



The former residence of Wang Jingming — Ti Gong

Scholar's residence brought back to life

Wang Wei'er and Hu Min

A centuries-old residence in Jiading District, once home to top Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) scholar Wang Jingming, has been meticulously restored after decades in disrepair, revitalizing a cultural landmark.

A winding cobblestone path seemed to be endless. Bamboo racks used to dry clothes span Renmin Street and the aroma of home-cooked meals waft from the mottled wooden doors. Little did people know that one of those doors concealed the historical charm of Jiading's first *zhuangyuan*, or scholars who ranked first in the highest imperial exam in ancient times.

Among the three top imperial examinees from Jiading, Wang was the most deserving "imperial student."

A year after his father, Wang Qi, passed the Jinshi scholars (imperial scholars) exam, 46-year-old Wang Jingming became the top imperial examinee.

Weathering vicissitudes

Historical records indicate that Wang's residence (the Top Imperial Examinee's Mansion), built in 1719, was backed by Qingjing Pond to the north, adjacent to an unnamed small river to the east, and surrounded by water on three sides.

It is a magnificent residence with

a complete Jiangnan residential structure.

The main hall's four courtyard columns were made of *nanmu*, a type of wood that is frequently used for boat building, architectural woodworking and wood art, hence its name "Nanmu Hall." It also featured *dougong*, a bracketing system used in ancient Chinese architecture, as well as carved windows.

In 1899, the property was leased as a school. Over nearly half a century, more than 200 households moved in and out of this once spacious and well-ventilated mansion, which was gradually partitioned into cramped and crowded units.

Brightness turned to dimness, comfort to oppression. Few tenants were aware that this place was the residence of Jiading's first top imperial examinee.

Due to long-term neglect, especially after reform and opening up, driven by the nationwide business boom, the side along Meiyuan Road was extensively altered to open shops.

Within the courtyard, arbitrary construction and rentals led to a state of utter disorder, severely damaging both the appearance and structure of the building. Some tenants even set up coal stoves inside the hall to prepare takeout boxed meals, posing significant safety hazards.

In 2000, Wang's residence was

designated a cultural heritage protected building. Around 2010, nearly 30 households were relocated. After the relocation, the property remained vacant and sealed for years, with the building deteriorating rapidly — walls collapsed, roofs caved in, wooden structures rotted, and the entire structure became dangerous.

Many experts, scholars, political advisors and citizens, concerned about local cultural history, called for restoration to its original appearance.

Rejuvenating the old house

In 2022, a project to protect and restore Wang's residence was included in the Jiading government's special fiscal budget.

Huang Zhenwei, an inheritor of the intangible cultural heritage of traditional Jiangnan residential construction techniques, served as technical consultant for the project.

However, the challenges extended beyond the physical structure. During the beam lifting process, numerous termites and wood damage were found at the base of almost every column. Tree roots from several tall and lush fir and camphor trees near the walls penetrated underground, damaging walls and even causing collapses.

To address these issues, the construction party proposed relocating

four fir trees near the building to prevent further damage.

Most of the carved components in Nanmu Hall were either missing or decayed. To address this, Huang invited provincial intangible cultural heritage wood carving artisans from Jingjiang, Jiangsu Province, to manually carve and replace the components.

The restoration adhered to the principles of using original materials and traditional craftsmanship. All wooden structures and doors and windows were remade with old timber according to the original design, maintaining stylistic consistency with Nanmu Hall.

The project team also collected extensive historical material on Wang and his residence to uncover and preserve its unique cultural essence.

From early November 2023, when the construction team entered the site, until completion of the restoration project, the technical team worked on-site regardless of the weather.

The construction management team documented the entire restoration process in images and text, rejuvenating the old house in less than a year.

In November, the project received a rare high score of 91.6 from an expert panel. Experts unanimously praised it as a model case in Shanghai's cultural heritage restoration in recent years.