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Runaway Wives and their Matchmakers: Lower Class Women's Networks in Beijing's Courtyard Tenements, 1928-1949

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Social and Cultural Research

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Abstract

This article examines the formation and operation of lower class women's social network in the ghettoized courtyard neighborhood in early twentieth-century Beijing. Drawing evidence from criminal case files, it argues that courtyard tenements provided a gendered urban space within which women formed, extended, and maintained a flexible and dynamic web of durable relationships. Motivated largely by individual circumstances and objectives, this neighborhood network remained personalized, individualized, and "ego-centered" The network did not come into existence for any type of political movements; nor did it entail wider female solidarity. But the physical geography of the courtyard tenements and the development of these neighborhood networks offered lower class women some immediate protections and buffers when they were under emotional, domestic or economic crisis. This article argues that these interpersonal relationships forged within a complex urban space was an important resource for women to rise themselves out of the intense state control and economic turmoil in the tumultuous decades of reform and revolution.

Keywords: Women, Courtyard Neighborhood, Network, Crime, Beijing

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Introduction

Lao She (1899-1966) was a locally born fiction writer in Beijing with a considerable reputation in contemporary Chinese literature. In 1936 he published his most important masterpiece, *Rickshaw Boy*, which told the story of a young rickshaw puller's odyssey of hope and toil, frustration and disillusion. The story was set in a lower class "courtyard neighborhood" (*siheyuan*) in Beijing in the 1920s and 1930s. Lao described the rickshaw puller's neighborhood as follows:

"There were about eight families in this mixed courtyard and most of them lived in one room. ... Some of the men pulled rickshaws, some were street vendors, some were policemen, and some were servants. ... Ashes, dirty water, and sweepings all landed in the courtyard and no one bothered to sweep it out. The middle of the courtyard was covered with ice."¹

This image of a cramped, raucous and filthy courtyard neighborhood was prevalent not only in modern Chinese fiction,

but also a common theme in writings by administrators, police, criminologists, social workers, and missionaries. These individuals, as Madeleine Yue Dong discusses in her study of urban reform in early twentieth-century Beijing, saw the courtyard neighborhood – the rundown houses and lower class dwellers – as a defining feature of the poverty of the Chinese nation.² Sweeping away unsanitary living conditions became the target of policies initiatives.³ Criminal elements and social strife in these courtyard neighborhoods were also felt to warrant intense police control and justified governmental security campaigns.⁴

While current scholarship focuses on the problems associated with courtyard neighborhoods in Beijing from the vantage point of urban administrators and reformers, this article adopts a bottom-up perspective and looks at courtyard neighborhoods from the standpoint of the residents themselves, especially lower class women. What was the gender-specific meaning and function of the courtyard neighborhood in the everyday practice of lower class women? How did environmental and demographical changes in the courtyard neighborhoods shape and re-shape lower class women's survival strategies and social lives? How were their daily choices and actions in their living situation different from those of men and elite women? This article argues that the courtyard neighborhood was a critical domain that enabled lower class women to develop social bonds. Shared facilities and crowded living conditions forced them to interact with other women like themselves and created a neighborhood network that was an

essential for their survival. The presence of such a neighborhood network could offer lower class women some immediate protection when they were under emotional, domestic or economic stress.

In order to take a closer look into their lives, this article draws upon criminal files from the Beijing District Court that are now categorized under the heading “Offenses Against the Institution of Marriage and the Family” in the Beijing City Archives. Major offenses handled under these files include abduction, adultery, and bigamy. Cases cover all districts in the walled city and neighboring counties from 1939 to 1949. The case files normally include a preliminary report submitted by the police officers, brief depositions taken at the police substation from key persons, a complaint filed by the plaintiff, an indictment prepared by the prosecutor, transcripts of courtroom proceedings, petition letters, statements from defense lawyers (in some cases), documentary evidence (e.g. marriage certificates, wedding photos, and wedding feast registries), and the official sentence. The length of the case records varies from one to multiple volumes, depending on the number of court sessions involved. The case files recorded women’s interaction with neighbors and their daily activities in the rapidly changing urban setting. These historical fragments of individual experience offer invaluable insights into the lives of lower-class women that would otherwise remain unknown. They also provide abundant ethnographic material on the social history of women’s lives in Beijing’s courtyard neighborhoods.

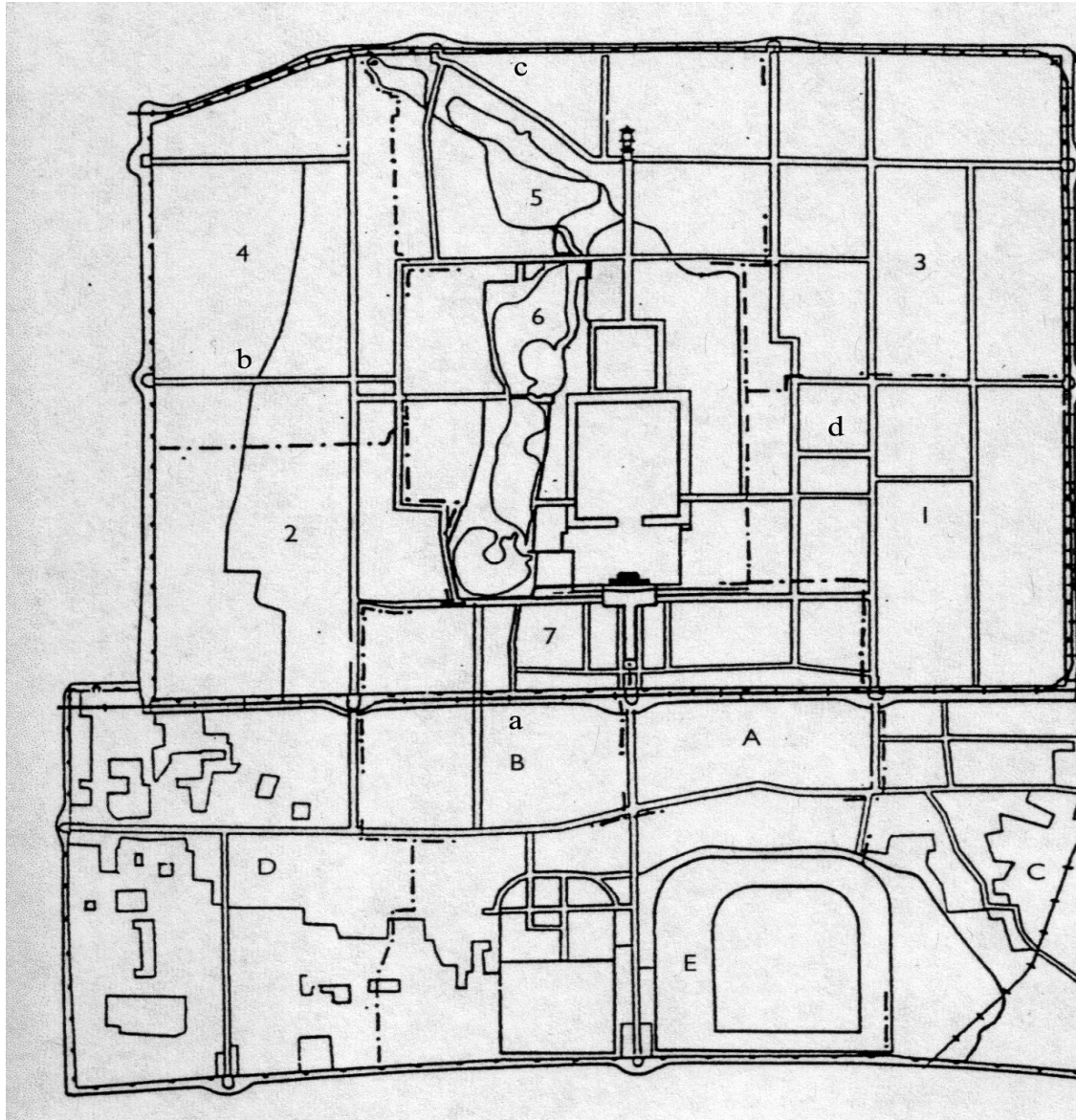
Scholars in recent decades have been increasingly interested in the constitution and operation of urban social networks in late imperial and modern China. Studies of native-place lodges, commercial guilds, universities, political parties, and labor unions have pointed to the strength of social networks based on various types of political and professional affiliations.⁵ Networks, as these studies indicate, often functioned as an essential ground for the cultivation of group consciousness and the creation of distinct group identities. On some occasions, they even developed into a significant socio-political force that proceeded to engage in high level political contestation between group interests and the various municipal/national authorities.⁶ However, due in large part to the high female unemployment rate and the low level of female political mobilization, major urban organizations were generally off-limits to lower class women. For a majority of women in Beijing, it was the courtyard neighborhood that marked the immediate center of their social world instead of the labor union or native-place lodge.

Women's networking activities in courtyard neighborhoods was an important dynamic shaping and re-shaping socio-political practice in Beijing. First, the women-centered tenement networks remained apolitical. They did not purposely come into existence for any type of political engagement. Rather, their primary nature was fundamentally *social* praxis in a particular locality. As court files illustrate, the neighborhood network emerged from casual

and fleeting encounters. Even though it could enlarge itself, it remained a personalized and individualized collectivity of spontaneous relationships without formal leadership, hierarchy, or organizational structure. Moreover, the women-centered networks were unlike other intra-urban networks that proceeded to balance the individual member's concerns with the interests of the group as a whole. They instead were "ego-centered" and motivated largely by individual circumstances and objectives without reference to any long-term agenda for the general political interest or social struggle of the members. Second, a specific woman's network, as an individualized collectivity of personal relationships, might be confined within a particular courtyard neighborhood. However, this form of networking was never restricted to certain districts but rather was found everywhere as courtyard neighborhoods spread over all districts and suburbs in Beijing. Neighborhood networks stood in contrast to those networks associated with other types of institutions such as the native-place lodge or university whose activities tended to concentrate only in specific districts where such institutions had a fixed physical presence.

Courtyard neighborhood networks enabled women to form, extend, and maintain a flexible and dynamic web of relationships adaptable to external urban changes. Even though it entailed no wider female solidarity or formal role in collective bargaining, the courtyard neighborhood network remained an important resource

Map: Districts of Early Twentieth-Century Beijing



- | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------|---|
| 1. Inner-1 District | A. Outer-1 District | a. Runaway wife Meng Yuzhen's home |
| 2. Inner-2 District | B. Outer-2 District | b. Home of Wang Xiangyu who had a sexual relationship with her neighbor |
| 3. Inner-3 District | C. Outer-3 District | c. Runaway wife Mrs. Zhang's home |
| 4. Inner-4 District | D. Outer-4 District | d. Mrs. Wickes' church |
| 5. Inner-5 District | E. Outer-5 District | e. Home of Mrs. Fan who was sold by her mother-in-law for cash |
| 6. Inner-6 District | | |
| 7. Inner-7 District | | |

Source: Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 45.

for lower class women to resist to state control and overcome economic turmoil in early twentieth-century Beijing. Now let me begin my discussion with a description of the unique residential setting where the courtyard neighborhood network took was based.

