

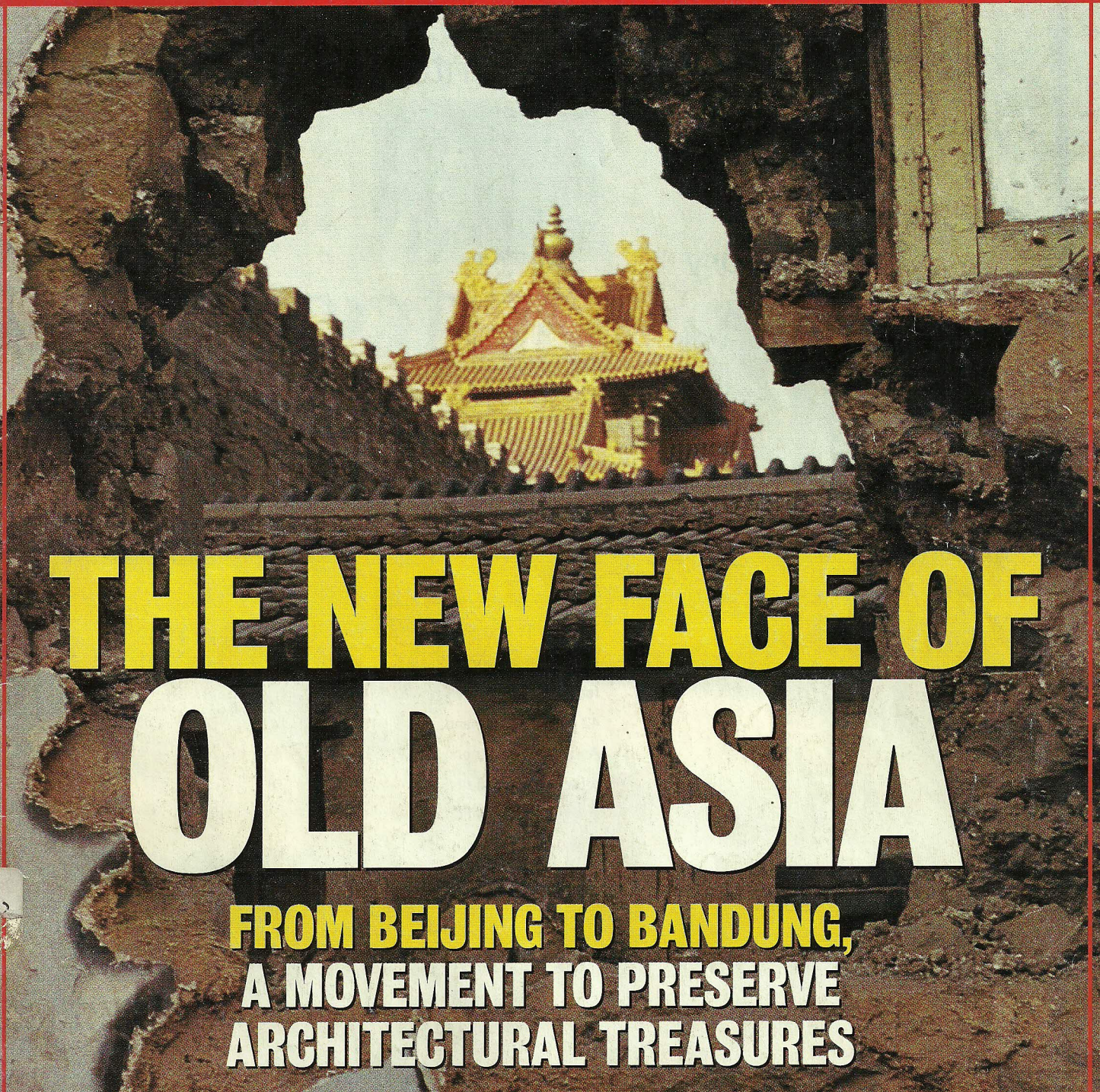
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THE NEW FACE OF OLD ASIA

**FROM BEIJING TO BANDUNG,
A MOVEMENT TO PRESERVE
ARCHITECTURAL TREASURES**



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In with the old: activists push to save China's ancient homes and alleys

