



What a Difference a Brick Makes? Transitions of Memory and Shanghai *Shikumen* Walls

Abstract: This essay is intended as an appreciation of an overlooked element of Chinese material culture: discarded blue bricks from demolished *shikumen* houses in Shanghai. It contemplates the concept and materiality of a wall from a unique perspective, combining insights from Chinese architecture history and scholarly tradition of appreciating stones. Combining scientific and poetic approaches, the author argues that these bricks can be contemplated analogically to ink landscape paintings and famous Dali dreamstones. The author uses these clay objects as a starting point to reflect on the rapid transformation of Chinese cities and complex relationship between enduring tradition and ongoing modernization.

Keywords: brick, Shanghai, ink painting, dreamstone, longtang

Wall in China can and usually is associated with division, centralization, symmetry, nationalism, and reinforced confinement of individuals and whole communities. Indeed, throughout the Chinese history, walls marked the occupied territories, as well as embodied hierarchies and certain systems of value. They facilitated defense, along with control of movement and inhabitation. Both city and home walls differentiated between the outer and the inner, marking strict horizontal and vertical boundaries and sociological differences in allegiance, subjecthood, locality, gender and wealth (Hay 1997, 12-13). To some extent different forms of material or conceptual walls were intended to distinguish China's peoples and settlements from their less settled, and supposedly less literate neighbors (Hay 1997, 11). There is, however, a complementary quality to potential segregation or oppression imposed by a wall (including a screen wall) – the one of protection and unity. Walls separate, but also embrace, and, as such, can mark or even enable shared spaces of intimacy and belonging, as well as precious and vibrant life. Wall – if only it allows transgression – does not have to be hostile. It can be beautiful too, if only approached with a mind open to being surprised and a caring heart.

This text is intended as an appreciation of an overlooked element of Chinese material culture. It is something of a thought experiment conducted in tribute to the vanishing brick walls

of historical neighborhoods in Shanghai. John Hay observed that China has a history of approximately 2500 years of wall-building and, until 1949, the country was a landscape of walled towns (Hay 1997, 11–12). According to Shan Man, importance of the wall in the Chinese context is such that its very relation with built-scape is quite unique: “Walls are becoming architecture within buildings being reduced to attachments of the walls” (Shan 2018, 296). Furthermore, the scholar points to the fact that “From the country to the home, “wall” shaped the space form in different scales as isomorphic relations” (Shan 2018, 295) and goes as far as to conclude that “the status of the wall in Chinese space cannot be replaced. Without the wall, the Chinese space will no longer exist” (Shan 2018, 298). Such conclusion makes Julia Lovell’s remark that “A twentieth century of revolutions, wars and Communism has turned hundreds of miles of Chinese walls into just so much rubble” (Lovell 2007, 31) particularly notable.

Nowadays, old walls of Shanghai vanish in several ways. Firstly, they keep disappearing most literally and irreversibly due to the demolitions of old neighborhoods of the modernizing city, which reimagines its identity and seeks more profitable urban layouts. Secondly, common rather superficial renovation projects, implying essentially merely a facelift of the façades, often make the factual historical wall disappear underneath multiple layers of harmful paint, thick layers of concrete or various faux brick wall coverings. Thirdly, it happens that historical brick houses are demolished and replaced with concrete walls imitating the original appearance of the lane but with the use of new materials and technologies. The intention is usually to preserve the look (often referred to as “historic appearance” of a building) and frequently apply texture similar to the original brick wall – yet no careful eye can be fooled by lines too straight even for contemporary mass produced bricks, not to mention nineteenth century ones. So, interestingly, brick walls vanish, but, at the same time, patterns evoking them have become over the past years a favorite design motif, both in the interiors (for instance in the shopping malls, big and small restaurants, or hotels duplicating “old Shanghai”) and in the streets. Somewhat ironically, walls surrounding construction sites (many of which had emerged in the location of demolished longtangs) are often covered with faux brick panels or painted over with *shikumen* motives.¹ While historic walls are not being comprehensively protected, patterns evoking blue and red bricks of pre-1949 Shanghai, distributed across the city and in designs, seem a favorite when it comes to

¹ *Shikumen* – traditional Shanghainese architectural style combining Western and Chinese elements that first appeared in the 1860s.

evoking the aura of Shanghai culture and past, both for commercial and heritage promotion purposes.

