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RESILIENT LILONG: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF
SHANGHAI'S URBAN HOUSING

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Work-In-Progress

Resilient Lilong: An Ethnography of Shanghai's Urban Housing

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Statement of Problem

Preserving a city's rich cultural heritage may require a balancing act when weighed against market demand. Shanghai's traditional *Lilong* housing, a legacy of western influence during the city's tenure as a Treaty Port, is facing extinction at the hands of property developers seeking valuable land for high-rise condo development. Once the realm of local Chinese laborers, Lilong have come to symbolize the pressures of globalization as migrants from across the country have settled in. Central to the question of this research is the exploration of the importance of community space in the globalizing processes whereby apparently property-led development is becoming standard urban planning practice with its concomitant influence on the life-style of Chinese today. How could we best explain the importance of a community mediated by built environment through ethnographical study? That is, what "holds" the community together in the context of social and economic reform? The existing literature is not convincing because of its nostalgia for its historic value or the vitality of its community realms, neither of which take into account the actuality of the rapidly-changing structure of Shanghainese society. Hence, there is an urgency to seek to understand Lilong from the view of the individual residents.

Rationale and Literature Review

Apart from the sterile high-rise buildings that have sprung up since China opened its doors to capitalist-style economic development in the late 1970s, Shanghai's urban form is dominated by neighborhoods of low-rise housing, known as *Lilong* (see note #1), that crisscross the city in urban superblocks. Soon after Shanghai became a treaty port in the 1840s, British developers built Lilong houses to provide basic accommodation for Chinese laborers (Morris 1994, p.8-12; Guan 1996, p.29; Zhao 2004, p.57). A typical Lilong neighborhood is a walled community composed of a main lane running all or half way across each block, with branch lanes connecting perpendicularly to the main lane in order to economically pack as many housing units as possible into any single cluster (Lu 1999). The developers saw this layout of Lilong neighborhood as the most economical and efficient way to accommodate high densities, foregoing any concern for spatial needs or appropriate sanitary conditions. Surprisingly, the residents did not see the offer as obstacles, but instead found unique ways to flexibly utilize the formal space to meet their daily needs in ways the original builders did not plan (Lü, Rowe & Jie 2001, p.67)[see note #2]. For instance, the residents turned a narrow circulation path, which was

initially designed to minimize construction costs, into an every-day “community corridor” (Guan 1996, p.116; Morris 1994, p.20; Arkaraprasertkul 2007). The adaptations within Lilong neighborhoods respond to multiple social functions of the community, allowing its physical elements to serve several purposes simultaneously (Miao 2003, p.56). The success of the first series led to the demand for the next, and within one hundred years of the first construction, , more than 200,000 lilong dwelling units – of approximately 60 – 150 square meters per unit – had been built. The Lilong had become the dominating characteristic of Shanghai’s urban fabric (Rowe 2005, p.124).