Ghettoization of Courtyard Neighborhoods

The courtyard compound where most lower class women lived was “*siheyuan*,” a vernacular architectural term that literally means “enclosed courtyard with four wings.” Its physical structure, as its Chinese name suggests, consisted of a group of single-story residential rooms that were constructed in form of four “wings” (i.e., four blocks of rooms) around a common courtyard. Most courtyard compounds in Beijing during 1940s were originally initially built after the fourteenth century when the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) developed Beijing as its new capital. Construction and renewal continued throughout the rest of the dynastic period and well into the twentieth century.⁷

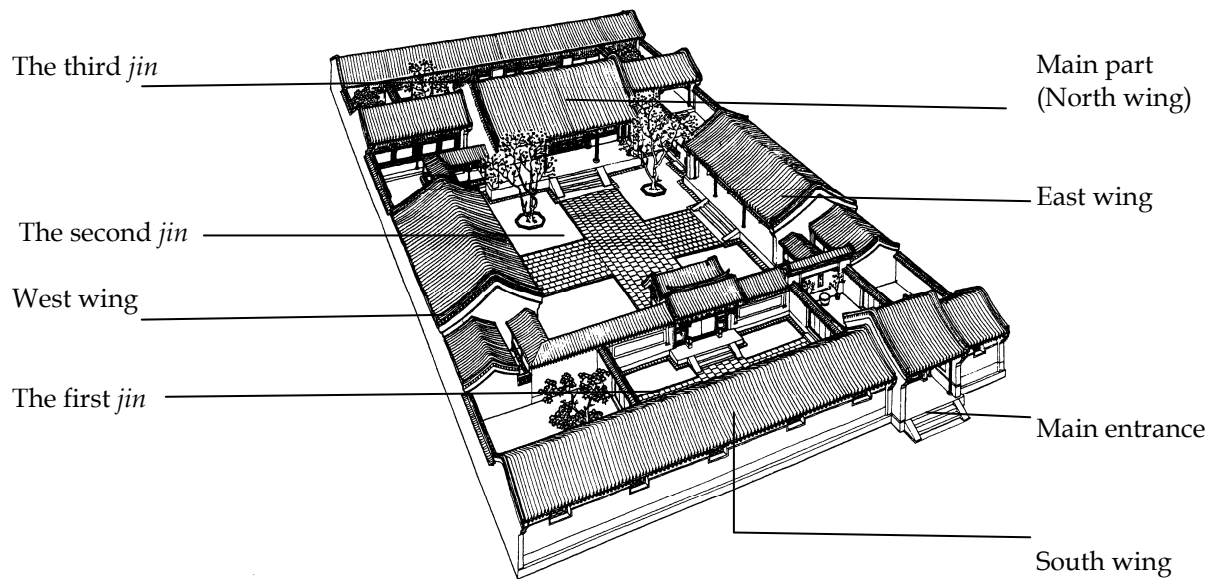
Historians and anthropologists contend that the courtyard compound was originally built as the residence for a single extended family.⁸ The main or north wing (*zhengfang*) consisted of rooms with windows and doors that were all facing the south. This orientation allowed cool air to ventilate this part of the compound during the hot and stuffy summer while allowing more warm sunshine for the interior during the windy and chilly winter. For

this reason, local custom reserved the “main wing” for the elders. Flanking the main wing were the “east wing” (*dongfang*) and “west wing” (*xifang*). Both were normally built a bit lower than the main wing and, in some cases, built in a simpler style with cruder or inferior materials. The south wing consisted either of a block of rooms or merely a wall with a gate (see Illustration 1, 2 & 3). The size of a courtyard compound was measured by how many “*jin*” or courtyards it had. A standard one-*jin* compound occupied about 1,000 square feet of land.⁹ A large courtyard compound could consist of a chain of courtyards connected by doorways and gates.

The architectural characteristics of a courtyard compound, particularly its enclosed residential layout, its “introverted form,” and its hierarchical construction, influenced how sinologists interpreted the psychological aspects of Chinese life and social relationships within it.¹⁰ For example, Samuel V. Constant, an American military officer affiliated with the United States embassy in 1930s Beijing, who wrote on the local Chinese language and customs observed that:

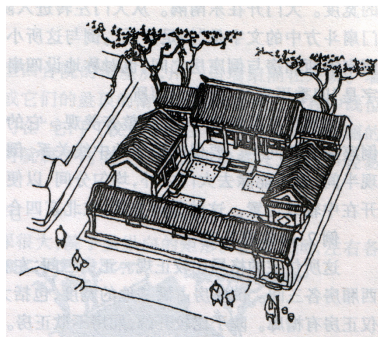
“China is a nation of walls within walls. They vary in size from the famous Great Wall of China some fifteen hundred miles in length to the humble mud walls of the country farmer. ... In between these two extremes we find every sort of wall — city walls, palace walls, *yamen* walls and walls of the rich and poor. There is no doubt that these walls have profoundly affected China’s history and the psychology of

Illustration 1: The Layout of a Standard Three-*jin* Courtyard Compound

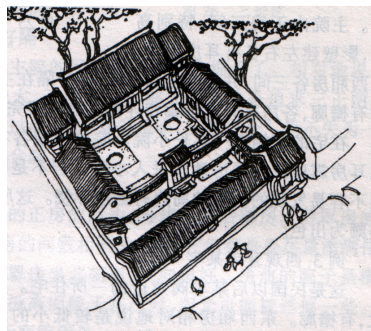


Source: Lou Qingxi, *Zhongguo gujianzhu ershi jiang* [Twenty lectures on the ancient architecture of China]. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2001, p. 190.

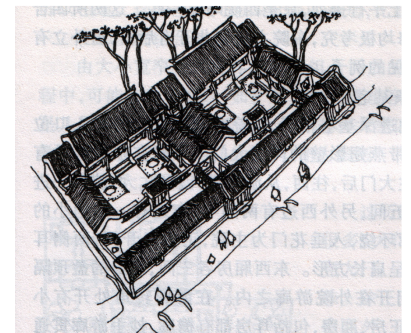
Illustration 2: Other Forms of Courtyard Compound in Beijing



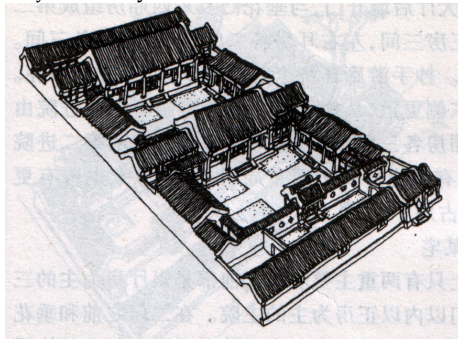
One-*jin* courtyard house



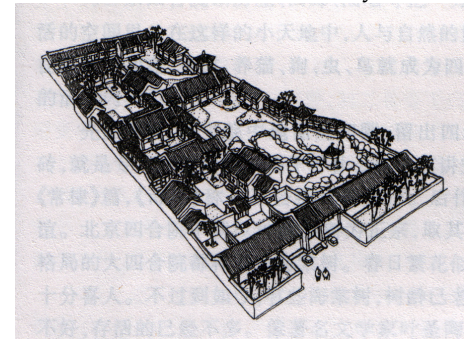
Two-*jin* courtyard house



Parallel courtyard house



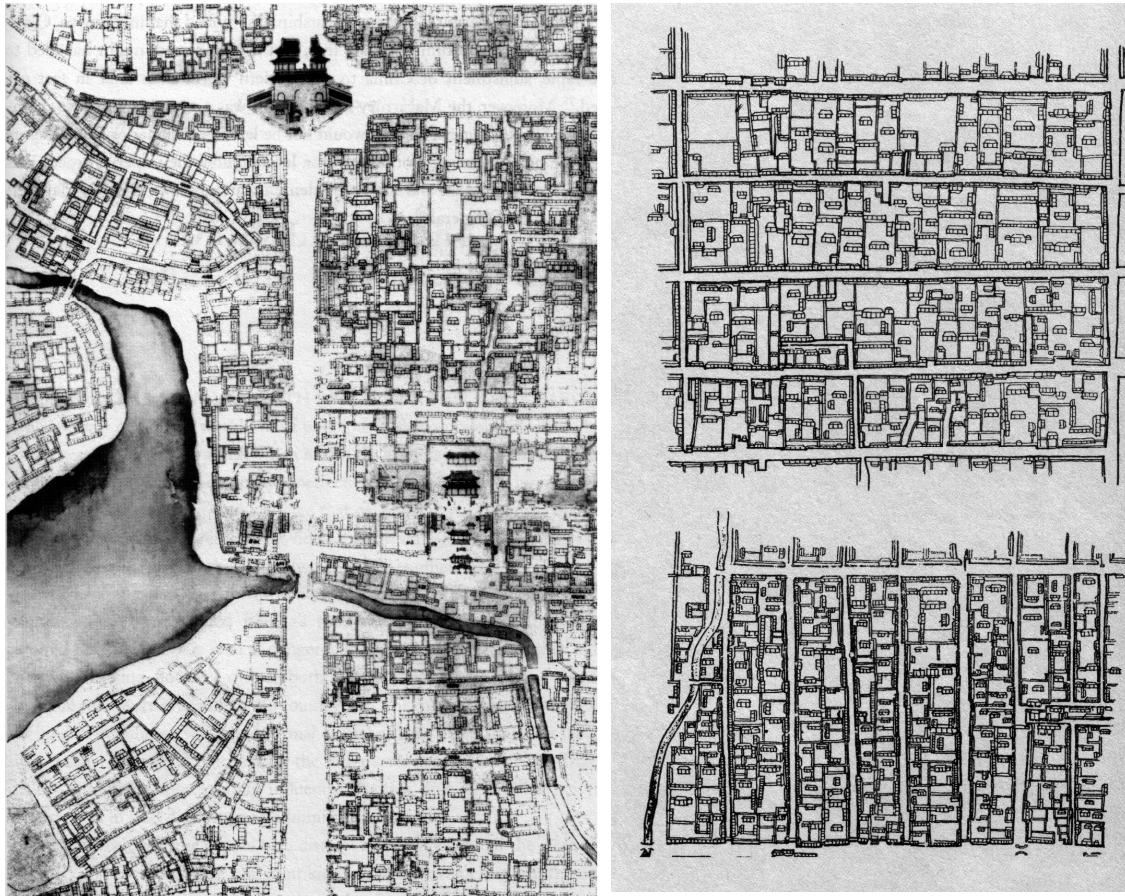
Four-*jin* courtyard compound



Courtyard compound with multiple *jins* and gardens

Source: Wang Qiming, *Beijing siheyuan* [Beijing's courtyard houses]. Beijing: Zhongguo shujian, 1999, pp. 59, 61, 65, 67, 71.

