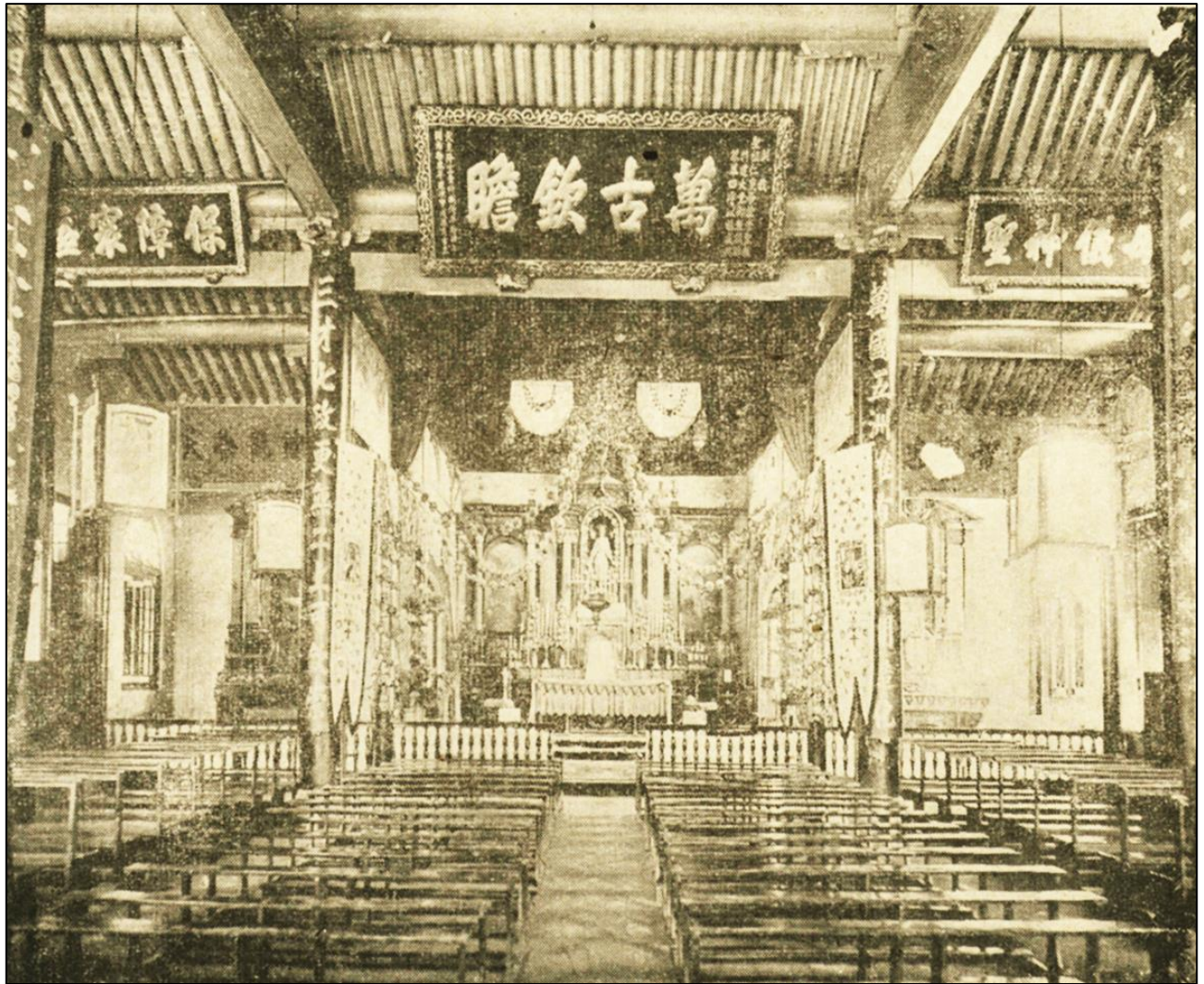


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Shanghai's *Lao Tang* ('Old Church') in Historical Cartography.
Mapping and Perception of a Sensitive Place



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Extended Abstract

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In the cover: *Lao Tang*'s interior, with Holy Mary's statue on the high altar, in a photo published in Bugnicourt L., "Le «Lao-Daong» [sic]", *La Revue Nationale Chinoise*, XXXVIII, 125 (1940), pp. 127-146.