In this concise paper, I cannot engage into a complex analysis of the unique way of life and layered historical legacy, which old brick walls used to embrace. Neither can I discuss in detail the curated shift in perception and meaning of this architectural heritage, which seems to be increasingly associated with the Revolution in the recent years.² I am instead animated by the puzzling tension between the demolitions, which are perceived by the authorities as natural and unavoidable in the Chinese urban context, and the emergence of such extraordinary hybrid structures as, for instance, a giant *shikumen* archway erected in one of the crossroads in Jiading, which combines visual features of traditional *pailou* archway and *shikumen* architecture. In the present text, I intend to turn towards the materiality of the old walls and contemplate their unique captivating beauty in a situation when new walls in the city are built using completely different materials, and often get covered with vertical gardens or slogans praising either the city or Chinese socialism. Thus, this essay results from an approach similar to the one pursued in Chinese literati tradition, where unusual rocks and roots can be brought into the study, become provocations for thought, and be shared and enjoyed together with friends with mutual interests and common sensitivity. Some of the famous Chinese literati of the past knew how to be friends with stones and, at times, even wrote poems for them.³ At some point in my life I got into the habit of befriending discarded bricks, which I have been occasionally bringing back from my solitary walks in the disrupted urban surroundings. In my semi-hermitage in a lane attic, they have helped me to escape the big city buzz and flex thoughts, and, over time, overgrew with meanings, poems and memories.

In May 2018, I impulsively collected over a dozen of Chinese blue bricks from one of the demolition sites along Xinzha Road Shanghai (Photos 1 and 2), where historic neighborhoods had been demolished.⁴ Wooden elements had already been sorted out for recycling, complete bricks were removed for repurposing, and imperfect bricks remained in the site, gradually overgrowing with precipitous plants.

2 According to Yang Jian “Shanghai has preserved a total of 612 historic sites related to the revolutionary campaigns between 1919 and 1949. They include 497 former sites of key Party and government bodies as well as 115 memorial venues” (Yang 2021).

3 In 826, Bai Juyi wrote a famous poem *A Pair of Rocks*.

4 “Blue bricks” is the conventional translation of 青砖. In Old Chinese 青 can mean blue, green, black and the shades in between.

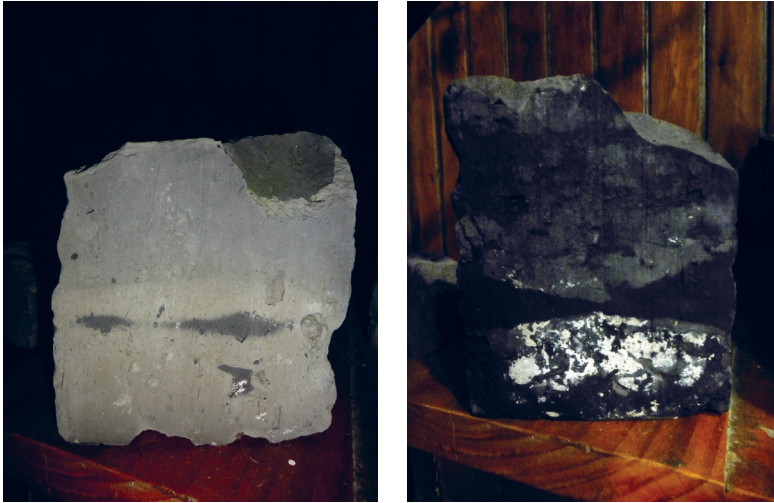


Photos 1 and 2. Discarded old bricks in a demolition site along Xinzha Road.

Attracted by the rich texture of these bricks and their distinct hues, I took several pieces home, washed them, and, to my great surprise, realized that they can be so much more than just wall fragments once the scale changes. Especially when placed on a carved wooden stand, they easily become clay objects in their own right. Moreover, depending on the light and perspective, irregular shades of blueish gray and black, occurring accidentally in the brick burning process, can unexpectedly evoke wrinkled surface of the lake, or rocks after the snow has melted, or a mossy path in the old temple. Equally unintentional residues of white paint or mortar can enhance the effect by creating an impression that a white dot is, in fact, a full moon above the hill, whereas an irregular white line can be easily reimagined as one of the renowned scholar's rocks against gloomy skies. In artificial light, glowing silica dust adds unique visual effect reminiscent of snowflakes or twinkling stars. Blue bricks, which ended up in the rubble next to the red ones, displayed additional visual effects reminding me of red soil or orange streaks of the setting sun. I went back to the demolition site and realized that many, though not all of the remaining bricks, could in a similar manner evoke most exquisite landscapes, including avalanches, islands shrouded in fog, karst mountains, caves and cliffs, forgotten towns, shorelines and glacial valleys, or night skies above snow covered hills. Some of these bricks evoke associations with more classical ink paintings, some incite associations with contemporary ink paintings, such as ones by Gao Xingjian.⁵ Therefore, even though these bricks can certainly be studied in a historical or critical manner

