

CitySpace



Though some would argue that Shanghai's architectural environment is hopelessly contaminated by Western influences, the quintessential Chinese combination of wall and the gate is still in evidence. While many of the best and most historic examples have disappeared, there are still abundant manifestations – plenty enough for a treasure hunt.

The Middle Gate

Consider for a moment the Chinese word for China, *Zhongguo*, the “Middle Kingdom”. The character for “middle” (中) is the essence of Chinese urbanism – a walled enclosure, pierced by gates along a central axis. Nothing could be simpler or more essential. In addition, the words “city”, “city wall”, and even “Great Wall” all share the same ideographic character, *cheng* (城). So every time you practice your *guoyu*, you can imagine the plan of the grandest imperial palace – an entire Forbidden City in miniature on a language flashcard.

The City Gate

Though not as magnificent as the Tang Dynasty's Chang'an (the site of contemporary Xian), Shanghai had its own walled city long before Westerners appeared. Built in 1554 by the local magistrate

after his constituents petitioned him to do something about the river-borne marauders, in modern times the old city wall was torn down to make way for bus lanes. However you can plainly see the outline of the old city wall on any Shanghai map (look for Renmin Lu and Zhonghua Lu). You can visit the ghosts of the 11 original gates by tracing the paths of the Old City's outer streets. And then there is a bit of the real thing, a physical remnant of the original wall and gate at Dajing Lu.

The Memorial Gate

In the old days, memorial gates, known as *pailou*, commemorated important people and places. Only a few still remain (the one at the intersection of Lishui Lu and Renmin Lu, for example, commemorates the time I ate three huge bowls of Old City soup dumplings after lining up for hours this past winter). Nowadays, most *pailou* memorial gates have transfigured into architectural motifs. Look at the Huangpu District Government headquarters (hard to miss even when traveling at 100 kph on the elevated highway.) Or the City Treasury Bureau Headquarters near Xujiahui. Or for that matter, just about any super-sized residential development around town. Think of them as memorials of the memorials.