Illustration 3: Courtyard Compounds and Alleyways in Mid-Qing Map of Beijing



The Qianlong map of Beijing (1750) indicates that courtyard house was the most common type of housing in the city at the time. Sources: (left) Lillian Li, Alison Dray-Novey, and Haili Kong, *Beijing: From Imperial Capital to Olympic City*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 69; (right) Wang Jun, *Chengji* [The chronicle of the city]. Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2003, p. 17.

her people. In addition to this they have caused the Chinese family to build for itself a small feudal castle, so to speak, into which the family or clan withdraws and closes the gates. Within the many walls of China have been enacted its greatness and tragedy for centuries. So on a lesser scale the average Chinese family in their small walled compound is a fair cross section and example of the great nation they represent. The compound is their world to a large extent,

certainly to the women folks, to whom going outside its confines is quite an event.”¹¹

Accordingly, the image of the walled, inward looking courtyard compound was reflected on to the image of Chinese parochialism in the wider society. Due to its enclosed domestic layout, it has also been portrayed, or stereotyped, as a physical manifestation of women's isolation and segregation within the patriarchal feudal family. However, this characterization of an isolated and gender-segregated life in courtyard compound, especially by 1930s, was more an Orientalist illusion than a historical reality. The physical appearance and residential population of these courtyard compounds was radically transformed over time. The transformation process significantly accelerated in the early twentieth century. In some cases courtyards maintained their original structure as respectable residences for elite families while others were ghettoized into slum-like tenements where multiple families lived in abject poverty. It is against this background that I decided to use the term “courtyard compound” to refer to these residences before their ghettoization and use “courtyard-tenement” to indicate their new form after their ghettoization.

The rise of courtyard tenements in Beijing in the early twentieth century was due to the interplay of various factors. First and foremost, population growth and migration caused an acute housing shortage in Beijing starting in the late Qing period. Beijing's population increased more than 71% from 1647 to 1910.¹²

The increase in Beijing's population accelerated after the collapse of Qing Dynasty in 1911. Census statistics show 11% growth over the course of the Nationalist decade from 1928 to 1937. Even when Beijing was under the Japanese occupation from 1937 to 1945, both the number of households and general population slightly increased.¹³ In general, the population growth in Beijing during the early twentieth century followed a distinct demographic pattern. The two outer administrative components of Beijing, the "suburbs" (*jiaoqu*) and "municipal counties" (*jingxian*), increased by 20% and 10% respectively, while the "walled city" (*chengqu*) witnessed a dramatic population increase of 46% (see Table 1).

Secondly, the rapid population growth in the walled city was not only a consequence a lack of available land for development. Due to financial constraints, the government decided that the only feasible solution to the influx of new migrants was to settle them in the walled city in spite of the already overcrowded conditions there. The walled city was, as Richard Belsky described, "a city of two discrete, though contiguous, walled enclosures, commonly referred to as the Inner and Outer Cities, respectively."¹⁴ It took its physical shape around the mid-sixteenth century and remained unchanged until the 1950s, when the new Communist government tore down the city walls to make way for extensive urban expansion. The overall pattern of urban development in Beijing in early twentieth century involved absorbing, to use Rowe's words, "the growing population primarily by involuting – growing in upon itself – rather than expanding into new suburban

Table 1: Population in Republican Beijing by Administrative Unit

	1917		1935		1948	
	Household	Population	Household	Population	Household	Population
City	166,522	811,566	213,534	1,113,966	284,786	1,513,529
Suburbs	83,543	409,477	93,744	459,238	110,469	492,269
Counties	289,123	1,700,914	340,468	1,911,810	350,957	1,879,694

Source: Han Guanghui, *Beijing lishi renkou dili* [Geographical distribution of population in the history of Beijing]. Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1996, p. 131.

districts.”¹⁵ This type of urban development created serious problems for the newcomers when they tried to find housing in the increasingly overcrowded city.

Lastly, large numbers of families in Beijing were plagued by poverty in the early twentieth century.¹⁶ The widening gap between housing prices and people’s income forced many families to share their residences with families and individuals who were strangers. Yamin Xu found that during 1930s most residents in Beijing could not afford to rent a whole courtyard compound, thereupon many owners sold or leased part of their houses while they themselves occupied another part.¹⁷ An earlier study by sociologist Niu Nai’e in 1920s observed that some poor households still lived in their own houses but they needed to give up some part of their living space in exchange for additional income by renting out a wing or a room.¹⁸

The population density in Beijing also continued to increase in the residential neighborhoods and displayed a highly uneven

geographical distribution. Census information shows that the average density of population for the inner and outer districts was 33,626 people per square mile in late 1910s.¹⁹ When the Nationalist government in 1946 resumed the sovereignty of Beijing after eight years of Japanese occupation, the number of people per square mile had grown by over 80% or to 59,849.²⁰ Population density continued to increase over the next two years and reached 67,847 per square mile in 1948.²¹ However, the population density did not grow evenly among districts. Some areas witnessed a rather drastic increase over the course of early twentieth century. For example, the Outer-2 District was already the most densely populated district in Beijing. By the turn of twentieth century, the population density continued to grow by over 50%. In the two decades starting from late 1910s its population increased from about 80,000 to 120,000 per square mile.²² This district nonetheless remained a popular place for the internal migration in Beijing.

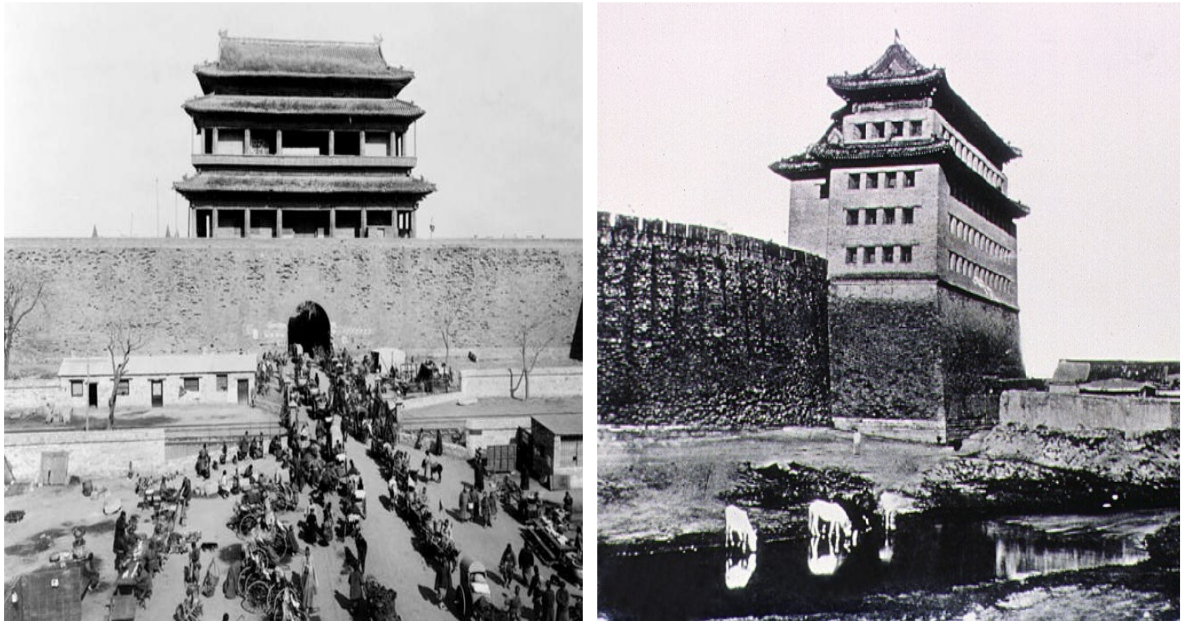
Above all, contemporary sociological surveys, criminal case records, and fiction illuminate a remarkable process of demographic change inside the enclosed walls of courtyard compounds. General population increase from natural growth, the influx of people from rural areas surrounding the city, and structural deterioration of houses due to the lack of necessary maintenance drastically and fundamentally changed the physical setting and demographic features of the neighborhoods. Many courtyard compounds in early twentieth-century Beijing were no longer the domain of exclusively isolated, self-sustaining and

inward-looking family life. They instead had become courtyard tenements that intricately contained both multiple private domestic practices and many supra-domestic practices. They also provided dynamic social connections into the public community for lower class women. What follows is an ethno-historical account that fleshes out the subtle but common existence of the neighborhood networks in Beijing's courtyard tenements, particularly their social organization and gender-specific features.

Courtship and Love in a Crowded Neighborhood

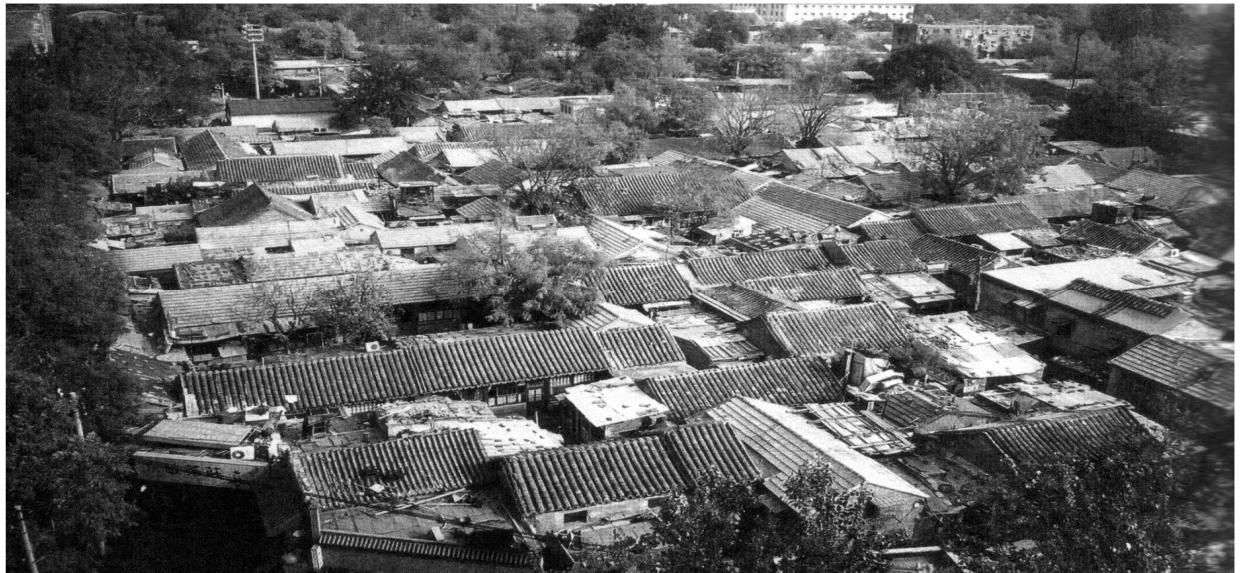
Since the early twentieth century, it was a common demographic feature in Beijing that many lower class families of several generations lived in one cramped, subdivided room of a courtyard tenement. For instance, among 283 Chinese families that Sidney Gamble surveyed in the 1920s, 124 families (44%) were living in one room.²³ A significant number of courtyard tenement dwellers were from the city's most deprived population. They had to live in such an overcrowded situation because of financial constraints. In Chinese sociologist Li Jinghan's estimation, about 100,000 people were barely living at subsistence level in Beijing in 1929. They ate coarse grain such as millet and sorghum. The entire family was forced to live in just one rented room in a rundown courtyard tenement.²⁴ Niu Nai'e's study of 1,200 poor families in Beijing at about the same time confirmed Li's findings. Over 82% of the families could afford just one room. In the eight extreme cases, the families could only rent half a room for their living.²⁵ These