⁵ For instance: Gao Xingjian, *Lumière*, 2015; Gao Xingjian 高行健 *On the Shore (Sur la rive)* 此岸, 2016; Gao Xingjian 高行健, *Moonlight (Au Clair de la Lune)*, 2014.

as remnants of modernization and rapid urban transformation in contemporary China, I ended up following a very different and somewhat poetic trajectory, putting these sparkling iridescent fairylands in context of Chinese tradition of philosophical and aesthetic rock appreciation, pursuing striking correspondences between these bricks and China's famous dreamstones from Dali in Yunnan Province.



Photos 3 and 4. Two brick landscapes reminiscent of landscapes painted with brush and ink.

Dali dreamstones are also known as natural stone paintings (*shihua* 石画). They are slices of polished marble in which striations of mineral deposits resulted in “veins” of color reminiscent of landscapes painted in China using brush and ink. Like ink scroll landscape paintings, they can be accompanied by poetic calligraphies on the stone. Either encrusted in pieces of furniture or framed like paintings and decorative screens, they have been appreciated in China since Tang dynasty (618–907) as works of art (Schneible 2011, 2). The parallel between unintended inky landscape in dreamstones and bricks in my collection is striking (Photos 3 and 4) but the similarities go far beyond the visual resemblance. Indeed, both brick and marble can remain merely construction material or – as it turns out – can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities. Furthermore, both natural stone paintings and “brick paintings” I am collecting involve contemplation of an inky landscape without the name of the artist attached. Perhaps the most prominent analogy concerns the very process of revealing the inky landscape. Stone paintings are “buried” high and deep in the mountains, and cannot be revealed without an intervention into the natural site. Brick paintings are “concealed” in the old brick walls and cannot be retrieved without

a demolition. Both require a unique combination of certain visual competence and luck, both equally indispensable to succeed. The accidental process which leads to emergence of “ink landscapes” in both cases does not involve any intent whatsoever for these landscapes to be viewed by anyone, and yet the landscape is revealed. In case of the dreamstones, seasoned professionals, known as revealers, study the outside skin of the marble slabs and decide how to cut off the stone to obtain a piece of perfect beauty. In case of the bricks, construction workers destroyed the walls and then I acted as a “revealer” of a kind, walking carefully through the site and taking time to “discover a landscape” – decide whether it is indeed there, repeatedly seen in a certain discarded brick. Ideally, dreamstones should not be enhanced or alternated, only cut and polished – therefore, I did not manipulate the landscapes in the bricks either. I only decided which side(s) of the bricks disclosed a landscape to me, and which perspective was most interesting for a display (Photo 5 and Photo 6).



Photo 5. Brick displayed on a wooden stand.



Photo 6. Four bricks reveal to an attentive viewer views of four mountains, which may bring to mind famous Guilin scenery.

However, certain essential differences between dreamstones and inky bricks can be noticed as well. Bricks have a very different relation with time, as well as a very different appeal from rock and

stone. Of course, the latter are a product of nature and geology and are cold and in some way distant. Intuitive talent of dream-stone revealers merely complements geological activity, which went on for hundreds of millions of years. A brick, on the other hand, is a product of humans and history – it is human made and human scaled. It is the product of craft, labor, earth, water, and fire and therefore, envelopes a very different world physically and intellectually. It absorbs ambient temperature and is at home with the living environment for which it was created by human thought and action. In fact, an old brick house can be easily reimagined as a ceramic vessel containing human lives. Brick does not mimic stone or nature but has its own place, because it is made by labor, not formed by tectonic forces. To some people this robs a brick of spiritual content as it is thought to conceal no mystery. To me, the coming together of the elements through human agency produces a different not lesser mystery that can be valued in its own right.⁶

Therefore, when reflecting whether or how a discarded brick can be appealing as a cultural object, it seems important to consider analogies with ceramics as well. This is particularly relevant in the Chinese context, as bricks were often supposed to be visually appealing, and old walls in Shanghai often reward explorers attentive to each of the consisting bricks. Even if craftsmen had no intention of infusing a brick with an ink landscape at any point of the manufacturing, they often crafted bricks beautifully. Bricks could be stamped on the edge with characters, auspicious symbols (such as the eternal knot) or name of the factory. They could also be exquisitely carved before becoming incorporated into a façade of a residential house or garden. Therefore, fascinating questions concerning the rather blurred boundary between a crafted object, an art object worthy of a place in the study room and ordinary building material, at least to some extent significantly predate my poetic explorations of the demolition sites along Xinzha Road.