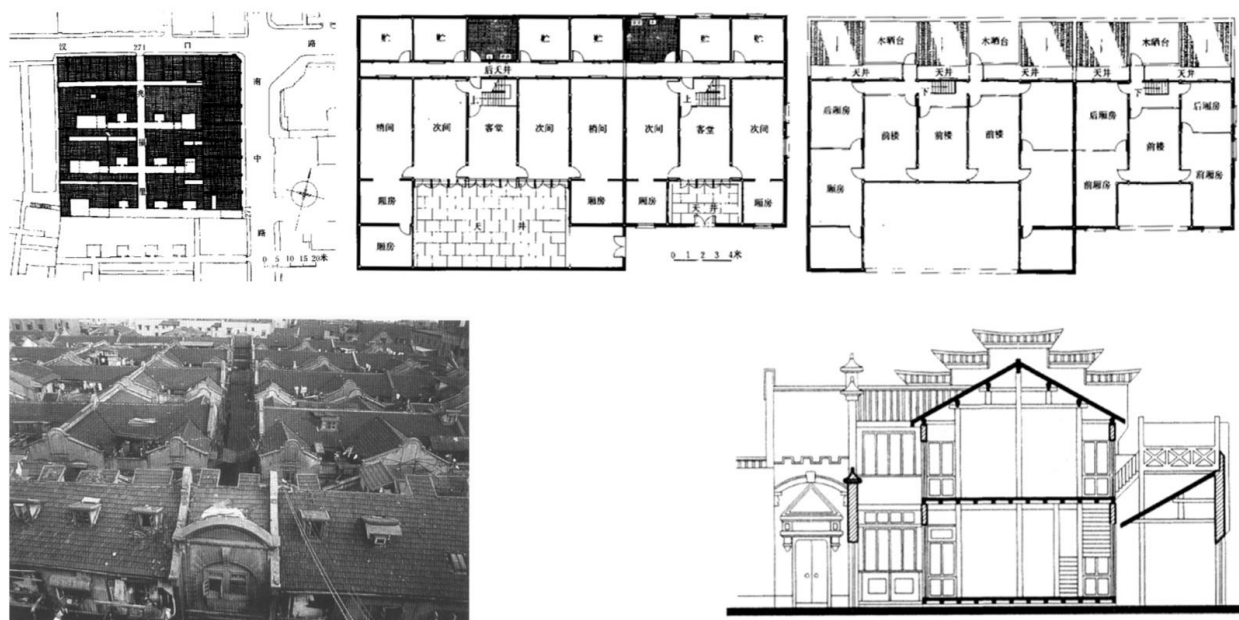


Figure 1: A Lay out plan of a typical neighborhood (top left); bird-eye view of the Lilong neighborhood (bottom left); a plan of a typical two-storey late-nineteenth century Lilong houses (top right); section of a typical two-storey late-nineteenth century Lilong houses showing the very basic building structure.
 Source: Lü, Rowe & Jie, 2001

