

# HomeShop: Research-Based Practice and the Spirit of the *Hutong*

TEXT / JASON WAITE







Turning off a bustling Beijing thoroughfare onto the narrow *hutong*, or lane, Jiaodaokou Beiertiao, one is confronted with a newish, official, red granite plaque affixed to a brick wall. Inscribed in the gleaming stone is the genealogy of the *hutong* and in particular the changing of its name over the past half millennium as well as its measurements: 681 meters by 6 meters. This anti-spectacle of history contains neither an account of crucial historical events nor a verbose biography of a notable resident. Instead the meaning here is simply the persistence of the community. Yet the *hutong* is not immune to the transformations going on around it. Life there has begun to shift in the context of the larger, rapidly transforming topography, becoming an example of “the urban that grows wild like the state of nature.”<sup>1</sup>

I wandered up and down the lane searching for the artist initiative HomeShop, one among the newer constellation of artist-run spaces and collectives that engage in research-based practice, providing a counterpoint to the largely market-oriented art world in China. Aided by a helpful grandmotherly lady perched on a stool surveying the lane's activities, I was directed to what appeared to be just another one of the small shops that serve the lane. The event that evening was an impromptu gathering of Sugar

Jar, an independent music collaborative. This self-titled “indie culture transmission studio” run by Yang Licai and Gerard Altaio provided a small alternative space for musicians in the 798 arts district where the studio's vast CD collection of independent Chinese music was also on display until they were evicted for complex reasons involving run-ins with the authorities and the brief detention of Yang by the police. After finding and renovating a new space elsewhere, the studios were meant to reopen that day, but were shut down by the police—evidence of the watchful eye of the state still present in the arts—and called for everyone to gather at HomeShop instead.

The development of HomeShop as a place for community took the processes of the *hutong* as its point of departure. Replicating the fervent life of the lane as a passageway for people and ideas, HomeShop has become a locus of diverse practices that overlap in small-scale activities, gestures, and publications. The name was derived from its original location as a storefront real estate agency transformed into a live-in studio and project room, founded by Elaine W. Ho in 2008, not far from its present location.

The trappings of a store both bring local residents and passersby into the space under the pretense of everyday financial transactions, in

order to traffic in the commerce of collaboration and seek a more affective form of exchange, while raising larger questions about one's relationship to economic systems. The limited space, about 250 square feet, encouraged the activities, research, and events to spill over into the street. The 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing provided the occasion to take stock of the inhabitants' lack of inclusion and access to the games. *Wii would like to play // we don't have tickets*, 2008, invited neighbors and visitors to participate instead in a public competition on a more egalitarian video game platform that was projected onto the facade. In another event, instead of the usual adulation directed toward the victors of the Olympic Games, a block party and screening of video works was held in honor of games' losers. Inside a countdown clock heralding the coming of the Olympics' end was installed. The clock referred to the one erected in Tiananmen Square that counted down the time until the start of the games, but inverted the anticipation toward their expiration.

Nearing the end of its lease and needing to expand to accommodate the community forming around it, HomeShop began a tumultuous period of looking for a new space, which resulted in a mapping of the neighborhood. The search led them behind closed doors, into pri-

INSIDE FRONT COVER + OPPOSITE: Suvi Rautio with Michael Eddy, Elaine W. Ho, Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga and Twist Qu, detail of community project, *WaoBao Spring Cleaning*, 2012 (photo: Elaine W. Ho); ABOVE, LEFT AND RIGHT: HomeShop gathering, Beijing (photo: Elaine W. Ho)



vate spaces and often into intimate encounters with residents. The search was mainly facilitated by real estate agents whose position provided access to proprietary information such as locations, prices, and the landlord's contact details—knowledge that was slowly accumulated by the members of HomeShop during their research. After about a year spent creating its own archive of real estate information related to the area, HomeShop reconstructed the original function of the space as a real estate brokerage. HomeShop's brokerage, however, was open source: The organization gave out all of the knowledge they had accumulated through postings that replicated the format of housing ads posted in the window, literally transferring the “agency” to the visitor. Interspersed among these sheets were documentation, stories, and sketches of inhabitants who had been met during the research, which provides an account of value that cannot be so easily quantified.

At the end of 2010, HomeShop moved to its present location—where the Sugar Jar party was under way with a mixture of artists, musicians, and a trickle of foreigners. I entered the small shop-like space that used to be part of a workers' dormitory and now houses diverse spaces and studios shared by the seven contributors who co-organize HomeShop. The intimate space serves as a multifaceted meeting space surrounded in part by an open-air, public lending library started with donations, and is curated by Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga and Ho whose cataloging

system begins with Marxism, Leninism, Maoism, and Deng Xiaoping before continuing through the humanities and sciences. It also serves as a reference point for the informal book group facilitated by Michael Eddy—who was in attendance having just returned from spending the day tending to an organic farm plot outside the city. He organizes the Happy Friends Reading Club, which was holding a meeting the following night to discuss a number of the papers read at a recent conference on grassroots activism in China. Further inside the structure a small courtyard acts as a site for many events. And just off the courtyard sits a kitchen that might not look out of place at a commune plastered with helpful reminders to clean up after yourself. Elsewhere a small refrigerator and counter have been installed in one of the studios, transforming it into a bar where everyone was packing in to drink small shots of an electric blue cocktail that I was happy to partake in on this sweltering evening.

Other members of the community rent worktables by the week or month, which also provides some economic generation for HomeShop. Among the artist and designer occupants are the editors of *LES+*, one of the few lesbian magazines in mainland China and the only to be published on paper. The commitment to print media generally is congruent with HomeShop's own experimentation with the form. The self-produced journal *WEAR* documents the many ephemeral events and projects in and around the space and also provides a site for critical

scholarship. Another publication undertaken by HomeShop as a form of DIY journalism is the newspaper *Beiertiao Leaks*, where stories from around the *hutong* on a single day are gathered, written, edited, and then laboriously screen printed by hand as an edition. The project is a form of slow transmission that shifts the focus toward the process of production rather than its consumption.

This turn, which is representative of the actions of HomeShop, speaks to what David Harvey calls “place-making.”<sup>2</sup> The abiding connection made with one's home partakes in a “practice of dwelling” in geographic and personal relationships. These everyday landscapes and their accompanying micropolitics are imbued with a form of potential, one that requires radical attention to quotidian experiences.

#### Notes

1. Fredric Jameson, “The Politics of Utopia,” *New Left Review*, vol. 24, 2004, p. 49.
2. David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* (London: Profile Books, 2010), p. 192.

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ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT: Elaine W. Ho and Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga, street view of public installation *I Love Your Home*, 2010 (photo: Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga); public screening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics closing ceremony at HomeShop, Beijing, 2008 (photo: Jeroen deKloet); OPPOSITE: view of HomeShop, Beijing (photo: Elaine W. Ho)