I believe bricks in my collection can be perceived as ceramic objects created in an extended effort pursued more or less voluntarily over the decades by many different people. In fact, throughout the whole process of creation and destruction, most of the labor has been conducted by humans. Every piece is therefore entirely manmade, one of its own, somewhat uneven, and thereby beautifully imperfect. What further adds to the unobvious beauty of these objects is common natural patina, as well as erosion effects and traces of these bricks being hit by something or caressed by wind and plum rains for decades. Resilient materiality of these

⁶ I would like to express my gratitude to Linda Johnson for bringing these important differences to my attention.

bricks against the weather, as well as against the historical turmoil of the twentieth century, can be truly inspirational for the viewer. The fact that the emergence of inky landscapes on the brick surface is completely uncontrollable and unpredictable complies rather well with the tradition of admiration of accidental effects in ceramic craftsmanship both in China and Japan. In fact, in a way these bricks may belong to the long tradition shaped by Daoist and Buddhist teachings, where a most humble, unconventional object can facilitate a philosophical and poetic reflection on the impermanence and passing of the world.

The analogy with dreamstones is but one reason to seek an imaginary realm in a discarded brick and welcome landscapes emerging from such an imaginative pursuit as fully valid and meaningful. The connection between a wall and an inky landscape itself is worth taking into a careful consideration. In fact, Chinese garden has taught me that there are at least two ways in which a wall can display to an attentive viewer unexpected scenes of exquisite beauty. Firstly, “leaky windows” made using thin bricks or roof tiles, allow a wanderer walking along the garden wall to look through and get a sudden glimpse of a very different realm – a remote and currently inaccessible scenery. Secondly, depending on the light and time of the day, plants and architectural structures can cast magnificent shadows against the white plastered walls, resulting in visual effects very much reminiscent of a painted ink scroll.

Another reason to perceive connection between a brick wall and an ink landscape in the Chinese context as somewhat integral is, of course, the fact that hanging ink scrolls could be displayed on the wall (as did the framed dreamstones). As clay cubes, brick landscapes seem to extend an invitation for the viewer to enter a three-dimensional space and explore – not unlike in case of the painted ink scroll, which even though seemingly two-dimensional, always facilitates a full immersion, and the “shifting perspective” allows the wandering eye to elect where to look. It is noteworthy that instead of presenting a complete statement about the world, both brick landscapes and ink landscapes provide an opportunity to set the imagination free and wandering over the limitless spaces of the universe. According to Michael Sullivan, a painted Chinese landscape is never a final statement but rather a starting point: “not an end, but the opening of a door” and, as such, it invites the viewer to “discover fresh beauty at every step” (Sullivan 1961, 144–145).

There is also a strong philosophical aspect, which in my view greatly adds to the appeal of these bricks: a brick, once solid enough to support a house wall, suddenly almost dilutes, transitions towards an open space, and gradually turns into a pulsating void able to move a tired mind beyond illusionary bounda-

ries suppressing it. Hence, in some ways these bricks bring to my mind Daoist practice of meditation, according to which life is surrounded by many walls that need to be gradually knocked down until the Mystery can be revealed and the practitioner enters the state of balance, harmony and full understanding (Cherng Wu Jyh 2014, 93). In other words, these ceramic cubes inspire a meditative state of mind. Inky realms unfold in front of a patient observer and offer a unique opportunity for escapist wandering. Constraints of urban time and space in a contemporary metropolis can then be transcended, and a moment of offline leisure in spare time is abounding with quiet delights. Not unlike scholar's rocks, these bricks can be disorienting in a rewarding manner. Nancy Rosenblum's remarks about the rocks can easily be transposed to inky bricks: due to the deliberate confusion of scale, as well as the interplay of immeasurable depth and movement in a finite space, and together with the fact that material turns immaterial "the result of looking steadily is a direct confrontation with cosmology: how big is this rock, this earth, this universe?" (Rosenblum 2007, 254).