Picture 1: City Gates and Walls in Late Imperial and Republican Beijing



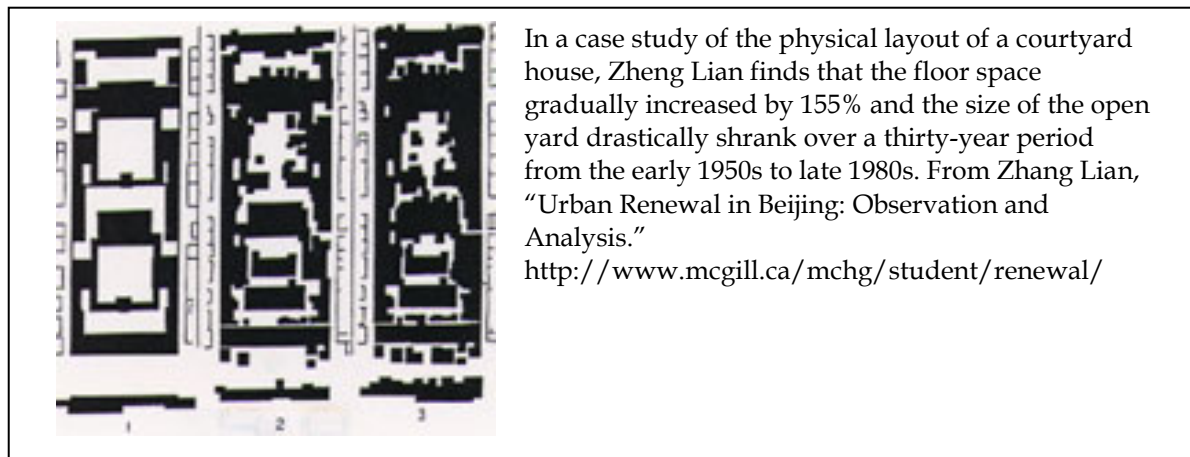
Source: (left) http://www.inamericabooks.com/content_documents/chin/d_beijing.jpg
(right) <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/core9/phalsall/images/pek-wall.jpg>

Picture 2: Courtyard Tenement in Beijing in the 1990s



Source: Wang Jun, *Chengji* [Chronology of the city]. Beijing: Sanlian shidian, 2003, p. 334.

Illustration 4: Transformation of the Physical Layout of a Courtyard Compound



congested living circumstance raised considerable concern about the spread of infectious disease. "If the infected member of a family is sent back home," a British medical missionary wrote in her diary on December 13, 1947, "there is no means of isolating him from the rest of the family — they all sleep together on the big *kang* (a heated bed made of brick and adobe) which occupies the one room of the house, and the rest of the family inevitably become infected."²⁶

Normally, the first step in the ghettoization process of a courtyard compound for a new crop of families was that, as more families moved in, each took one of the four wings of the compound. As people kept flocking into Beijing, local residents then began to further subdivide each wing of the courtyard compound in order to accommodate more new arrivals. A wing in most cases comprised three "*jian*" — the "space between two roof trusses" that varied, as Gamble wrote, "in size from seven by eight,

to nine by twelve feet.”²⁷ By building partitions or walls people could turn one wing into two or three rooms with each room having a door open to the courtyard.²⁸ Eventually, the courtyard compound was developed into a multi-family residence and thereby become a courtyard tenement. One common incident that often took place in such an extremely close residential setting was the rise of licit or illicit intimacy between lower class men and women.

For instance, Rickshaw puller Wang Zhenhui and his family lived in No. 28, White Pagoda Temple Lane in the Inner-4 District in 1946. For several months he had considerable trouble in regard to his 15-year-old daughter Wang Xiangyu. The matter in question involved Xiangyu’s love affair with her family’s neighbor, 26-year-old Wang Lide. The story was that Zhenhui had promised another family, which was living in Gu’an County in the southern part of Beijing, that his daughter would marry their son. However, the two families had not yet finalized the marriage because Xiangyu was not mature enough. In any case, Xiangyu was not happy with this arranged marriage. She developed her own romantic relationship with her neighbor Lide who also worked as a rickshaw puller. In June, 1946, they had sex at Xiangyu’s home when no other family members were around. On July 15, the same year, Xiangyu ran away from home. Zhenhui found his daughter and brought her home. He also filed a lawsuit at Beijing District Court accusing Lide and Lide’s cousin, Wang Liyou, whom Zhenhui believed to be complicit in abducting Xiangyu.²⁹

The court's investigation revealed that Zhenhui's family had four members from at least two generations. Like many similar lower class families in Beijing they occupied just one room in the courtyard compound. The legal proceedings of Xiangyu's case also indicated that the courtyard where her family lived was part of a temple complex and her landlord was the monk who served as its abbot. Importantly, in the same wing where Xiangyu's family lived, there was another neighbor, Xin Fusheng, a 36-year-old vendor. One night, Fusheng got up and went out of his room to use the public bathroom. As he walked across Xiangyu's room, he noticed that light was turned off inside but Xiangyu was chatting with somebody. It was Lide with whom Fusheng was familiar. Somehow Lide realized that they had been spotted. He immediately rushed out and begged Fusheng not to expose his relationship to Xiangyu or anyone else. Fusheng did keep the secret for him for a time but finally told Xiangyu's father everything. Friendship, courtship, and romantic love, as seen in Xiangyu's case, were all forms of neighborhood contact, especially among young tenement dwellers, whereas at the same time neighborhood contact meant watchful eyes and unwanted intrusions that could expose intimate relationships.

Neighborhood Contact among Women

Women neighbors in the courtyard tenements frequently interacted daily on a face-to-face basis. Their interaction took

various forms ranging from chatting, sharing needle work, gossiping, matchmaking, to plotting wifely desertion. The following story from the court case files provides a good example this. On April 16, 1943, a woman was stopped by police officers at the security checkpoint in Qianmen Railway Station, because she held an invalid residence permit. The police rejected the document and threw her out of the station. On her way home, she ran into her husband who was anxiously looking for her. The woman was Mrs. Zhang, the 23 year-old wife of a barber. What she actually planning to do was run away from Beijing to marry another man in Shandong Province. According to her testimony, Mrs. Zhang lived in a courtyard tenement at No. 83, Xitao Lane, in the Inner-5 District. While her husband, barber Zhang Yongyi, was out at work, she often dropped by Mrs. Gao's home that was located across a narrow lane at No. 82. Noticing Mrs. Zhang's pale complexion and patched clothing, Mrs. Gao persuaded her to remarry in order to escape her current misery. In her words, she could introduce Mrs. Zhang to a peasant who "had farmland and houses in his hometown" and would be able to secure her a good life "with ample food and adequate clothing." Mrs. Zhang hesitated for a while but finally agreed. After the failure of her desertion plan due to the unexpected problem with her residence permit, Yongyi, her husband, took legal action to accuse Mrs. Gao of abducting his wife.³⁰

The frequent contact amongst female courtyard tenement dwellers largely resulted from their common but marginal

economic circumstances that created a need for close and mutual dependency. The local economy, as Madeleine Yue Dong summarizes in her study, had been impaired by the chronic problem of a low level of industrialization. In spite of some measures toward economic revitalization, the conditions continued to deteriorate as urban administrators and developers failed to surmount difficulties caused by the economic crises caused by the Japanese occupation and the subsequent civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists. Beijing had never become a manufacturing center and depended upon the surrounding rural and urban markets for its daily necessities.³¹ In effect, the economy failed to generate enough employment opportunities for local residents, particularly lower class women. The female criminal cases this article mentioned before were all identified by court documents as “unemployed” (*wuyue*). The official report from the Justice Department in 1928 also indicated that among the women inmates serving sentences in the period from 1914 to 1923, less than 8% had had a manufacturing job and two thirds were unemployed before their incarceration.³² Another survey conducted by the Beijing Municipal Police Department five years later in 1933 pointed to an unemployment rate up to 62% among women of working age in comparison to 28% among men.³³ The situation remained unchanged for the next two decades.

The close relationship among lower class women in their common courtyard neighborhoods worked along side an informal economy. In early the twentieth century, sideline economic

activities available for women included piece work, irregular jobs, and seasonal work that did not require either regular work hours or a fixed work site. Sociological studies of the period in question provided insights into this aspect of the urban economy. In winter 1929, the Chinese Academia Sinica launched a nationwide study of crime. As part of the project, Zhou Shuzhao, a student from the Department of Sociology at Peking University, interviewed 100 women inmates in Beijing Municipal Prison. She found that 44 of the 100 inmate interviewees were jobless during her research period. Moreover, only 29 women had never held a job. The remaining 71 women had held jobs at some point in their lives.³⁴ In other words, they were not without capacity for work but they were vulnerable marginal labor in a fluctuating job market.

The sources of income from which a woman could bring in some cash to support her family included a spectrum of different kinds of work. At one end was traditional handicraft production – weaving, spinning, knitting, making paper flowers, etc.³⁵ At the opposite end was prostitution. To be clear, some lower class women resorted to sex work as a survival strategy only in case of having a sudden family budget crises. They usually left the sex trade when their economic situation improved. The sex trade in the early twentieth-century Beijing was flexible enough to allow different forms of economic exchanges. For example, one could negotiate a fixed period of service lasting from weeks to months and then receive cash payment from the brothel in advance (*shiqian yazhang*). One could also work under an oral agreement that

entailed a sharing a certain percentage of the earnings with the brothel (*zihun*) or, more commonly, work simply as *anchang*, which involved providing sex services at home or in a rented shed (*anfangzi*) without any official register.³⁶ However, the most common sidelines for women were irregular work involving such things as mending and washing. These informal economic activities increased women's interactions and connections in their courtyard. Their daily work sites coexisted with their daily living quarters. The courtyard tenements where lower class women managed their daily activities was also an economic world for them where they could undertake various types of temporary work, services, and informal economic transactions for their getting by and making do .

Go-between at Work: The Network

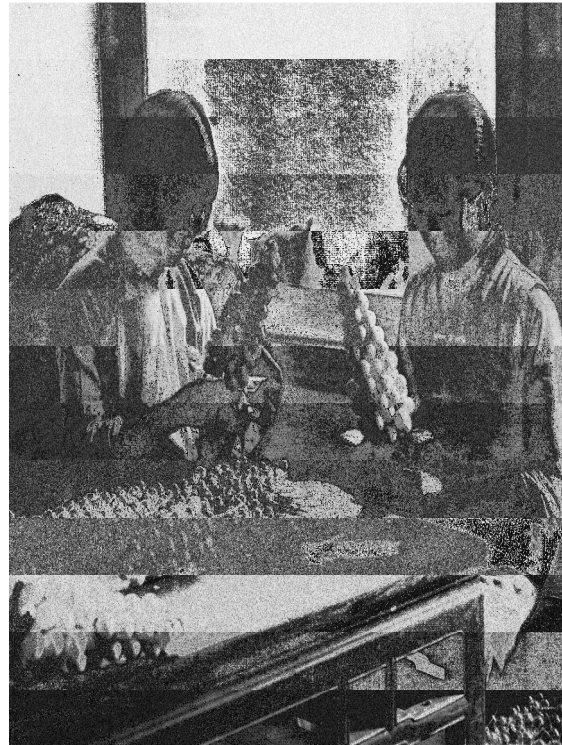
Throughout the day, the lower class women often talked about their love affairs, spied on each other's domestic troubles and miseries, and even, as mentioned before, plotted desertions. Inherent in these usual and unusual female activities was the subtle workings of a women-centered network within and beyond their immediate courtyard. The story of Mrs. Wu is a case in point.