Through history and space at a world scale, religion had, and still has, not only cultural implications, but also, with regard to its linkage with power, elites and social control, political ones. That is why an historical Catholic church in Shanghai like the so-called *Lao Tang* can be defined as a ‘sensitive place’ in a long term perspective. This Catholic building was founded in 1640 ca. by Italian Jesuit Francesco Brancati, known in Chinese as Pan Guoguang 潘国光: thanks to the financial support of the Xus, a prominent Shanghainese family converted to Christianity since the time of Xu Guangqi (Matteo Ricci’s follower), Brancati bought and consecrated a pre-existent structure into a church, known as *Jingyitang* 敬一堂 (‘Hall of the Only Respected’), and later known as *Lao Tang* 老堂 (‘Old Church’) or *Tianzhu Tang* 天主堂 (‘Catholic Church’). For a long time, this was the main church in Shanghai: Italian Jesuit Martino Martini, known in Chinese as Wei Kuangguo 卫匡国, frequented *Lao Tang* during his Shanghainese stay as Brancati’s guest (from June to October 1643 ca.), and mapped it in *Nanking, sive Kiangnan* map of his *Novus Atlas Sinensis* (1655) (Fig. 1), in the context of the great emphasis given by him, in the cartography attached to his volume, to the Catholic presence in China. After the ban of Christian missions in the Chinese Empire decided by Kangxi Emperor, and later implemented by Yongzheng Emperor, Kangxi’s successor, in 1730-1731 ca. *Lao Tang* was significantly converted into a temple of the Chinese God of War, indicated on the maps as *Wu Miao* 武庙 or *Guandi Miao* 關帝廟 (‘Temple of the God of War’) (Fig. 2). This operation has to be encompassed in the framework, in this phase, of a nationalistic rejection of any western influences, and aimed implicitly, with regard to the change of the dedication from the Christian God to the God of War, at the profanation of the building. After the First Opium War (1839-1842), the Treaty of Nanjing (1842) and the opening of Shanghai to international commerce, Christianity re-entered in the city with the strong support of western countries: the conversion of Chinese people became also a demonstration of power and a political question; in particular, the Catholic missions now developed mainly under the French aegis, and France played a key-role also in the foundation, in those years, of the Jesuit settlement of Zikawei (now, Xujiahui), in Shanghai’s suburbs. In this geopolitical context, in 1861, under French pressure and under explicit request to Chinese authorities by general Charles Montauban in person, the former church, now located in the so-called Shanghai’s ‘Old City’, was returned to Catholic priests and re-consecrated. In this period, the urban environment of the so-called ‘Old Shanghai’ (the stage encompassed between the Treaty of Nanjing and WWII) was very cosmopolitan and could be considered quasi-colonial, hosting, besides Chinese residents, English, American and French Concessions (the first two merged, since 1863, into the so-called ‘International Settlement’): it seems that the perception of the re-instituted *Lao Tang* was, probably, different according to the point of views of the various cultures and nationalities settled in the city; at least, this fact is identifiable on historical maps on the basis of the different origins and cultural backgrounds of them. In fact, for the growing number of Catholic Chinese people and for Catholic westerners, *Lao Tang* became an urban icon and a landmark, and, as a consequence of this, the church started to be very frequently mapped both in Chinese and French maps of the ‘Old Shanghai’ (Figs. 3-5). In Chinese maps, the prominence of *Lao Tang* was further emphasized by the fact that even the street, where the religious building was located, was officially mapped with a homonymous toponym, *Tianzhu Tang* 天主堂 (‘Catholic Church’) or *Lao Tianzhu Tang* 老天主堂 (‘Old Catholic Church’) (Figs. 6-8). On the contrary, as a reflection of Anglican and Protestant backgrounds, Anglo-Saxon maps of the ‘Old Shanghai’, both English and American, usually ignored the church originally founded by Brancati (Figs. 9-10), and only in some cases they indicated the Chinese toponym of the street, transliterated as *Lo Tien Chou Dong* (that is *Lao Tianzhu Tang*) (Fig. 11). After the rise of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the urban environment of Shanghai changed completely again, turning into a ‘Chinese city’, without any significant foreign communities. In the framework of the Communist new deal, *Lao Tang* was deconsecrated and there was no mapping of the church in post-1949 city plans. It seems that the toponym *Tianzhu Tang* survived for a while in the early 1950s; then, starting from the late 1950s, this placename was officially changed on Shanghai’s city plans in *Wutong lu* 梧桐路, another informal name of the street among the residents. The aim of this operation was, of course, to erase the religious meaning of the toponym, even though also the new placename adopted, today still official (Fig. 12), was indirectly linked, however, to the church instituted by Brancati in the

17th century: in fact, the word ‘Wutong’ is semantically related to a colloquial Chinese name for the genus *Platanus* (plane tree), and it seems that, since the first foundation of the church, western priests had planted several plane trees in front of the building, in order to create an hospitable environment for religious meetings and outdoor activities. Currently, *Lao Tang* is still conserved, although deconsecrated, in critical structural conditions and annexed to a primary school of the Shanghai’s ‘Old City’ (Fig. 13): it is one of the oldest Christian churches survived in China, and a restoration and regeneration of it into a museum, focused on China’s cultural encounter with the West, are warmly recommended.