BY MELINDA LIU

ONE DAY IN 1998, ZHAO Jingxin returned home to find this shocking message painted on the wall of his centuries-old house: to be demolished. Built during the Ming dynasty, he says, and purchased by Zhao's father in 1950, the courtyard home was to be torn down to make room for a new development. But Zhao and his wife refused to budge. When the developer threatened to evict them with a bulldozer last October, the couple sat tight—but donated their antique furniture and old books to museums for protection. In early November several prominent intellectuals, including Chinese-American architect I. M. Pei, warned that demolishing the Zhao house "would damage Beijing's traditional culture beyond estimation." Now the Zhaos' courtyard is the only one left in a snow-covered lot cleared for new construction. It's "a lonely island," says Zhao, 82, a retired professor. "I can't run away from my responsi-

Rescue efforts: *Retouching the Great Mosque in the central city of Xian (left), an ancient pagoda in Huizhou district*



KATHARINA HESSE

bility to keep the courtyard while I'm still alive, but I know I'm going to lose this fight."

Perhaps. But these days, small victories are possible. Zhao is one of a growing collection of scholars, artists and young professionals who are fighting to save the *hutongs*, or alleys, and courtyard houses that survive from a bygone imperial society. The 20th century has been hard on the skyline of ancient China, as first communist radicals and later capitalist developers swept away old city walls, temples and entire neighborhoods to make way for anything that seemed more modern. But recently, encouraged by conservationist activists, the government has been taking steps to preserve its architectural heritage from the Great Mosque in Xian to the alleys of Beijing, where pending legislation will designate 25 "protected" neighborhoods. Such regulations are "better late than never," says Beijing-born art dealer Lawrence Wu, who lives in a magnificently rebuilt courtyard house. "There's no way to find the charming old neighborhoods ... that I knew as a child. It's a crime."

So much has been destroyed. During the Cultural Revolution, from 1966 to 1976, radical Red Guards were encouraged to destroy anything old or "bourgeois," and courtyard houses were seen as both. As the population exploded, proletarian families built rickety shacks inside the courtyards, many of which are now hardly recognizable. Fearful owners burned intricate wood lattices and shattered stone carvings to make their homes seem less grand. Today most of the courtyard houses, called *siheyuan*, are so dilapidated and overcrowded that few Chinese would prefer them over more modern apartments. Many have no plumbing. And Beijing officials believe, not unreasonably, that "it's not responsible" to lavish money on old homes when high-rise housing can be built less expensively, says Shu Yi, a literary historian and preservation adviser to the government.

The war of old versus new has been raging ever since the communists came to power in 1949. Yale-educated architect Liang Sicheng once wrote that he felt "as if my own flesh was being torn off" when, in the 1950s, Mao had the ancient ramparts of Beijing ripped out to make way for a new ring road. By the end of the Cultural Revolution, most gates and imperial arches of Beijing and many other cities had been demolished. Across the land, bureaucrats have since erected white-tile buildings, thinking they were symbolic of the new China. "They remind me of toilets," says Ling Jianmin, a cultural-relics official in Anhui province.

Now, the cult of shiny modernity has triggered a countertrend. In 1997, President Jiang Zemin launched a project to

widen Ping An Avenue, a famous hutong near the center of Beijing. New rules require all nearby buildings to adopt the late Ming or early Ching style, using a muted gray and white color scheme. Gaudy advertising is out, and even a glitzy karaoke club has redone its façade in somber gray. Critics pan the restoration as a scheme to attract tourists, but Shu says the government was sincere about preservation—and limited the widening of Ping An Avenue to save at least some of its courtyard homes.

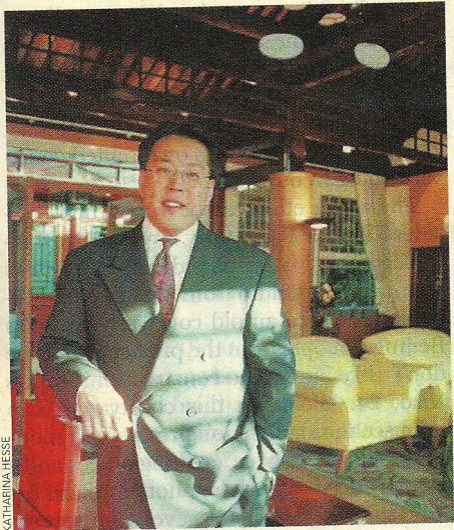
In Beijing, the conservation movement is spearheaded by scholars like Shu, who fought to preserve the home of his late father, renowned Chinese author Lao She. Shu has been pivotal in drafting the new legislation that protects 25 historic Beijing neighborhoods. The historian and his friends meet informally to discuss preservation and fund-raising—the beginnings of independent activism that would have been impossible in China even a decade ago. Shu says he "can't afford" to live in a courtyard

himself; but his tiny apartment is crammed with historical and literary memorabilia. "From my window," he says, "I can see remains of the old Beijing moat."