Mrs. Wu was 46 years old in 1943. She lived with her husband and their grown-up son in a courtyard tenement in Beijing.³⁷ She held no regular paying job, but had been absorbed by her former neighbor MengYuzhen's family disputes since December in the

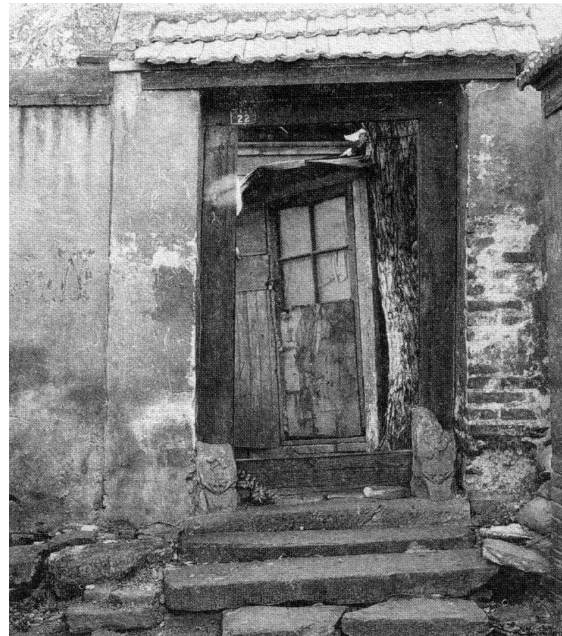
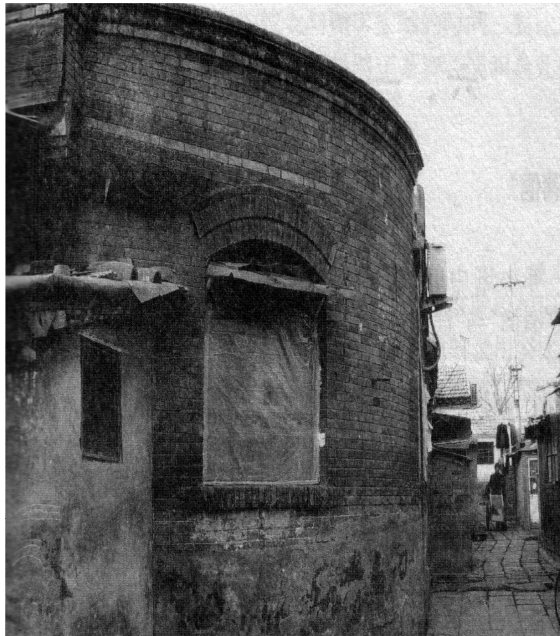
Picture 3: Women's Works in Courtyard Tenements



Making small straw toy figures



Making artificial fruit



Sections of neighborhood formerly occupied by un-registered prostitutes

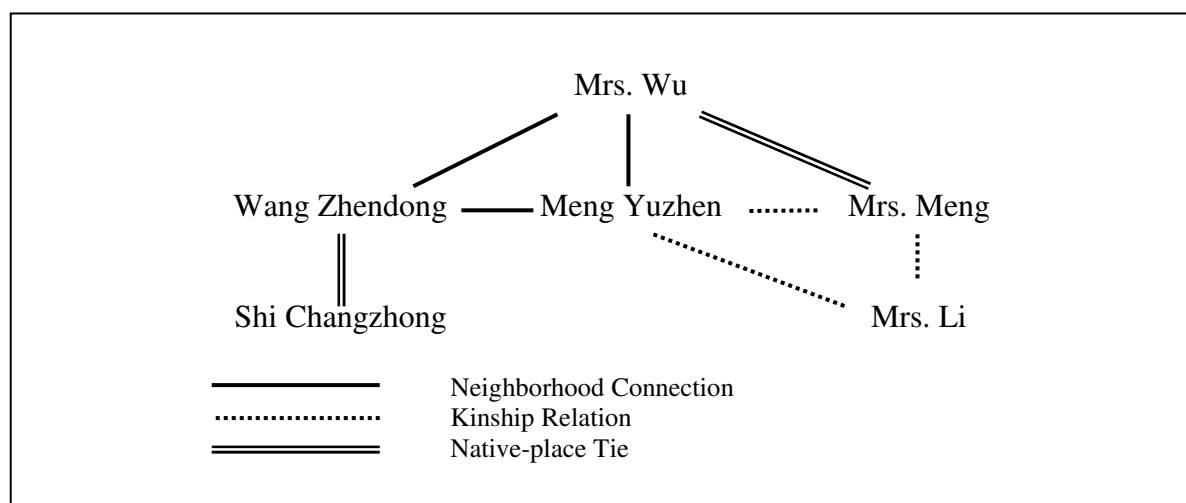
Source: (top) Hedda Morrison, *A Photographer in Old Peking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 189, 210; (bottom) Zhang Jinqi, *Bada hutong li de shenyuan jiushi* [Romance and anecdotes in the eight great lanes]. Zhengzhou: Zhengzhou daxue chubanshe, 2005, pp. 123, 189.

same year. Yuzhen was a married woman. Her life was a hard struggle. Her money was always tight. Her husband, Duan Lantian, barely maintained a livelihood by slaughtering pigs in Beijing. In October, Lantian heard that a job doing electrical work on airplanes could earn more cash. He decided to take this job opportunity and headed for Zhangjiakou, about 100 miles northwest of Beijing. Yuzhen was therefore left alone at home with her two children who were four years old and four months old.

Unfortunately, Yuzhen had received neither letters nor money from her husband since his departure. She had to pawn her furniture and clothing piece after piece in order to support herself and her children. Despite of these efforts, she remained unable to improve her domestic condition. It occurred to her that her only hope was to find another well-to-do husband. She thus went to Mrs. Wu for help. Mrs. Wu had been Yuzhen's neighbor for years. In response to Yuzhen's tearful plea, Mrs. Wu proceeded to meet with another two neighbors — one named Wang Zhendong and the other surnamed Shan — for their assistance in looking for a possible match with Yuzhen. Mrs. Wu eventually reached a peasant in Zhuolu County to the west of Beijing and arranged for her marriage. On December 28, Yuzhen ran away to be married. However, Yuzhen's husband came back to Beijing three months later. He filed a lawsuit accusing Mrs. Wu of "selling his wife for lucrative purposes."³⁸

The neighborhood network, as this case indicates, was characterized by a complex network of kinship relations and linkages to home villages. Two members of Yuzhen's natal family were involved in her desertion. Twelve days before she ran away from home, Yuzhen first visited her elder sister, Mrs. Li's family. Her mother, Mrs. Meng, also took an active part in the desertion as well. On the day when Yuzhen left Beijing, Mrs. Meng came along with Wang Zhendong (one of the two neighbors-turned-go-between that Mrs. Wu had worked with) to escort Yuzhen to Zhuolu County, where her daughter would meet her new husband. Mrs. Wu followed them to Zhuolu in the early afternoon to finalize the new marriage arrangement. For her role in the desertion, Mrs. Meng later became a co-defendant and faced charges of "selling a woman for lucrative purposes." Court documents suggested that the Meng's were connected to Mrs. Wu not only through the neighbor, but also through native-place ties, as they both were originally from Beijing. Even though the degree of connectedness between them remains somewhat unclear, the case files suggested a remarkably long and deep relation between them. Mrs. Meng claimed in her testimony that her friendship with Mrs. Wu "spanned two or more generations" (*shijiao*). Native-place ties, furthermore, brought Yuzhen's new husband, Shi Changzhong, into this network. He had been not been acquainted with Yuzhen or with any member of her family, but he was tied to Wu Cheng Shi's two neighbors, Wang Zhendong and Mr. Shan, because they all came from Zhuolu County.

Diagram 1: Network in Meng Yuzhen's Desertion Case



Sociologists, as well as the municipal police, have commented on the role of neighborhood connections and networks in the lives of lower class people, although they often portrayed this as a mechanism through which criminal activities were organized. In her study of abduction in 1920s Beijing, Zhou Shuzhao made the following comment about the courtyard neighborhood:

The courtyard tenement is a “local special product” (*techan*) in Beijing. It is such a haven for evils. Two things usually occurs [in tenements] as the result of physical proximity, mixture, and various forms of close contact among dwellers: (1) People learn evil practices from each other, since they are “imperceptibly influenced by [bad behaviors] they constantly see and hear” (*e’ru muran*); (2) People make acquaintance with each other because of such proximity. Under this circumstance, on the one hand the abductor has the opportunity to organize his/her criminal group; on the other

hand, the familiarity with the potential victim's background and trouble allows [abductor] to watch [the victim] all the time and calculate the best opportunity to take criminal action. Furthermore, one can take advantage of the knowledge [of neighborhood] to trap women victims.³⁹

Her study found that about 25% of abductors had been neighbors to their victim and the neighborhood connection was ahead of all other relationships in such criminal activities (see Table 2). Zhou also found that in 26% of the cases the abductor lived with the victim in the same courtyard tenement (see Table 3). Given their problematic and volatile social conditions, courtyard tenements witnessed a series of official security campaigns in 1930s and 1940s. These measures not only aimed to restore order to the courtyard tenements but also attempted to enlist them, or more precisely the neighborhood structure, to form the foundation of an urban mutual surveillance system. In this regard, Beijing's courtyard tenements resembled their European and American counterparts in that they had long been viewed as sources of disorder and centers of violence in official rhetoric. As such they were seen to warrant both the moral guidance of social reform movements and the disciplinary authority of the municipal police.

Table 2: Relationship between Abductor and Their Victim by Type of Connection

Relationship to Victims	Number of Criminals	Percentage
Neighbors	50	25.51
Relatives	40	20.41
Sexual Partners	29	14.80
Acquaintances	28	14.29
Unknown to the Victim (before the crime is committed)	13	6.63
Friends	12	6.12
First Encounter	6	3.06
Figurative Bonds of Kinship	6	3.06
Employer/the Employed	4	2.04
Whoremaster	4	2.04
Workmates	2	1.02
Other Types of Relationship	2	1.02

Table 3 Relationship between Abductor and Their Victim by Residence

Residential Connection	Number of Cases	Percentage
In one room	20	13.70
In one courtyard house	38	26.03
On the Same Street/ In the same village	28	19.18
In the same District	20	13.7
In Different District	40	27.39

Source: Zhou Shuzhao, "Beiping youguai yanjiu" [Study of abduction crime in Beijing], M.A. Thesis, Department of Sociology, Yenching University, 1933, pp. 122-4.

Women on the Move: Replicating the Network

Studies of urban neighborhoods in the West suggest that local bonds among neighbors can be eroded by a number of larger forces; as David Garrioch and Mark Peel pointed out, “by the growth in city size, by the rise of absolutism in early modern Europe, by the political complexity of modern nation-states, by industrialization or new technologies, by the Welfare State, by ‘globalization’.”⁴⁰ In this regard, Beijing in early twentieth century experienced a relatively high degree of mobility and transiency. Beijing also failed to have horizontal expansion due to the physical restrictions imposed by the city walls. Criminal case files indicate that movement from one neighborhood to another was common among many lower class people. A large number of them moved around as a result of family relocation, while some people, especially women, simply abandoned their families and moved around from one place to another. Nevertheless, their mobility did not inhibit them from either forming or getting access to neighborhood networks and ultimately utilizing them for their own advantage. To put it in another way, networking was strikingly portable and adaptable. In practice, it was made possible, first, by the extensive distribution of courtyard compounds in Beijing, and secondly, by the flexibility and pragmatism inherent in the process of networking.