Keywords: Historical Cartography, Cultural Geography, Political Geography, Toponymy, Christianity in China, Shanghai Studies.

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Websites: www.virtualshanghai.net; [zh.wikipedia.org/zh/敬一堂_\(上海\)](http://zh.wikipedia.org/zh/敬一堂_(上海)).



Fig. 1 – Section of *Nanking, sive Kiangnan*, map attached to *Novus Atlas Sinensis* by Martino Martini (1655). In the map, the city of ‘Xangha?’ (that is Shanghai) is characterized by the symbols of a Catholic church (the Christogram IHS and a cross): it should be *Lao Tang*, founded in 1640 ca. by Italian Jesuit Francesco Brancati, frequented by Martini in person during his Shanghainese stay in 1643, and for a long period the main church in the city. At the time of the map, Songkiang Prefecture was one of the most deeply Christianized area in China.

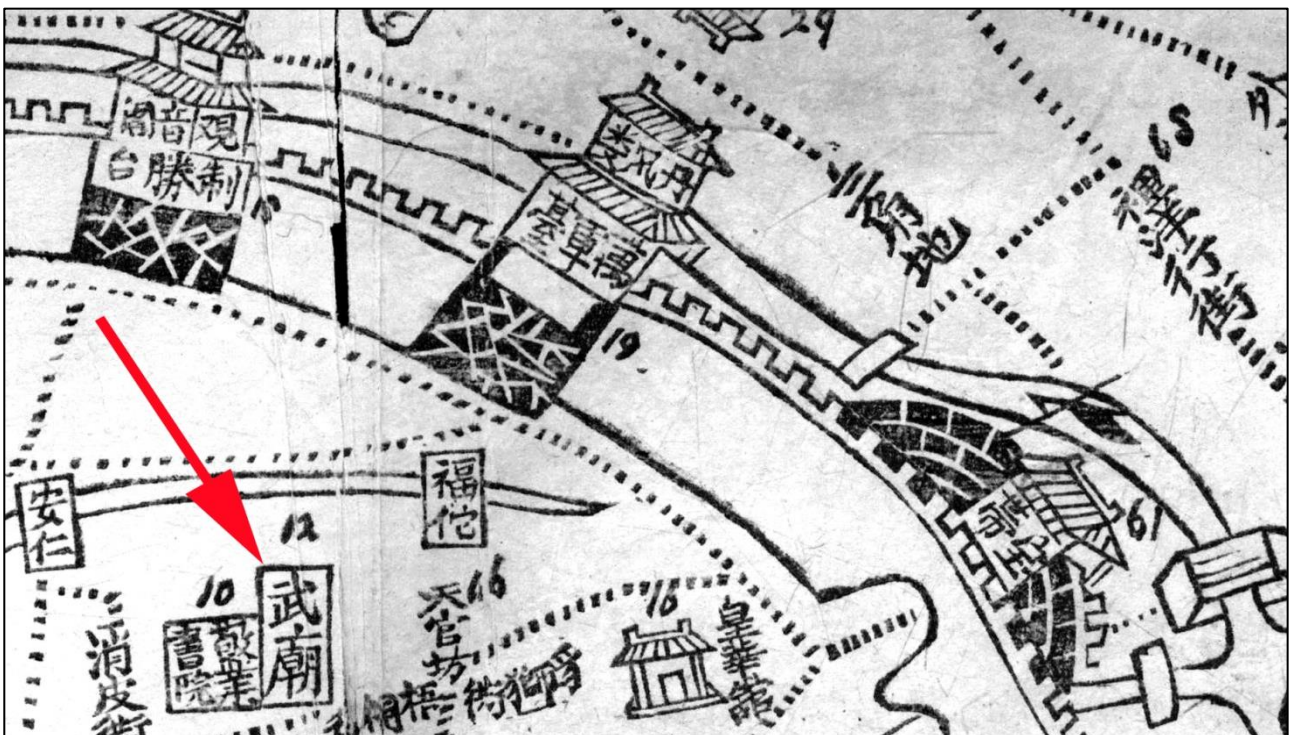


Fig. 2 – Section of *Ground-Plan of Shanghai City*, Chinese map, with English title, attached to Medhurst W.H. [attributed], *General description of Shanghai [sic] and its environs extracted from native authorities*, Shanghai [sic], Mission Press, 1850. This map seems to be a