

## Taikang Lu People

Excerpt from Xiao Ba's Taikang Diaries: Mr. Le Jian Cheng and Aunt Xu

Article written by Jennifer Lin, Photograph by Matthew Cianfrani

Aunt Xu has moved to Taikang Rd nearly 20 years ago, when she married her husband Mr. Le Jian Cheng. She, along with her husband and her son, currently live in a traditional Shikumen house, and has opened an art studio, Jing Chan Zhai, to display Mr. Le's photography and block prints. Shikumen houses are a key feature of traditional Shanghainese architecture.

Aunt Xu's home is a traditional Shikumen; people often come by with rental offers. Wanting to improve her living standards, she has considered renting out her and using the income to rent a larger, more modern home, but her husband has rejected all the offers. Mr. Le was born and raised in Taikang Road. To him, the houses are filled with emotions and memories. He boasts that even with his eyes closed, he can recount the area in detail, down to every tree and every blade of grass. Because of the unique structure of Shikumen houses, several families share a common kitchen and bathroom. The toilets still don't have plumbing yet, so every morning families have to come out to empty their portable toilets at the public toilet. Although living standards have improved, the lane culture has slowly disappeared. Before the advent of air conditioners, neighbors used to lounge outside together in their chairs at night, casually chatting and fanning themselves. Neighbors used to interact frequently with one another; when someone cooks a special dish, she would share them; they would baby sit for one another; they didn't even close doors because no thieves were around. In comparison, now that each family has an AC unit, people stay inside, limiting interaction with one another. Old neighbors have moved away, and new ones keep their doors and windows lightly shut. Sometimes they don't even know whether their next door neighbor has moved away. The games that he used to play and the songs that he used to sing have all disappeared in his son's generation.



In recent years, the government has wanted to tear down Taikang Rd to rebuild it. It has posted moving notices at least twice, and even proposed the conditions for relocation. However, residents are still unwilling to move. The living standards at the old houses do not compare to the new ones, and sanitation facilities are poor, but to Mr. Le, Taikang Lu is filled with childhood memories, and Shikumen houses were the initial inspiration to his artistic talent. After having lived in such housing for most of his life, it has developed his perception of beauty. He now teaches architectural beauty at Hangzhou Teacher's University, educating the young generation on how to appreciate the beauty of Shikumen Housing. He has documented hundreds of

Shikumen houses, but unfortunately few remain standing. If the government really wants to tear down the housing, they will be forced to relocate; but as long as the houses remaining standing, he wants to die here. Both he and his wife love Taikang Road. They love every detail of this place and will remain in this memory-filled place as long as possible.