The rise of courtyard tenements discussed in previous sections affected simultaneously all of the city’s districts and suburbs. It produced a spectrum of residential spaces in Beijing. At one end

were some high-class residential areas populated by foreigners and Chinese political and commercial elites. The Legation Quarter, which was to the south and slightly east of the imperial palace complex in the heart of Beijing, was the most outstanding example of an exclusive privileged-class residential neighborhood. At the opposite end of the social scale were pockets of squalor, in Tianqiao and Chaowai for instance, notorious for the extreme concentration of physical decay, poverty, and crime.⁴¹ Most courtyard neighborhoods were somewhere in between. In this regard, courtyard tenements in early twentieth-century Beijing displayed some differences from the urban slums in the West. In Western cities, impoverished people flocked to particular neighborhoods and gradually turned the entire district into an uncomfortable world of, using Sarah Deutsch's words, "noisome streets, dank basements, and alley shacks" usually occupied by immigrants speaking mosaic languages.⁴² The slums, such as the North End in Boston and the Lower East Side of New York by the turn of the twentieth century, were off-limits to the upper classes. Slums stood apart from other more affluent neighborhoods and enjoyed their own rhythm of daily life. By contrast, most of Beijing's residential neighborhoods were a patchwork of a few respectable residences standing in the midst of rapidly spreading courtyard tenements.

Some Westerners' accounts provide insight into the spatial distribution of courtyard tenements and the mixed character of city districts in Beijing. Mrs. Fannie S. Wickes was an American

missionary affiliated with the American Board Mission in Beijing. She spent a year in 1920 living in a “parsonage” inside the church compound in the heart of the city. Her residence was behind, she wrote, “a high wall and a big red gate at the end of a little blind alley.” “The arm of the main alley, or narrow street,” she continued, “is less 50 yards long, and the gray walls are each broken on both sides by three gates.”⁴³ Living side by side with these courtyard tenements and walking along the narrow alleyways, she was looking for an opportunity to get acquainted with her Chinese neighbors. Without any neighborly connections, she could tell from the exterior look of these courtyard tenements that their occupants were from the class of laborers, craftsmen, and the unemployed. However, when she finally had a chance to visit one of these courtyard tenements, Mrs. Wickes was still shocked by the deplorable conditions inside. She wrote:

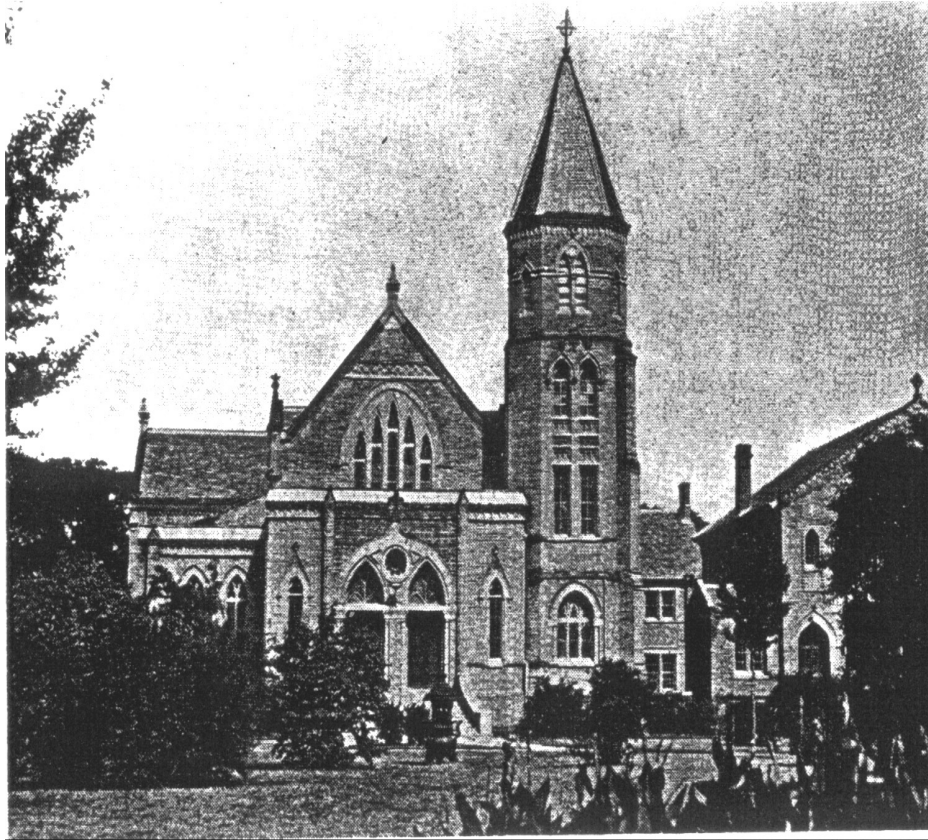
“Behind the nearest gate on the west is a rough, ill-drained yard some 25 feet square, on whose north and west sides are five rooms in an L shaped line, the home of four families, if you please. ... At No. 1, as we might style it, live a father and son; the father has some illness, abscesses I think he said, and rarely leaves the room; the son pulls ricksha(w)s. ... At No. 2 live a shoemaker, his wife and six children. ... At No. 3 is more palatial, having two rooms; one appears, however, to be used only as an entry, parlor and shrine for the gods of the household. Here lives a capitalist, in a small way — owner of 50 ricksha(w)s that are rented by the day to those who pull

them. ... At No. 4 lives a man who pulls ricksha(w)s, his untidy wife who is never seen without a cigarette, and their boy of three.⁴⁴

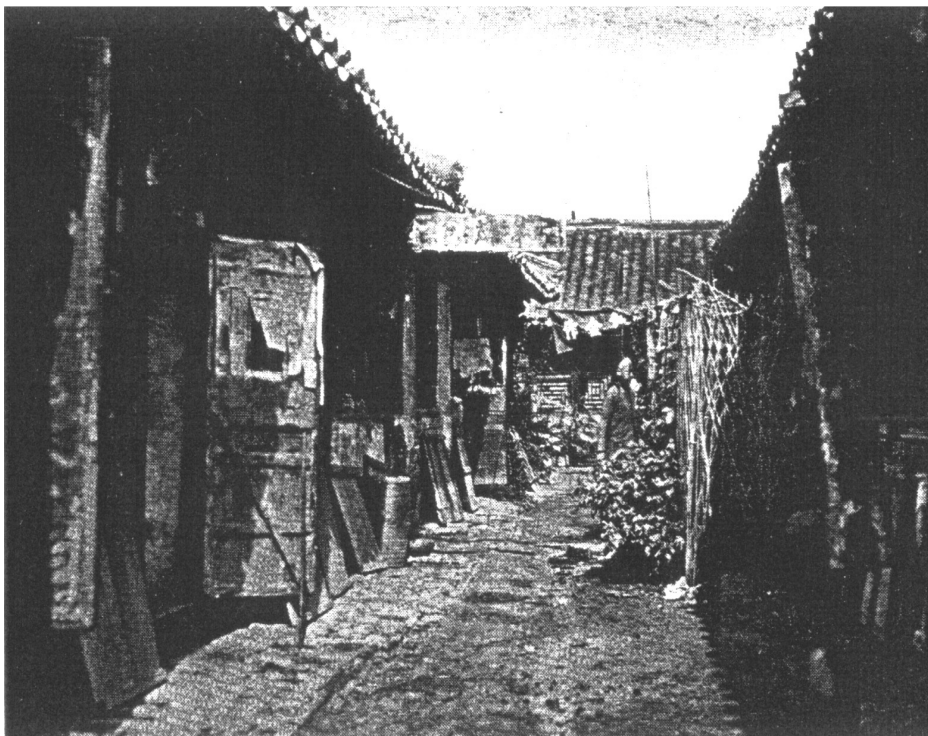
These were the neighbors who occupied the courtyard tenements just an arms-length away from a well-off foreign missionary and her neat and spacious American Board Mission church. Mrs. Wickes' observation is of particularly importance as it highlights that better-off families closely mingled with the less-fortunate neighbors and rundown houses stood side by side with the well maintained. This spatial distribution of courtyard tenements across city districts enabled women to rely upon the same strategy of creating and expanding network across administrative boundaries as they moved from one district to another.

Transiency among local residents and the spatial distribution of courtyard tenements affected the way women pursued and organized their social networks. The following bigamy case was a good example. On September 15, 1940, a thirty-seven-year-old widow, Mrs. Ying married a carpenter named Li Shucui. However, her desperate financial situation forced her to seek another well-to-do spouse. Soon after her marriage, Mrs. Ying realized that she had made a mistake. There were few opportunities for a carpenter in the war-torn city. High rates of inflation in late 1941 further upset their already precarious livelihood. Mrs. Ying felt herself slipping back into poverty. She was determined to move up in the world by the same means that she had used two years before. On

Picture 4: Patchwork of Neighborhood in Early Twentieth-Century Beijing



American Board Mission Church in the Inner-1 District, where Mrs. Fannie S. Wickes' parsonage was located.



Courtyard tenements of Mrs. Wickes' Chinese neighbors located near the church.

Source: Sidney Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey*. New York: George H. Doran, 1921, p. 326.

December 19, 1941, she ran away from Shucaï. Three days later she married Wang Dianshu, a bowl mender. Thirteen days after her desertion and ten days into her new marriage, Mrs. Ying was caught by the local police. In less than 13 months she had contracted into two marriages in two neighborhoods.⁴⁵

The network that facilitated Mrs. Ying's marital mobility consisted of clusters of people. Some lived, or had lived, in very close proximity in one neighborhood for a certain period of time. Others joined the network through different forms of social bond. On the occasion, the network was less a coordinated organization than a collection of relationships ranging from fleeting neighborhood contact to surrogate relatives. When she decided to marry her first new husband, Mrs. Ying went to seek help from her "surrogate mother" (*ganniang*), Mrs. Shi, who operated a stand selling snacks. Mrs. Shi eventually came up with a match — carpenter Li Shucaï, who was acquainted to her only because he sometimes stopped by her food stand. The same pattern of networking among people within one neighborhood appeared again when Mrs. Ying plotted to run away from Shucaï. This time she begged for help from her 61 year-old neighbor, Mrs. Li. It happened that Mrs. Li recently had been asked by one of her neighbors to look for a wife for bowl mender Dianshu. A match was worked out. As the central figure in Mrs. Ying's new marriage, Mrs. Li took charge of a number of nuptial rites, such as delivering betrothal gifts, holding a wedding feast, and inviting relatives and

friends for the wedding ceremony. She also witnessed the key ritual step of “worshipping heaven and earth” (*bai tiandi*).

