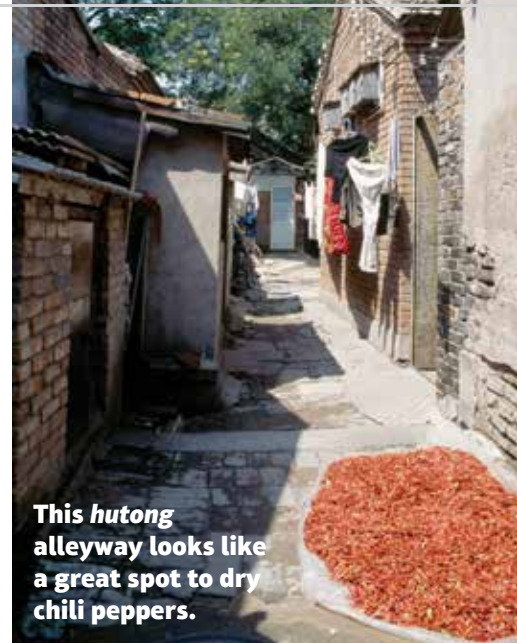
So many choices at this *hutong* outdoor market! What would you pick?

offered a clue about the occupant. Low-level officials could have no more than two steps; upper-level officials could have up to eight. Only the emperor could have the “supreme” number of nine!

Originally, *siheyuan* were for the ruling elite, and a single family occupied each spacious home. By the early 1940s, there were more than 3,000 *hutong* neighborhoods, and individuals from all walks of life now enjoyed these unique residences.



Calligraphy brushes for sale in a *hutong* artist's shop



This *hutong* alleyway looks like a great spot to dry chili peppers.

By the mid-20th century, it had become common practice for many families or extended family members (sometimes up to two dozen) to share a single courtyard house or to rent out space in their homes to tenants. Today, it is thought that no more than 1,000 *hutongs* still exist. Most of the others were destroyed during the Cultural Revolution of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as during a large housing and construction boom that began in the 1990s and continues to this day.

Close Quarters

Hutongs are famously narrow. This makes them great places to ride bikes, rather than drive cars. As a result, bicycles play a big role in the lifestyle of the people who live in these areas. By definition, in Beijing, an alleyway is supposed to be no more than 30 feet wide, but many are much narrower. In fact, the narrowest *hutong* in Beijing is a mere 22 inches wide! Since the roads in these neighborhoods were originally made of mud, there is a saying that, when it was windy, Old Beijing was like an incense burner—with all of the dust blowing up and swirling around in the air in the confines of these narrow passages. When it rained, the roads were so muddy that they were nearly impossible to cross.



Let's play! The bird seems to be watching his "friends" play a game in an area of a *hutong* set for demolition.

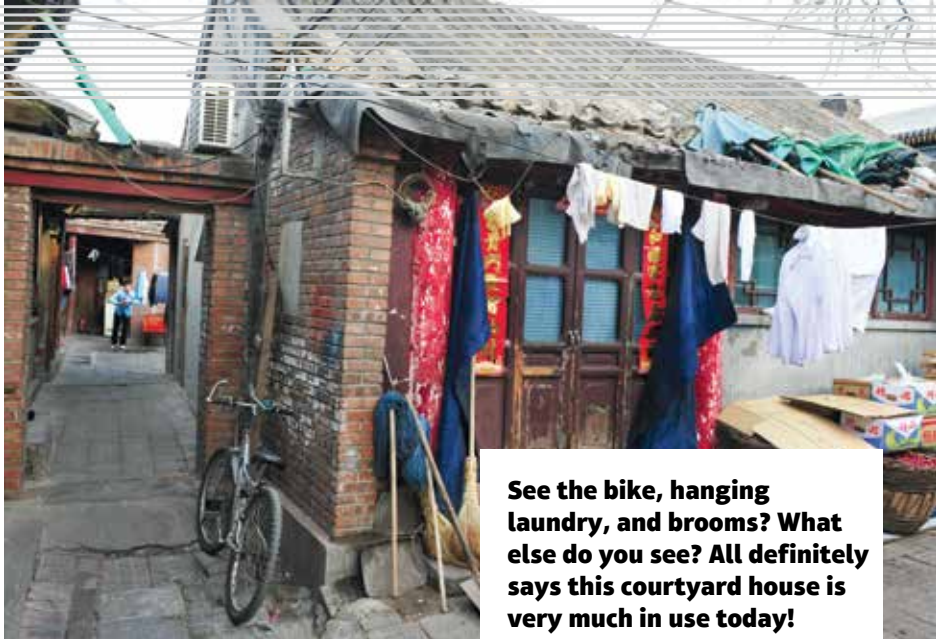
In recent years, some wealthy individuals, including media mogul Rupert Murdoch, have lavishly renovated a handful of private courtyard houses to include up-to-date infrastructure. Others have been modernized and turned into hotels. Still, some *hutongs* are rumored to have sewage systems dating to the Ming dynasty! Of the remaining *siheyuan* that belong to average citizens, most have no indoor toilets. Residents must walk outside and down the alleyway to use a shared public facility, even on the coldest of mornings. To bathe, residents must also use public facilities outside their homes. Some people do, however, boil water and keep a towel and basin

by the door for day-to-day washing. Another feature of this culture is that many houses are still heated by burning honeycomb-shaped coal briquettes.

Hutong communities are very tight-knit. Residents all know their neighbors, and they usually leave their doors open. Orange and white cats are often seen tiptoeing from roof to roof of courtyard houses. The walls of courtyard houses are about 20 inches thick and serve to keep those inside warm in the winter and cool in the summer. With everyone living so close to one another, the thickness of the walls also helps to block chatter from neighbors. Ventilation is poor, but small windows located high up on the walls help with airflow.

Home Sweet Home

Despite the challenges of the *hutong* lifestyle, many people do want to live in these charming historic neighborhoods. For young people, the location in the city center means that they can



See the bike, hanging laundry, and brooms? What else do you see? All definitely says this courtyard house is very much in use today!

easily meet up with friends at their favorite noodle shops and hangouts. Older people appreciate the one-story layout that offers them easy access to their families and friends. As was true hundreds of years ago, some residents still delight in plucking ripe persimmons and dates from trees blossoming in their courtyards. Others maintain the tradition, started in centuries past by nobles, of keeping pigeons in coops and attaching whistles to them so that all can hear the music as the birds soar above the neighborhood. Many still store their homegrown vegetables outside most of the year to keep them fresh and cool. They then use the inedible rinds of dried-out gourds as sponges to wash their dishes.

In the early 21st century, the Chinese government set aside 33 *hutong* preservation districts, or areas where courtyard houses cannot be torn down and replaced with modern structures. This mandate protects some 600 *hutong* neighborhoods. Others, sadly, will most likely disappear over time. A small number of nonprofit organizations, such as the Beijing Cultural Heritage Protection Center, are working at a furious pace to document these neighborhoods and the recollections of residents before these precious portals to the past are lost forever.



The owners of these *hutong* shops fit an impressive variety of goods into a small space.

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