Outside the capital, China has targeted some of its most ancient cities for preservation, including the Shanxi province city of Pingyao. Built largely during the 17th century by rich bankers who aspired to a courtly lifestyle, the city later fell into a deep stagnation that preserved gracious Ming-era streets in their original condition. In 1997 the United Nations named Pingyao a world heritage site, but there is still not enough money to do the restoration right. Local shopkeeper He Qingwen says that instead of employing painstaking old building techniques, conservation workers rush to get the job done. Instead of sealing old pillars with layers of cloth, horsehair and lacquer, they slap on a coat of paint. "They just want everything to look nice," He says. "They don't care what the sun might do after a year or two." Sure



KATHARINA HEISE



KATHARINA HESSE

Countertrends: Lawyer Handel Lee has lovingly restored his Ming-dynasty home (above), but in Pingyao (below), locals worry that the city doesn't have enough money to do quality renovation of old street fronts



enough, the paint is already peeling from murals on his recently restored shop.

Concerned Overseas Chinese and foreign philanthropists are stepping in to help pay for restoration. The Hong Kong-based China Heritage Fund is sponsoring the reconstruction of the Jianfu Palace Garden in Beijing's Forbidden City that was destroyed by fire in 1923. American antiquarian Robert Ellsworth organized Hong Kong and Western donors to help preserve four rare Ming-dynasty ancestral halls in the Anhui province district of Huizhou, dotted with ancient pagodas and homes.

For every restoration project underway in the countryside, many more buildings are in decay. In the Huizhou village of Chengkan (population: 2,700), stone walkways meander past towering three-story Ming-dynasty residences. Some of these old homes still have Cultural Revolution slogans scrawled on crumbling façades, or have been used as warehouses. "We must save them," says retired official Hu Huaduo, who began restoring monuments in the early 1980s. Even in the remote desert-oasis town of Yulin, locals are struggling to save remnants of the city

wall from pollution and development. "We want to, but there's no money," says a wizened man in the courtyard of the City Wall Administration Office.

The cash flows more freely in Beijing. Courtyard houses are increasingly popular with the growing urban middle class, and can sell for more than a million dollars. Conservationists want the government to cut the endless red tape that complicates the purchase of old homes. "Only if citizens spend their own money to fix up their own homes can our old neighborhoods survive," says Shu. Chinese-American lawyer Handel Lee lives in a lovingly restored Beijing courtyard complex that once belonged to the nephew of a Ming-dynasty palace eunuch. "It's not just for me," Lee says, "but for everyone who comes here as well, to see and appreciate."

Lee has converted a second ancient home into a restaurant and the CourtYard Gallery, which recently displayed the work of a guerrilla preservationist who calls himself "AK-47." Working at night to avoid police, graffiti artist Zhang Dali sneaks around Beijing spray-painting his own facial profile on

walls of buildings scheduled for demolition. He returns to the scene by day to photograph his work—which sells for up to \$4,000. His recent show was called "Demolition and Dialogue"—and was successful enough that Zhang hopes to save his own rented courtyard house by buying it.

The rescue effort can be frustrating. Consider Xiao Ran, a country boy who grew up to become a hip graphic designer. In 1998 he moved his studio from a noisy commercial building to an old courtyard house in Beijing. "People from the provinces like me don't like modern constructions," says Xiao, 24. "Look, in this courtyard I can even see the sky!" Xiao's firm poured money into his new space, creating offices and a cozy art deco café where photographers exhibit their work. Then last year the government announced plans to tear down the house in September. "We can't do anything about the decision," says Xiao, who has not given up hope. He is looking for another old courtyard—one closer to clients, and farther from the threat of the wrecking ball.

With LESLIE PAPPAS in Pingyao and
KATHARINA HESSE in Beijing



Picturesque decay: In the village of Chengkan, Ming Dynasty homes that have been scarred by neglect, or used as warehouses