The network in Mrs. Ying’s case was based on a wide variety of people and an array of social relationships. To borrow A. L. Epstein’s terms, it comprised “a wide variety of individuals” and a spectrum of social relationships differing “greatly in degree and kind.” At one end of the spectrum there were acquaintances connected with each other primarily through “casual and fleeting encounters.” On the opposite end was “a range of people” that a given person “interacted with regularly, and with whom his relationship was relatively intense.”⁴⁶ The key figures in the network, such as Mrs. Shi and Mrs. Li, were the “masterminds” that orchestrated Mrs. Ying’s two marriages. Nevertheless, other members of the network maintained ties to a key figure but did not necessarily extend their connections to other members in the network. Put differently, members interacted with one another with varying degrees of intensity. Some might never have met others in the network. The network was not stable, with permanent bonds, but was instead flexible and pragmatic. The networks also evolved over time in terms of the members involved and the purpose of their activities. People could be linked to one and other through ties to the key figure, or to the plot, or the task itself. Such multidimensional relationships and the flexible way of forming a network might even help extend people’s contacts beyond the physical boundaries of a particular neighborhood, thereby maximizing the payoff to be gained from networking.

With such connections, Mrs. Ying was able to transform herself from a widow to a wife, to a runaway wife, and back to a wife.

The bigamy case demonstrates that, on the one hand, the operation of neighborhood connections offered women some benefits by providing them with the chance to escape from an unhappy situation by way of a rather fluid pattern of marriage. Having limited resources at hand and being away from their premarital home, the neighborhood network was a feasible and effective strategy that could allow lower class women some sense of control and relief from their otherwise helpless lives. On the other hand, the network was an organic system of interconnections within which everybody knew and interacted with everybody in a regular and often intense manner. In this way, the social bonds between the members and the key figures in the network were more cohesive and stronger than any material links.

Helpful Connections, Selfish Connections

Neighborhood connections within courtyard compounds yielded helpful results, as people could turn to their neighbors for various forms of aid ranging from food to small sums of money. Seeking help from neighbors to some extent was part of the repertoire of survival strategies of people who struggled to maintain a precarious subsistence in Beijing. However, the courtyard neighborhood was not always harmonious and its inhabitants were not always mutually helpful. Hidden tensions and open

conflicts among neighbors, such as those described in Yamin Xu's research, was often the norm.⁴⁷ Moreover, help from neighbors was often a mixed blessing. It might not be as unselfish as help-givers claimed, and sometimes there could be a trap lurking behind neighbors' sweet promises. However, these connections, selfish connections, were an integral part of life in courtyard tenements and marked the other side of the coin in the closeness of the ties that connected members of the neighborhood.

To return to runaway wife Yuzhen's case mentioned before, facing the charge of "selling people for lucrative purposes," the neighbor-turned-matchmaker, Mrs. Wu defended herself in court: "My former neighbor, this Meng Yuzhen, came to me herself. She said her husband had gone to Zhangjiakou. Left at home alone, she wasn't able to make ends meet. Thus she begged me to find her a place where she could get fed." Mrs. Wu thus refused to plead guilty to selling her neighbor. Her testimony reflected the most common self-defense strategy, whereby "abductors" portrayed themselves as concerned neighbors offering help to alleviate the suffering of their fellow women. A similar "abductor's" defense can be seen in the following case.

Mrs. Fan (*née* Xu) lived with her mother-in-law Mrs. Fan (*née* Guan). Her husband, 38 year-old bricklayer Fan Enpu, had been in jail since 1937 for his involvement in a murder case. In early September 1943, facing soaring prices, the mother-in-law planned to sell her daughter-in-law for a price. She could then use the bride

price as capital to set up a small business selling matches. After the daughter-in-law agreed, the mother-in-law asked for help from 51 year-old Mrs. Tang who was her neighbor in the same courtyard tenement. While Mrs. Tang was contemplating a good match for her neighbor's daughter-in-law, she was visited by her son-in-law Chen Yide. Yide had a gardener job at a normal school in Tong County. Mrs. Tang asked Yide to find out if there was a marriageable man in his workplace. Yide agreed to help.

Mrs. Tang had expected a quick reply from Yide, but she did not hear from him as the days passed. She became impatient and went to Yide's mother, 49-year-old Mrs. Chen. She asked her to check on what was going on with her son. Mrs. Chen came back with some good news — Yide had found a good match, a cook in his school surnamed Guo, who was willing to marry the daughter-in-law. On September 16, Mrs. Tang and Mrs. Chen escorted the daughter-in-law, Mrs. Fan, to Tong County for her new marriage. She also took her 5 year-old son into her new marriage. One year later in April 1944, Fan Enpu was released from jail. He then accused the two matchmakers and his own mother of abducting his wife.⁴⁸ Facing with the accusation, Mrs. Chen spoke out at court:

Q: Mrs. Fan, *née* Xu is a married woman. How could you find her a new husband?

A: We [she and Mrs. Tang) just committed a minor mistake. We never anticipated that [to do so] we broke the law. We

were thinking of nothing but saving a person's life — to find a place where [she] could get fed.

The other go-between in this case, Mrs. Tang, offered similar testimony: "Mrs. Fan (the mother-in-law) came to my room in person and begged me to find a husband for her daughter-in-law who would give her food and save her from dying of hunger."

In their testimony, go-betweens typically insisted that they became involved in a desertion plot either because they sympathized with the poor young wife's miserable situation and hoped to offer her a better livelihood, or else because they could not resist the young wife's repeated requests. While denying the charge of abduction, they sometimes went further by finger-pointing at the runaway women's family members, usually their husbands, accusing them of being the actual "trouble-maker." It was these irresponsible husbands who drove their wives over the edge by not providing daily support or inflicting physical abuse. They, as neighbors, were problem-solvers who helped miserable wives escape from economic hardship or emotional suffering.

Despite their claims of selfless support, however, court documents suggest that there could be another reason; a material one, which motivated neighbors to plot or take part in desertions. They received cash payment for their efforts. In Mrs. Fan's case, right after she was remarried, her new husband gave 5 *yuan* each to matchmakers Mrs. Chen and Mrs. Tang. That amount of money

could buy about 2 *jin* of food grain for a day's meal.⁴⁹ In runaway wife Yuzhen's case, her new husband gave 150 *yuan* each to Mrs. Wu — the architect of the desertion and Mrs. Meng — Yuzhen's mother. Though the money was worth far less than its triple digit face value might suggest, due to persistent inflation, these sums could still provide some food or other necessities to these women. Considering women's lack of a regular income, money from matchmaking could contribute significantly to their economic life. This was a reason why we find many women neighbors willing to take part in desertion plots.

Criminal case files show that neighbors' contacts could be helpful and selfish, as well as cooperative and competitive. In this regard, courtyard tenements were indeed fraught with complex connections and internal disagreements. In analyzing the physical setting of the courtyard tenements and its impact on social relations, Yamin Xu argues "In such a crowded living compound, privacy was severely limited and no one would be surprised to see both inter- and intra- family conflicts breeding all too easily." Consequently, "it became more difficult for residents to form a closely-knit community." Because domestic violence and social strife were often not resolved through communal mediating mechanisms, Xu stresses that "the intrusion of the state" into neighborhood and private life as the ultimate arbitrating force was unavoidable.⁵⁰

However, my examination of criminal case files suggests that while urban neighborhoods were not necessarily “closely-knit,” they certainly were much more interdependent than Xu’s research has acknowledged. Essentially, the official institution of law and order was neither a new nor a destructive force in the working of the neighborhood network. The “state” was always there. Even in the imperial period when such “traditional social control tools” and “informal powers” as lineage or “kin-group mediators” were fairly common, county magistrate’s adjudication workloads were still laden with lawsuits over domestic disputes.⁵¹ The state-controlled court and neighborhood-centered mediation were always two major venues for people to resolve domestic disputes. But, the ultimate choice of one over the other was largely determined by the degree of conflict and, in some cases, by the individual preferences of the parties involved.

Conflict within courtyard tenements was not an indication of a declining community. Quite the contrary, conflict was simply an inevitable feature of the on-going social interaction amongst local residents. Members of the neighborhood were linked to each other through a spectrum of social ties. Some were altruistic as we see in cases of borrowing and lending a small amount of daily necessities between neighbors, whereas others might come from selfish calculations for money or other personal interests. But, even in the case of “selfish actions”, we still see that the women went to their “selfish” neighbors for help. Many women must have been aware that the help they sought and received was not necessarily a

genuine gesture of selfless aid, but they still sought it nevertheless because the neighbors and the neighborhood networks represented their only source of help.

Conclusion

The courtyard tenements was a distinctive form of urban space and the rise of social networks there differed both from their Western counterparts and the formalized Chinese networks that operated in institutionalized urban spaces, such as native-place lodges and universities. The history of neighborhoods in European and American cities has demonstrated that urban residential quarters could be a determining force in the creation of a distinct group identity (be it racial, ethnic, gender, or class-based).⁵² At a certain point of time, a neighborhood can even become a breeding ground for collective action that led to confrontations with the state.⁵³ The current literature on Chinese political and professional institutions in twentieth-century urban centers reveals a similar emergence of collective identity and group interest against a backdrop of state expansion in the form of municipal administrative power. Richard Belsky, for instance, argues that native-place lodges, as a form of urban space, “provided places to socialize, to celebrate festivals, to discuss events at home, to debate affairs affecting personal or regional interests, and to network with others in order to facilitate acting on such interests.”⁵⁴ By contrast, the women’s networks seen in criminal case files were, by their nature, spontaneous and ego-centered. Such networks were

spontaneous as some members of the network closely interacted with the key person while others might maintain casual ties. It was ego-centered since the operation of this personalized collectivity of relationships never sought to advance the interests of its members collectively. Instead, women resorted to the network to satisfy individual and immediate needs. But like other urban institutions, the courtyard tenement networks played an active role in shaping and re-shaping the surrounding social and moral geography.

Courtyard tenements had become a common landmark in major metropolitan centers in early twentieth-century China.⁵⁵ People living in congested neighborhoods were among the city's most deprived populations. These congested neighborhoods became the target of intense urban reform movements that continued to 1949 and after under the Communist government. Courtyard neighborhoods played a crucial role in urban administration and mass mobilization. The ghettoization process in Beijing's courtyard neighborhood continued into the second half of the twentieth century. Since the city was chosen to be the national capital of the new People's Republic, a large number of civil and military cadres, and their families, moved in. The problems of overpopulation and housing shortage further worsened as the result of migration under the government's economic policy to transform Beijing from a "consumer city" into an "industrial city" in the 1950s. Finally, as researchers have pointed out, the great earthquake in 1976, on the one hand, caused structural damage to courtyard tenements that were already in

deteriorating , and, on the other hand, “after the earthquake, various forms of temporary shelters were erected in the yards, altering the houses’ original state and hindering proper lighting and ventilation.”⁵⁶ As a result, courtyard neighborhoods once again have become the target of urban renewal plans, particularly during the Reform Era since the 1980s. By one account, at the turn of the twentieth-first century on average about 600 alleyways were being leveled every year in a new wave of urban reconstruction.⁵⁷

Officials may have view courtyard tenements simply a control unit or a marker of social illness (or inconvenience) but they were much more than this. They played a unique role in the daily life of lower class women who lived in the meandering alleyways and rundown houses. As criminal case files illustrate, these women differed from other female groups such as women workers, women students, women professionals, women soldiers, or even prostitutes working in brothels. Members of these other female groups could negotiate and advance their interests through organized activities, while women living in courtyard tenements were left entirely on their own. They needed to locate a different source of help. In this regard, various forms of daily contact, ranging from cooperation to contestation, created bonds amongst them. Internal disagreements existed and selfish activities characterized some neighborhood connections; but considered as a unit, this web of relationships secured the neighborhood as a central place in lower class women’s world. For those who were struggling in desperate situations, such networks proved to be a

source of hope. They could connect women to people they had never known before and carry them to towns and villages in regions far away from Beijing.