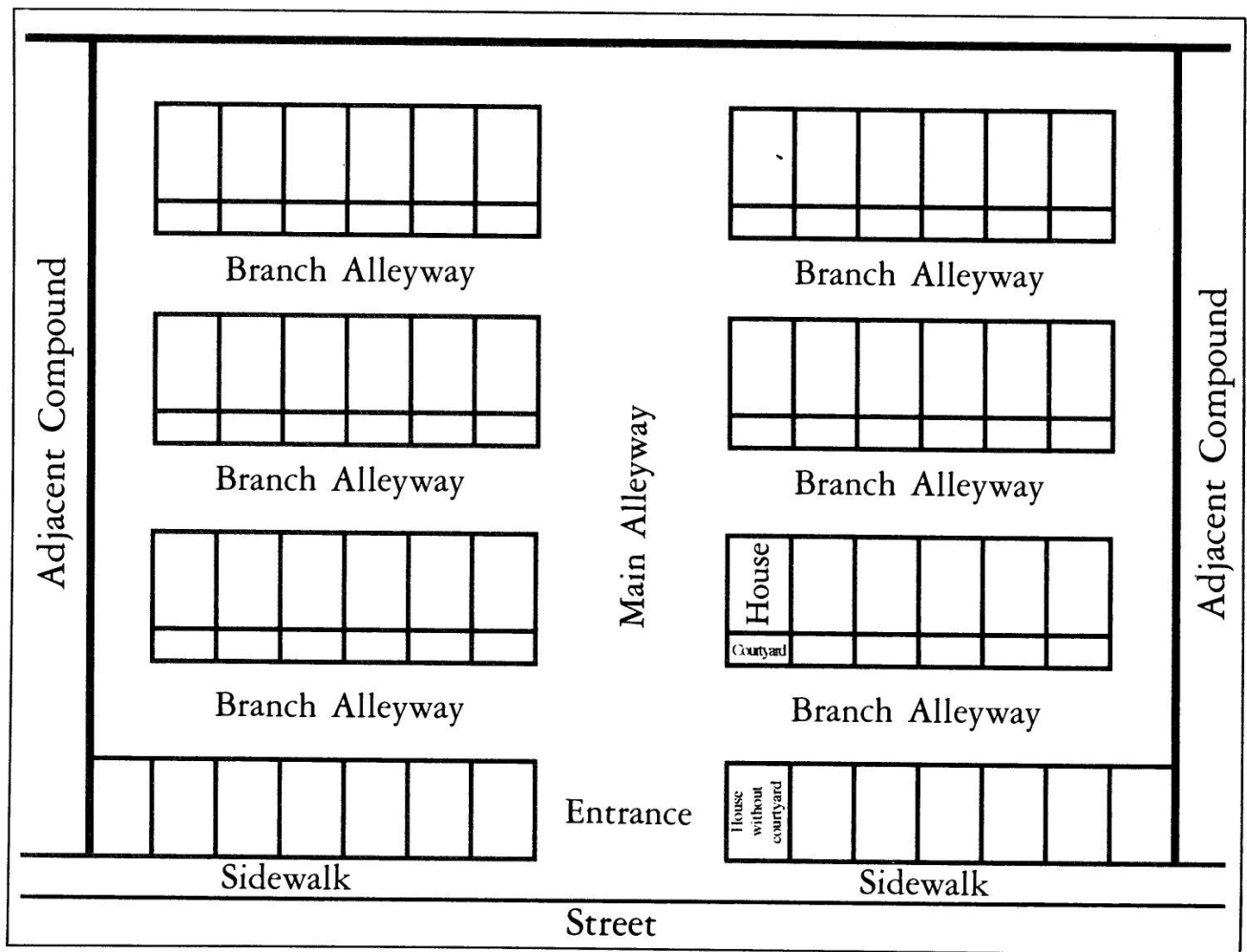


Figure 2: Diagram showing the basic structure of Lilong neighborhood: A walled community composed of a main lane running all or half way across each block, with branch lanes connecting perpendicularly to the main lane. The diagram was drawn for the purpose of giving instant picture of the structure of the neighborhood but not of giving accuracy: The lanes are much smaller in reality. Source: Lu, 1999



Figure 3: An aerial photograph of Shanghai (overlooking Puxi) in the 1930s showing the dominating pattern of Lilong houses. Only along the waterfront (The Bund; by the Huangpu River on the top of the photograph) were where other building types were located; most of them were foreigners' houses and their business headquarters. Source: Courtesy Virtual Shanghai Project, Christian Henriot (IAO - Lyon 2 University)

Benefitting both *servant* Chinese and *served* Westerners, Lilong houses became the epitome of communal and modern Chinese housing culture and were in high demand until World War II, and the founding of the People's Republic of China. Commercial, foreign investment and employment fled due to the wartime turbulence and the radical change of Mao Zedong's Socialistic fiscal policy. To overcome the hardship of this ongoing period of economic decline, residents have been constantly adapting the physical form of Lilong to work within changing social and political circumstances. Examples of this

include the *hukou* housing registration and *danwei* system during 1950s-1970s [see note #3]. For example, due to the decrease of commercial demand, the residents themselves introduced a sub-lease system to provide a much-needed income for themselves by providing space for low-income incoming tenants (Johnston & Erh 1992, p.12). The result was the change of the social structure both in the single unit and the neighborhood. Each unit was sub-divided to house more families, and more commercial activity. Since the 1970s, Lilong houses have become increasingly popular amongst Shanghai's burgeoning middle and upper classes. With increasing attention being drawn to Lilong houses, it is necessary to understand the flexibility of such urban spaces. Is it the residents who are flexible, or the Lilong, or both?



Figure 4: Aerial photographs of Shanghai in the 1930s (left) and 2008 (right) comparing the pattern of urban fabric. A large number of Lilong houses, which were the dominating fabric of the city in the 1930s, have been razed since the early 1980s resulting in a mixed-fabric of high-rise buildings and Lilong house as shown in the photograph on the right. Sources: Courtesy Virtual Shanghai Project, Christian Henriot (IAO - Lyon 2 University); Google Earth Image.

