

# A salute to writers' blocks

**Sue Wallace** explores a house honouring the stone dwellings that once inspired China's lions of literature.

A silk cheongsam hangs on the wall; a jade hairclip, red lipstick, rouge and face powder are neatly laid out on the dressing table. Jazz fills the room as a record is played on the old gramophone, while next door photographs of old Hollywood movie stars vie for space on walls. Welcome to Shanghai's Shikumen Open House Museum, which turns back the clock to a time when the city was known as the Paris of the East and the New York of the West.

You can just imagine the chic lady of the house checking her make-up and hear the rustle of silk as she closes the front door, hails a rickshaw and heads off to an afternoon tea-dance at a city hotel on the Bund.

The museum is in Xintiandi, an area once sprawling with shikumens – literally, stone-gate housing – but now an entertainment hub where some dwellings have been preserved or turned into slick clubs, restaurants and boutiques.

Xintiandi is a region where today's bustling Shanghai slows just a little to salute the past. Housed in an original shikumen, the museum

**Narrow alleyways meant everyone knew everyone else's business.**



An open book ... the cramped quarters aspiring novelists would use are on display at the the Shanghai shikumen museum.

highlights the fascinating history of the popular form of middle-class accommodation in the 1920s and 1930s, native only to Shanghai. More than 70 per cent of Shanghai's older residents were born and raised in shikumens linked by narrow alleys and, at their peak, there were more than 9000. Many have since been destroyed or demolished.

The two-storey museum has seven exhibition rooms, including a main bedroom, sitting room, study, elderly people's room, daughter's room, son's room and kitchen. There's also a tiny tingzjian room, once used as a storeroom or as servants' quarters. This unheated room was rented out, often to aspiring novelists who later earned fame by writing about shikumen life. It has a small bed, a desk, open books and calligraphy brushes on display.

Shikumen owners were encouraged to take in

boarders because of a general housing shortage in Shanghai in the 1930s. Lu Xun, Cai Yuanpei, Guo Moluo, Mao Dun, Ba Jing, Ding Ling and Feng Zikai are among Shanghai's canon of famous writers who lived in tingzjian – their work, known as Tingzjian Literature, often reflecting life in these quarters. Narrow alleyways and courtyards meant everyone knew everyone else's business. Most intriguing is the memorabilia collected from old shikumen alleys – step into the kitchen and you'll find old cooking utensils, bamboo baskets and an iron kettle.

English fashion magazines are scattered in the daughter's bedroom while the young boy's room displays comic books and toys. In the elderly people's room are a traditional Chinese bone-inlaid bed and carved boxes.

The museum uses information boards,



sound effects and projected images to help paint a picture of life in a shikumen. The history of these dwellings dates back to the 1860s, when Taiping rebel leader Li Xiucheng conquered towns in eastern China, causing refugees to flee to Shanghai's foreign settlements. To help ease accommodation shortages, rows of these houses were built, connected by alleyways.

The museum also reflects the neighbourhood's recent development – recording how Xintiandi once housed more than 2300 families, most of whom were relocated. You'll find antique walls, tiles and the exteriors of nearby shikumens have been preserved, while the inside of these dwellings reflects the latest in design.

*The writer was a guest of the Langham Yangtze Boutique Hotel, Shanghai.*

## TRIP NOTES

### GETTING THERE

▶ Qantas flies daily from Sydney to Shanghai, priced from \$1100. See [qantas.com.au](http://qantas.com.au).

### WHERE TO STAY

▶ The Langham Yangtze Boutique Hotel Shanghai has king rooms priced from \$260 a night. Phone +86 21 6080 0800, see [langhamhotels.com](http://langhamhotels.com).

### WHILE THERE

▶ The Shikumen Open House Museum at 25, Lane 181, Taicang Road, Shanghai is open from 11am to 11pm. Phone +86 21 3307 0337.



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