In the past, imperial interest in artisanal process could enhance the inherent beauty in objects made through labor and even legitimize them as objects to be appreciated, valued and collected. The question that arises then and remains open is whether a more institutionalized interest in bricks from destroyed longtangs could turn them into collectibles in the twenty-first century Shanghai? Could a lane poet or a calligrapher want to sustain the centuries old passion for rocks and roots in China with these clay inky cubes? Can blue bricks be incorporated into a scholar's study like many other thought-provoking and aesthetically pleasing objects, which over the centuries were supposed to help cultivate mind and enhance spiritual force? Would not they match oddly yet nicely not only dreamstones and scholar's rocks, but also black inksticks embellished with little scenes and poetic verses, or fine sceneries emerging from *duan* inkstones from Zhaoqing? Could their austere and unapparent beauty help foster imagination and original thoughts? Could they nurture attentiveness, together with contemplative appreciation of imperfection and impermanence of things? They certainly do not cease to deeply move and enchant me.

When I picked my first bricks from the ground, I merely intended to contemplate for a while objects which seemed likely to become one day some of the few remnants of an entire world enveloping a unique way of life and a distinct layered experience of Shanghai history. Each of these bricks had something which brought to mind a world frozen in half a breath, like in Pompeii. Each of these bricks served also as a token of some sort, corresponding to stories of those who experienced them alive

throughout the past hundred years or so. Once placed individually on the carved stands, these bricks became gradually isolated from the original architectural and sociocultural context. Moreover, they each regained their singularity, lost while they formed rows and walls. Now each brick became a thing complete in itself (Photos 7 and 8). Over time, they have confidently entered my



Photos 7 and 8. Two brick landscape with added effects created by demolition process – remaining layer of another brick and glowing orange hue from a red brick.

personal realm of ink and imagination, and now seem able to become a permanent element of any contemporary study room. In the most admirable way they revealed a slightly subversive dimension as well – smuggling into the extinction of a built and lived world, annihilated by the demolitions, a component of both time and space-transcendent Chinese tradition.

Even though the fragments of bricks I have collected cannot bring back the walls and lanes to which they once belonged and which are since long gone, I gather them tenderly. I lift them up carefully – with admiration which I share with Dorota Brauntsch, who in the book beautifully entitled *Domy bezdomne (Homeless Homes)* wrote so lovingly about bricks in disappearing traditional houses of the Silesian countryside (Brauntsch 2019). I turn them in my hand, illuminate them delicately with different lights and try to soothe my longing for the wall – and the house – which they co-created. Perhaps I am already missing my own lane home as well, which is following in the footsteps of all the homes that vanished. As I am writing this essay, almost all people had already been displaced and entire lanes of *shikumen* houses in Furui neighbourhood have been silenced and strangled with walls

of a very different kind – erected with blocks of concrete to shut *shikumen* gates leading to the deserted houses. I walk silently into my imaginary landscapes salvaged from a catastrophe to escape sorrow that my beloved home was not mine after all. I wander along the inky glacial lakes and slowly embrace the idea that every home is temporary and ephemeral. Surrounded by the bricks I engage in this liberating practice in order to give up on the habit of taking any place or body for granted and lasting, of clinging too much to anything earthly.

Over time, I surround myself with more layers and fragments of the brick walls. Perhaps ultimately I am making a discreet effort to somehow separate myself with this imaginary wall from the modern city solidifying all around in glass and concrete. My wall is not fortified – it is a living, porous wall which breathes with me when I lean tiredly against it. I build this wall a bit like my own stele labyrinth. Wandering through it with a dim light, I take refuge in its soothing darkness, forgetting all the flashy lighting of the global city exploding outside. In spite of the omnipresent surveillance and constant data collection, which so significantly yet unnoticeably transforms our relationship with the walls surrounding our most intimate spaces, I stroll invisible and unattainable – or at least that is what I imagine for a moment. By no means destruction of a wall always leads to the opening of a hospitable space – demolishing can also be an endeavor to create massive, entirely transparent and easily navigable spaces, and reshape a city according to an entirely different scale and ambitions. In fear that in such a city one might lose their soul, I endure in arranging patiently, against all odds, a fragile but persistent space for mind to wander continuously along the winding, secret and humanly imperfect paths. Nonetheless I always remain cautious to retain a genuinely free mind and not fall into an addiction. I make sure not to spend too much time with my inky bricks and to dedicate but a few hours each day to their contemplation, as recommended centuries ago by rock admirer Bai Juyi 白居易.

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