Today, Shanghai is undergoing unprecedented urban development attributable to the process of social reform (*Shehuigaige*) and skyrocketing land-values, which both tend to encourage more high-rise building type into its future planning (Wu 2004, p.453; Kuan & Rowe 2004). During the first decade of Deng Xiaoping's social reform (1978-88), the Communist Party used political power to interfere with economy, pressing the country towards capitalism (Tong 1996; Perry, Davis, Kraus & Naughton, 1995). This resulted in the vast destruction of a number of Lilong neighborhoods, making way for monumental open spaces and high-rise development. These top-down transformations – documented extensively in academic literature – fail urbanistically if the operation is carried out without the recognition of the local people (Anderson 1986; Herzfeld 2000; Jacobs 1961; Lynch 1981; Wampler 1997, 2009). Furthermore, in the late 1990s, Shanghai's local government fully adopted property-led redevelopment schemes to maximize revenue from "under-utilized" land (He and Wu 2007, p.196). These schemes include demolishing existing older, low density neighborhoods in favor of high-rise developments that could instantly provide much more leasable profitable space. No consideration was given to the cost of social issues, such as family displacement, gentrification, and social stratification (He & Wu 2007; Li 2000; Woolcock & Narayan 2000) let alone more complex issues such as cultural identity and historical value. There is an argument that younger generation of Chinese, especially those working in service sectors, prefer the smaller space in an apartment for day-to-day living for a couple and a child due to the One Child Policy (*Dushengzinuzhengce*). Advantages of this apartment unit in a high-rise building include low maintenance cost of a studio-type room, cheap rent, and, especially, good ventilation and natural lighting – something which the “houses built for laborers” like the Lilong cannot provide. The dramatic reduction of social space for interaction within the community in high-rise buildings, however, could result in the diminishing of social capital. The larger social perspective concerning “filial obligations,” according to a recent ethnographical research shows that this change of housing infrastructure could be a threat to the elderly support and security of the elderly vis-à-vis social segregation (Croll 2006, p.475).



Figure 5: A typical Lilong branch lane where all types of activities ranging from drying clothes to community gathering are normally taking place. Photographer: The researcher

Arguments:

Research from both sociological and historical perspectives tells us that high-rise development could be the cause of diminishing social bonds and the relationships of people in these community (Wu 2003; He and Wu 2005, 2006; Miao 2003; Gaubatz 1999; Olds 1997), hence advocating the preservation of Lilong. Among a number of studies of the Lilong in various disciplines, architecture is perhaps the most concrete in terms of implementation; yet still relies on the extreme *tabula rasa* approach – i.e. how to rebuild a “new” Lilong neighborhoods – rather than the trying to establish a middle ground that acknowledges both preservation and urban development. (Arkaraprasertkul 2007; Ge 2008; Hee 2007). On the other side of the coin, amidst the change in family size due to the One Child Policy, there have been changes in the preferences of housing among multi-generational Shanghainese residents and immigrants for which Lilong *may* or *may not* be the answer. The study of the relationship between the physical infrastructure of Lilong and the social formation of the neighborhoods is important to the process of urban housing policy planning that could counterbalance high-rise development. Within the context of China’s unprecedented social reform, the knowledge and idea from *cultural and social anthropology* is essential (Tong 1996; Herzfeld 2003, 2006) [see note#4].

Perspectives	Pro-Lilong	Negative-Lilong
Historical	Historically important – dated back to nineteenth century	“Laborers’ housing” – history to be replaced by modern China’s nationalism
Development Studies /Planning	Diversified environment: Counter-balancing high-rise development, which alone is not conducive to urban life	Inefficient use of space; dilapidating condition; obsolete infrastructure
Sociology/ Cultural	Shielding family displacement, gentrification, diversity, social segregation	Slum condition; crimes and drugs; changing structure of modern Chinese family in urban areas needs the efficiency and the low-maintenance aspect of high-rises
Architectural/ Physical	Flexibility of urban space as example of livable community; Efficient typology of traditional housing settlement	Bad ventilation; inadequate infrastructure; environmental and health hazard
Tourism Studies	Selling point of “real” Shanghai	Bad image of for the city’s tourism
Anthropological		

Table 1: Summary of attitudes towards Lilong from different academic angles, which serve as a theoretical (cursory) study of this proposal [see note#5]

Research Questions

Historians claim the Lilong has been an efficient form of housing for Shanghai residents, particularly from the 1980s to the present time (Lee 1999; Lu 1999, 2002; Zhang 2000). Yet such assertions rely on theoretical analysis, literature review, and nostalgic memoir. To date, there has been no ethnographic investigation into the personal experience of Lilong residents to determine the efficiency of such dwellings. This research is seeking to deliver the answer from a community perspective in order to provide the reason *whether or not* Lilong should be taken into account in the future planning of Shanghai. This research will be based on the study of the relationship of space and people, rather than being led by nostalgia for Lilong. The aim of this research is to define:

- 1) How space is utilized, justified and re-justified by the resident users, themselves the mediating agency between the physical form of their micro-communities and the ever-changing culture of China's largest city?
- 2) Does Shanghai accept Lilong as its dominant dwelling culture? Or is it just because of financial necessity that such houses and neighborhoods have become so important? Who are the Chinese who have "inhabited" these spaces and how do they understand all the changes they have witnessed? And,
- 3) Does the smaller family size of major Shanghainese family after the One Child Policy affect their housing preference?

This research seeks to understand in what ways Lilong are the *resilient* element of Shanghai's urban culture that many claim them to be. Only firsthand experience in Lilong communities can answer such questions and shed light on this unlikely phenomenon, with ramifications for developing urban spaces and aging metropolises alike.

Research Methodology: The Realities of Resilience

The primary research methodology is *ethnography*. There are three stages of the study: Pre-field work study, fieldwork, and analysis. Pre-field work study consists of a short story gathering survey before beginning to look at how others have interpreted them, which would help buffer the researcher from direct influence of other scholars' interpretation. Central to the pre-fieldwork study is the use of integrated quantitative and qualitative data as background study as suggested by Michael Bamberger (2000), which includes: the extensive review of existing literature of history, theory, and criticism of the Lilong; archival study (comparison of old photographs, historical artifacts); and the acquisition of quantitative data (i.e. demography, income/occupation, occupation, trend and affordability, and comparisons of population density of the Lilong and a typical high-rise apartment).

The fieldwork stage aims at assessing the nature of Lilong neighborhoods via: a) the organization of public space in such communities; b) the casual formation of semi-private space; c) the social networks (community networks including clubs, exercise groups, religious groups, chess clubs, and so on) which constitute spatial arrangement; and d) the personal experience of inhabitants actively creating and/or maintaining both. The methodology includes:

- Participant observation [see note #6].
- Participatory Appraisal (PA Method): A technique such as "Photovoice" -- giving selected groups a disposable camera and have them photograph their neighborhoods to record the

communities' strengths and concerns (Wang & Burris 1997). The aim of the method is two-fold: to get the participants to engage in a group process of critical reflection of the community, and to develop an opportunity to look into the deeper content of the community that cannot be seen using the outsider's perspective (Wang & Redwood-Jones 2001). It is noted that PA method is a method widely used in international development studies developed by Robert Chambers (2001), aiming at incorporating the knowledge and opinions of people in the planning and management of development projects (Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker 2005; Goethert & Hamdi 1988).

- Semi-structured and in-depth interviews (both inside and outside communities).
- Mental mapping (Lynch 1960, 1981).
- Timeline of activities & place of different age groups.
- Geographical and historical mapping (Caminos & Goethert 1978).

In terms of the feasibility of the fieldwork, the researcher has already established access to Lilong neighborhoods through contacts developed in Shanghai during research visits during 2005-07. These contacts includes current residents, former residents who were displaced and relocated with and without compensation, community leaders, as well as academics from Shanghai's Tongji and Fudan Universities working on documenting Lilong housing. Research sites will be selected to cover a range of varying factors, including: age, education, occupancy, community age, distance to city center, and commercial viability. From a large original sample, this research will choose one community that has both new migrants as well as families whose roots in Shanghai go back many generations. This proposal considers *Shenjiazhai*, *Liangwencheng*, and *Jinganli* communities (all located in central Shanghai) because, based on existing literature, they possess a diversity of residents and livable physical conditions of the community (He & Wu 2007); therefore, this proposal has preliminarily selected them for this study with an option to change once the fieldwork is being carried out. With these three communities, the researcher will work more intimately, gathering personal accounts and preparing detailed records of the use of space over time.

