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Celebrating *Chunjie* in Old Nanjing

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[Celebrating Chunjie in Old Nanjing](#)

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By Sarah Tynen

“You must be so homesick! Aren’t you going home to celebrate *chunjie*?” asked the Auntie who sells tofu on the back of a freight tricycle in the old city of Nanjing. Auntie rides down the narrow, winding alleys of Old Nanjing several times a day to emphatically announce her price of tofu at 500 grams for 1.5 yuan (that’s about a pound for 25 cents). Standing at my doorstep the week before chunjie, or the Spring Festival, also known as the Chinese New Year in the West, she told me to stock up. It was the last day of business and she would be taking a weeklong break to celebrate the lunar new year.

The residents of Old Nanjing accumulated food as if they were preparing for a blizzard. Their pantries were stuffed with rice, potatoes, carrots, and other staples in preparation for the 15-day long chunjie from January 23rd to February 6th, when most businesses across the city shut-down for at least a week.

Home to some of Nanjing’s oldest housing structures and poorest residents, Old Nanjing is a small, historic neighborhood located near the center of the city, a provincial capital with a population of 8 million about 150 miles west of Shanghai. The meandering alleys are too narrow for vehicles and lined with old homes, or *laofangzi* as the locals call the one-to-two story dilapidated houses with the fading traces of traditional courtyard architecture. The laofangzi here may date back over 500 years to the Ming Dynasty. The native Nanjingese of this community are currently awaiting eviction and demolition. Many of the residents expect their homes to be relocated within the year.



The doorway of a laofangzi in Old Nanjing

Due to skyrocketing property values, business deals between local governments and private land developers, and the increasing popularity of privately run, gated high-rise compounds, China is razing old cities and displacing the residents to faraway suburbs at an alarming rate.

Although reliable statistics for Nanjing are unavailable, Beijing's Old Dilapidated Housing Renewal (ODHR) program evicted more than 500,000 residents from 1990 to 2003. As reported by Michael Meyer in his book [*The Last Days of Old Beijing*](#), some unofficial estimates even go as high as 1.25 million residents. According to data provided by the Beijing Academy of Urban Planning, while the number of hutongs, or alley-ways, in Beijing exceeded 7,000 in the early 1950s and was reduced to about 2,000 in 1990, today there are only an estimated 900 hutong left in Beijing.

While the pace of urban redevelopment has supposedly slowed in Beijing since the end of the 2008 Olympic Games, in Nanjing the pace of demolition is quickening, as the city and provincial governments gear up for a wave of demolition in advance of the 2014 Youth Olympic Games. Signs around the city urge: "Stage a Good Youth Olympics, Build a New Nanjing!" and "Promote Harmony, Renew the Old City, Welcome the Youth Olympics!" A government official

who requested to remain anonymous revealed to me that 100 billion RMB (15.7 billion USD) has been approved for urban redevelopment projects in preparation for the Youth Olympics.



A house marked with the characters "banqian," or "relocate"

Big red characters reading *banqian*, or “relocate”, are spray painted on the outside of many of the homes in Old Nanjing. The residents, however, have not been given notice of compensation or official orders to move out yet. Torn and faded posters around the neighborhood read, “The Earlier You Move Out, The More Rewards You Will Get” and “Cast Away Illusion and Make Practical Negotiations.” Residents say the posters were put up over two years ago, but no one has forced them to move out yet.

Two months ago, while eating lunch with a family in Old Nanjing, I stumbled upon the opportunity to move into a *laofangzi* with a 19-year old Chinese veterinarian student. I am conducting field work in Old Nanjing during my 10-month research grant from the Fulbright US Student Program to explore the relationship between urban redevelopment, socio-economic segregation, and concepts of local identity. I immediately took advantage of the opportunity to live in the neighborhood I am studying.

My new roommate, Little Sister Xie Rui, confided, “I would hate to part with this *laofangzi*. I will miss my neighbors so much when we’re demolished and relocated.” Although the rest of her family moved out of the *laofangzi* after her grandmother passed away three years ago, Little Sister Xie Rui refused to move into their new apartment. She still makes the one-hour commute from vet school to return to the *laofangzi* every other weekend. “My fondest memories from childhood are celebrating *chunjie* on our street: making dumplings, setting off firecrackers, watching the red lanterns go up, and getting money in red envelopes from the relatives. Though I still treasure this neighborhood, now I really couldn’t care less about *chunjie*, except I have to say I like getting a month off from school so I can sleep in until noon everyday.”

Many of the adults in the neighborhood express dislike for the New Year holiday. “There’s nothing interesting whatsoever in celebrating chunjie,” said Uncle Cao, who has converted his kitchen and living room into a noodle restaurant. His daughter poked her head out from the bedroom periodically to stare and giggle at me while I slurped my noodles. “The holiday has turned into one focused on consumerism, and it’s all just about how much money you can spend.”

“Chunjie doesn’t mean anything to me,” declared the kindly Grandpa practicing tai chi at the local park nestled between the ancient city wall and the Qinhuai River. He rubbed his fingers together in a gesture indicating the need for money. “I don’t have any money to spend to go out and play. I’m retired, you know, and my pension is practically nothing. I have no money! What’s fun about chunjie? Eating and drinking, but I don’t have the money for this. If I had enough money, then chunjie might mean something.”