Moreover, women-centered courtyard neighborhood networks differed from other urban communities in terms of their political potential. Studies of elite activism and urban transformation in late imperial and early twentieth-century China have shown both the existence and vitality of various types of urban communities in major cities. Institutions, such as commercial guilds, native-place associations, charitable organizations, religious institutions, labor unions, and secret/criminal groups, gave rise to heterogeneous communities. They enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy in late imperial China. However, they began to face growing pressure from expanding government power over the course of urban reform in the late Qing period and with the rise of the authoritarian state in the Republic. These communities, therefore, were places where negotiation and confrontation between group interests and official agendas played out. On the contrary, the courtyard tenements examined in this article were not the bases of any organized action. Networks formed by lower class women were spontaneous, personal, and ego-centered. Their activities had neither political agendas nor political content. In this sense, courtyard tenements were fundamentally apolitical during the early twentieth-century. Even though the courtyard neighborhood was essentially apolitical it enabled women to survive political turmoil and

economic dislocation and in the process it helped to fundamentally reshape the city's socioeconomic and moral geography.

Glossary

anchang	暗娼
anfangzi	暗房子
bai diandi	拜天地
Chaowai	朝外
chengqu	城区
dongfang	东房
e'ru muran	耳濡目染
ganniang	干娘
jiaoqu	郊区
jin	进
jingxian	京县
Lao She	老舍
shijiao	世交
shiqian yazhang	使钱押账
siheyuan	四合院
techan	特产
Tianqiao	天桥
Tong County	通县
wuye	无业
xifang	西房
Zhangjiakou	张家口
zhengfang	正房
Zhuolu	涿鹿
zihun	自混

Notes

The following abbreviations are used in the Notes:

BPDDFY: Beiping difang fayuan 北平地方法院, Beijing District Court.

BPSJCJ: Beipingshi jingchaju 北平市警察局, Municipal Police Department (Beijing).

ZJSJBPFJ: Caizhengbu jichare qu zhijieshui ju Beiping fenju 财政部冀察热区直接税局北平分局, Tax Office in Beijing, Region of Hebei, Chahar, and Rehe Provinces, Ministry of Finance.

¹ Lao She (Shu Qingchun), *Rickshaw: The Novel Lo-t'o Hsiang Tzu*, Jean M. James, trans. (Honolulu: The University of Press of Hawaii, 1979), 150.

² Madeleine Yue Dong, *Republican Beijing: The City and Its Histories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), chapters 7 and 9.

³ Yang Nianqun, *Zaizao bingren: Zhongxiyi chongtu xia de kongjian zhengzhi* [Remaking “patients”: Spatial politics and the conflict between Chinese and Western medical practice] (Beijing: Renmin daxue chubanshe, 2006).

⁴ Yamin Xu. “Wicked Citizens and the Social Origins of China’s Modern Authoritarian State: Civil Strife and Political Control in Republican Beiping, 1928-1937” (Ph. D. Dissertation, Berkeley: University of California, 2002).

⁵ Major works on urban space and social networking in late imperial and early twentieth-century China include: Richard Belsky, *Localities at the Center: Native Place, Space, and Power in Late Imperial Beijing* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2006); Bryna Goodman, *Native Place, City, and Nation: Regional Networks and Identities in Shanghai, 1853-1937* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984); Man Bun Kwan, *The Salt Merchants of Tianjin: State-Making and Civil Society in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001); Timothy Weston, *The Power of Position: Beijing University, Intellectuals, and*

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⁶ Belsky, *Localities at the Center*; William T. Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1895* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

⁷ Elisabeth Frances Wood, "Domestic Architecture in the Beijing Area, 1860-1930" (Ph.D. Dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1983), 8.

⁸ Wood, "Domestic Architecture in the Beijing Area;" Deng Yunxiang, *Beijing siheyuan* [Courtyard houses in Beijing] (Beijing: Renmin ribao chubanshe, 1990); Wang Qiming, *Beijing siheyuan* [Beijing's courtyard houses] (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1999).

⁹ Deng Yunxiang, *Beijing siheyuan*, 6.

¹⁰ A Canadian Architect, Andre Casault recorded his impressions of the courtyard houses in Beijing in 1987: "Three characteristics of the Chinese courtyard house seem to me to be very important: its introverted form, its symmetry and its hierarchical structure." Andre Casault, "The Beijing Courtyard House: Its Traditional Form and Present State." *Open House International* 12, no.1 (1987): 31.

¹¹ Samuel Victor Constant, *Calls, Sounds and Merchandise of the Peking Street Peddlers* (Peking: The Camel Bell, 1936), iii-iv.

¹² The population growth varied in different parts of late imperial Beijing. The inner city first witnessed a 43% increase in the first half of the Qing and then a decrease in the second. This demographic curve was largely the result of the Qing ethnic policy that prohibited Han Chinese from permanently residing in the Manchu dominated inner city on the one hand and relocated the growing Manchu population in other parts of the city or even other regions on a regular basis on the other. While the population remained stable in the inner city, it doubled in the Han

Chinese-concentrated outer city and almost tripled in the multiethnic city suburbs. Han Guanghui, *Beijing lishi renkou dili* [Geographical distribution of population in the history of Beijing] (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 1996), 125-8.

¹³ Beipingshi gongwuju [Beijing public construction bureau], "Beipingshi zhi gailue" [A survey of Beijing], 1946. In *Beijing dang'an shiliao* [Beijing archival materials], edited by Bai Shulan, Wang Muhong, and Zhao Jiareng, 1992, 15.

¹⁴ Richard Belsky, "The Urban Ecology of Late Imperial Beijing Reconsidered: The Transformation of Social Space in China's Late Imperial Capital City." *Journal of Urban History* 27, no.1 (November 2000): 55.

¹⁵ Rowe, *Hankow: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City*, 5.

¹⁶ For discussion of poverty in early twentieth-century Beijing, see Dong, *Republican Beijing*; Janet Yi-Chun Chen, "Guilty of Indigence: The Urban Poor in China, 1900-1949" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 2005).

¹⁷ Xu, "Wicked Citizens and the Social Origins of China's Modern Authoritarian State," 162-8.

¹⁸ Niu Nai'e, "Beiping yiqian erbai pinhu zhi yanjiu" [A study of 1,200 poor households in Beijing]. In *Shehui xuejie* [Sociological world] 7, (1933): 174.

¹⁹ Sidney Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey* (New York: George H. Doran, 1921), 94-5.

²⁰ Beipingshi gongwuju [Beijing public construction bureau], "Beipingshi zhi gailue" [A survey of Beijing], 1946. In *Beijing dang'an shiliao* [Beijing archival materials], edited by Bai Shulan, Wang Muhong, and Zhao Jiareng, 1992, 16.

²¹ Han, *Beijing lishi renkou dili*, 334.

²² Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey*, 94-5; Han, *Beijing lishi renkou dili*, 334.

²³ Gamble, *How Chinese Families Live in Peiping*, 129.

²⁴ Li Jinghan, "Beiping zuidi xiandu de shenghuo chengdu de taolun" [A study of the lowest living standard in Beiping]. In *Shehui xuejie* [Sociological world] 3, (1929): 3.

²⁵ Niu, "Beiping yiqian erbai pinhu zhi yanjiu," 173.

²⁶ Grace E. Woods, *Life in China* (Braunton Devon: Merlin Books Ltd., 1992), 66.

²⁷ Sidney Gamble, *How Chinese Families Live in Peiping: A Study of the Income and Expenditure of 283 Chinese Families Receiving from \$8 to \$550 Silver per Month* (New York and London: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1933), 129.

²⁸ L. K. Tao, *Livelihood in Peking: An Analysis of the Budgets of Sixty Families* (Peking: Social Research Department, China Foundation for the Promotion of Education and Culture, 1928), 104.

²⁹ BPDFFY, J65-13-3762, Wang Lide and Wang Liyou, 1946.

³⁰ BPDFFY, J65-7-3389, Mrs. Gao, *née* De and Mrs. Gao, *née* Zhang, 1943.

³¹ Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 105-7.

³² Zhang Jingyu, "Beijing sifabu fanzui tongji de fenxi" [An analysis of the statistics on crime compiled by the Justice Department]. In *Shehui xuejie* [Sociological world] 2, (1928): 136.

³³ BPSJCJ, J181-1-371, "Renkou zhiye xibie biao" [Occupation of the residents in the inner and outer districts of Beijing], 1933.

³⁴ Zhou Shuzhao, "Beiping yibaiming nufan de yanjiu" [A study of one hundred female prisoners in Beiping]. In *Shehui xuejie* [Sociological world], 6, (1932): 55.

³⁵ Dong, *Republican Beijing*, 131-5.

³⁶ The unregistered prostitutes had other names: *sichang*, *tuchang*, *youchang*, *sanchang*, *yeji*. Zhao Chunxiao, *Jingcheng jiushi zatan* [Stories of the capital] (Beijing: Qunzhong chubanshe, 1997), 76-7.

³⁷ Court documents identify her as Wu Cheng *shi*, or Mrs. Wu, *née* Cheng.

³⁸ BPDFFY, J65-8-2439, Mrs. Wu, *née* Cheng and Mrs. Meng, *née* Ma, 1944.

³⁹ Zhou Shuzhao, "Beiping youguai yanjiu" [A study of the crime of seduction in Beijing] (M.A. Thesis, Department of Sociology, Yenching University, 1933), 122-4.

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⁴² Sarah Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space, and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6.

⁴³ Mrs. Fannie S. Wickes, "My Nearest Neighbors in Peking." In Gamble, *Peking: A Social Survey*, 331-2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ BPDFFY, J65-6-599, Mrs. Ying, *née* Wang, 1942. The official investigation transcript found that Mrs. Ying had been Mrs. Li, *née* Ning when she cohabited with Li Shucaï, and she then became Mrs. Wang Ning Shi after she married Wang Dianzhu. But, for some unexplained reason, the official indictment and sentence still wrote her name as Mrs. Ying, *née* Wang.

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⁴⁷ Xu, "Wicked Citizens and the social Origins of China's Modern Authoritarian State."

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⁵⁴ Belsky, *Localities at the Center*, 4.

⁵⁵ Hanchao Lu, *Beyond the Neon Lights: Everyday Shanghai in the Early Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Zwia Lipkin, *Useless to the State: "Social Problems" and Social Engineering in Nationalist Nanjing, 1927-1937* (Cambridge, Mass.: Published by the Harvard University Asia Center and distributed by Harvard University Press, 2006).

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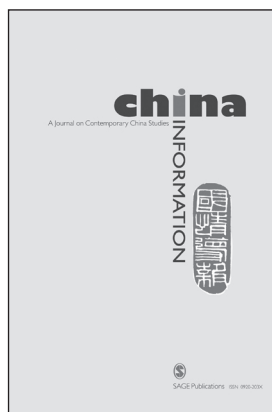
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