Expected Contribution and Anticipated Limitations

Whereas previous study from various angles proscribed two extreme paths toward the development of Shanghai urbanism in order to cope with political change and economic reform, this research intends to establish the long overdue missing medium ground between the two paths. This research does not aim at suggesting policy or advocating the preservation of Lilong, but to contribute to a useful argument on the benefit of a balance between the history and the contemporary condition of

the city (Arkaraprasertkul 2009, p.86-7). This research will contribute vital substance to academic discourse on such housing typologies through an *ethnographic view* of dynamic communal life and the socio-spatial impacts of property led development in Shanghai's Lilong neighborhoods. The policy question, for example “if Lilong has a role, could it be replaced with other housing?” and “if it does not have a role where would the demand for this type of housing now be absorbed?” *will not* be directly answered through this research.

There are, however, three anticipated limitations and concerns. First, Lilong communities might not be receptive and responsive to inquiry, as some of them are highly reserved and feel insecure when having visitors from outside. Second, another difficulty may include language and cultural barriers: older generation residents in the Lilong communities only speak Shanghai dialect (*Shanghaihua*). Last, there is an ethical issue: the opaque line in “the use of humans as experimental subjects” has always been a daunting topic in ethnography. The first two limitations could be rectified via the familiarization with the community leaders and the gaining confidence of informants, as well as the use of the established connections (i.e. previous residents and previous university researchers). For the last issue, the researcher plans to review carefully all the pertinent documents regarding both the legal and practical angles of this issue before conducting field research [see note #7].

End of the Proposal

Word Count = (Limit 2,500)

Notes:

1. Lilong (里弄) is the pronunciation in Shanghai dialect (*Shanghaihua*).
2. In the historical review of this study, the researcher relies on the work of Non Arkaraprasertkul (2007, 2008, 2009) whose comprehensive study and research on Lilong has become one of the standard texts on Shanghai urban housing history.
3. The *hukou* (户口) system is a registration system that afforded residents access to local government benefits like education, health care, and welfare, but restricted in-country migration as these benefits were only available in the locale where a citizen was registered (e.g. if you were a resident of Beijing, you could not move to Shanghai and receive government benefits nor easily gain employment, and vice versa). As China has modernized and opened its borders per se, the *hukou* system is fading into obscurity, allowing massive in-country migration, usually to where employment is plentiful. The *danwei*(单位), or “work unit,” is a registration system of a place of employment: the principal method of implementing party policy during the period when China was still socialistic (1949-1978). Also workers were bound to their work unit *for life*. Like the hukou, each work unit created their own amenities, such as housing, child care, schools, clinics, shops, services, post offices.

4. For instance, through ethnography, we could develop the framework for the understanding of "Cultural Intimacy," the concept which Anthropologist Michael Herzfeld coined and described as "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of *external embarrassment* but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality (1997, p.3)."
5. The main references for the arguments from these perspectives are: Historical (Bergère 2002; Dong 2001; Guan; 1996; Howe 1981; Lee 1999; Lu 1999; Morris 1994; Zhang 2000; Zhao 2004), Development Studies /Planning (Arkaraprasertkul 2007, 2009; Gaubatz 1999; Huang 2000; Miao 2003; Wasserstrom 2009; Wei & Leung 2005; Wu 2000, 2003; Yeh & Wu 1999), Sociology/Cultural (Logan 2002; Lu 2006; Wasserstrom 2000, 2009; Wu 2007a, 2007b, Wu 1997; Yeung & Sung 1996; Zhang 2002), Architectural/ Physical (Arkaraprasertkul 2007; Caine 2006; Gandelsonas 2002; Ge 2008; Hee 2007, Wu 2002), Tourism Studies (Hibbard 2007; Pan 2008; Tsai 2008; Warr 2007, 2008)
6. While Participant Observation could be thought of as a "passive method." ethnographer could never really be passive in reality. In fact passivity can be quite aggressive: people are going to expect contributions back from the field ethnographer and that is always a *negotiated process*. As for the participatory research – this research clearly distinguish such methods from "Participatory Action Research: PAR" which involves people in a full manner in every aspect of research toward a goal for progress or Development (in best cases of their choosing).
7. Typically, this is satisfied through completing an Institutional Review Board (IRB) form, whose aim to protect the rights and welfare of the human research subjects. The researcher will carefully consult with the University of Oxford's standards before conducting the fieldwork.

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