Some of the residents do not understand why I am still conducting field research during chunjie, and insist that I return home for the holiday, or at least go traveling. My next-door neighbor Big Brother Guo insisted, “You’re wasting your time! Chunjie is so boring. Most people return home for the holiday, and everything shuts down. The taste of the New Year celebration is gone in Old Nanjing since everyone is westernized. No one bothers to celebrate. The kids love it, but the teenagers aren’t willing to participate, the adults are indifferent, and the old people are too tired and poor.” Still, Big Brother Guo invited me to spend New Year’s Eve with him and his family.

For some, however, chunjie is significant because it means spending time with family. Uncle Shen was born and raised in Old Nanjing. He lived with his parents in a laofangzi for 30 years before he moved out to Shandong Province to work as a car salesman while his wife stayed behind to care for their son with his parents. He comes home to Old Nanjing to see his family once a month. He explained, “It was fun for us when I was a kid because we were so poor, and chunjie was one time of year we could eat meat and wear new clothes. Heck, now we celebrate chunjie every day with the life we lead. So chunjie isn’t anything that special anymore. But it’s good to see family since we all work in different places now, and we’re separated most of the year.” Uncle Shen’s situation is not uncommon in China, where children often stay behind with their grandparents when parents move to other provinces, or even countries, to work.

For the small, family-owned businesses in Old Nanjing, chunjie can mean either bad business or good business. For Uncle Cao’s noodle restaurant, chunjie is busy with the tourists coming to see the nearby Confucius Temple and city wall. He explained to me, “Business is a little bit better around the holidays because people don’t feel like cooking food at home, so they’ll go out and casually eat some food at a restaurant. Plus we have the lantern festival at the city wall soon, which will attract people.”

A few of the laofangzi on my street have been converted into thrift stores overflowing with inventories of used boots, sweaters, jackets, and handbags. Grandma Wang, a 75-year old owner of one of the second-hand clothing shops, remarked that business is terrible during chunjie. “Everyone wants to buy new things for chunjie, no one wants to buy used things on the holiday,” she sighed, shaking her head with disappointment, “I’ve completely lost hope.”



Grandma Wang's thrift store

My 16-year old neighbor, Little Sister Li Jun, will spend her winter break from school working everyday at a chain megastore similar to Wal-Mart, the one store in the area that will remain open everyday during chunjie. She earns 88 yuan for each eight-hour shift (about \$1.75 per hour). She will give half of her earnings to her family and keep half for herself as spending money. Meanwhile, her mom, aunt, and grandma sell kabobs every night for seven hours from a street cart to pay for her beauty school tuition. Auntie Li said they make about 40 to 50 yuan (\$6 to \$8) per night, depending on the day. When they ask me how much I could make an hour if I tutored English, I do not dare respond with the truth: native English speakers can make between 100 to 150 yuan (\$16 to \$24) an hour.

The week before chunjie Auntie Li told me, “We’ll be working everyday during chunjie. Business is always a little better during the holiday!” One night, though, I did not see them in their usual corner by the city wall and I went to their home to inquire after them. Auntie Li admitted, “Since the cross-strait cooperative lantern festival is going on for chunjie at the city wall, the city management team told us we weren’t allowed to sell kabobs until after chunjie was over.”

The lantern festival was a mutual cooperation and cultural exchange effort between Jiangsu Province and Taiwan with the slogan of “The auspicious dragon leaps over the Taiwan Strait, and the golden age will be shared harmoniously.” Government officials from across China and Taiwan were in attendance. Although local residents were not allowed to attend the ceremony, we watched the rehearsals of various traditional Chinese drumming, martial arts, singing, and dancing performances during the week leading up to the event.



A couplet welcoming the new year adorns the door of a laofangzi in Old Nanjing

The penetrating sound of Auntie’s voice selling tofu usually wakes me up in the morning, but this week the streets are quiet. For New Year’s Eve on Sunday, January 22nd, perhaps the most important day of the Spring Festival, I made spaghetti and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for Big Brother Guo’s family, who requested that I bring American food. I spent the afternoon helping his wife, Big Sister Chongyang, make spring rolls, chicken feet, and pig’s tongue. Before dinner, Big Brother Guo set off firecrackers near the front stoop. We ate heartily, drinking corn juice—the latest health fad in China promising weight loss—out of soup bowls and making wishes for each other for the coming New Year (mostly for higher salaries). Afterward, we snacked on sunflower seeds and watched the New Year’s Special on CCTV, the most widely watched television program in China. The holiday was a relaxing, simple, and peaceful one that reminded me of celebrating Christmas in the U.S. at home with friends and family. The peace was broken at midnight, when we joined the rest of the country in setting off firecrackers. Little Sister Xie Rui complained, “The fireworks last for days on end. It kills me it’s so loud!”

This is what chunjie means for the urban poor of China, the forgotten native Nanjingese that are waiting eviction and demolition. They are the ones that have been left behind by the city they call their own.

Sarah Tynen is a 2011 graduate of George Washington University currently in Nanjing, China on a 10-month research grant from the Fulbright US Student Program to conduct an ethnographic case study on the old city of Nanjing. Her fieldwork involves participant observation, interviews, and mapping to explore the effect of urban redevelopment on socio-economic segregation and concepts of place-based identity.