re-elaboration, with addition of numbers, of an original Chinese map, entitled 上海縣城圖 (‘Plan of Shanghai City’), dating back between 1800 and 1820 (www.virtualshanghai.net, Document ID 754). The caption, in English, indicates no. 12 as ‘Temple of the god of war; formerly a Roman Catholic chapel’: evidently, 120 years ca. after its deconsecration, the memory of the Catholic church founded by F. Brancati in 1640 ca. was still conserved among the local community. On the map, the building is indicated, in Chinese, as *Wu Miao* 武廟 (‘Temple of the God of War’). In other Chinese maps of those years, the same building is also mapped as *Guandi Miao* 關帝廟 (‘Temple of Guandi’; Guandi is the name of the God of War). In 1861, under French pressure, the Temple of the God of War was re-consecrated into a Catholic church, later informally known as *Lao Tang*.

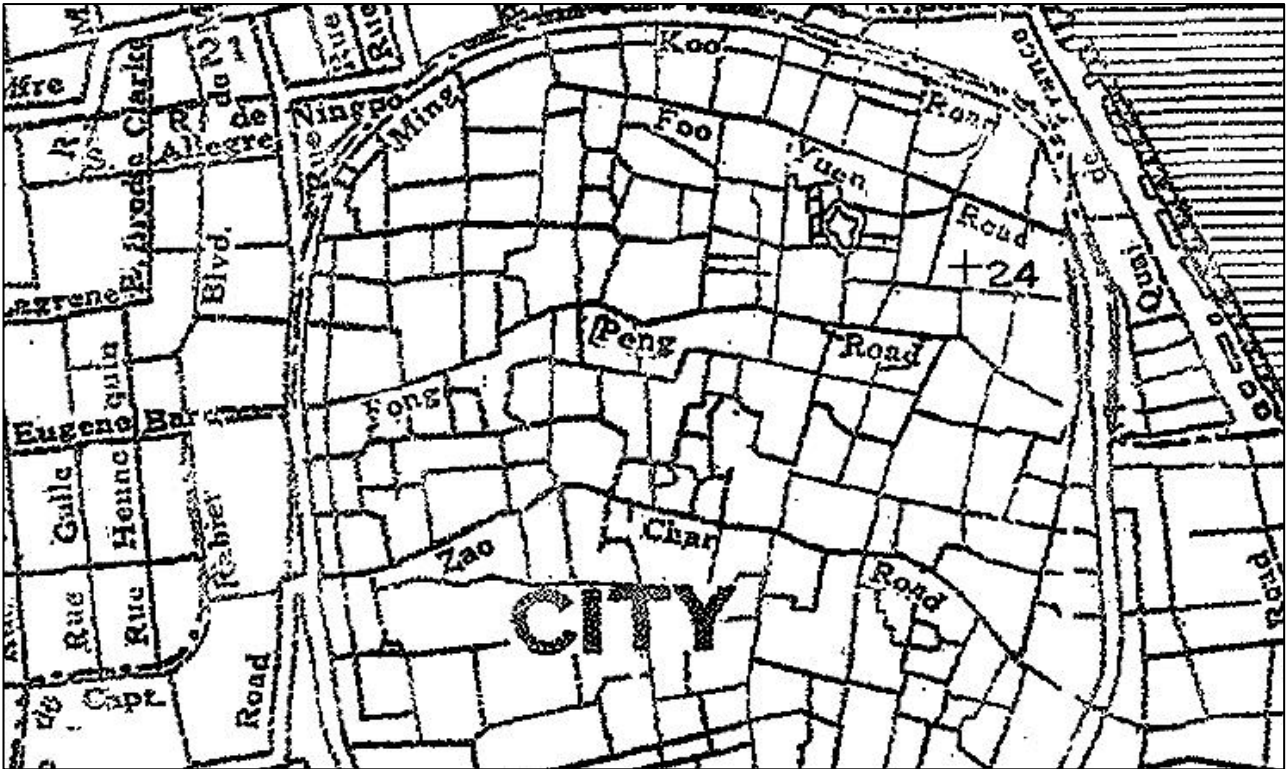


Fig. 5 – Section of *Map of Shanghai*, attached to Anon., *A Guide to Catholic Shanghai*, Shanghai, T'ou-sè-wè Press, 1937. The book and the plan, focused on Catholic settlements in the city, were published in English language, but were probably drafted by French Jesuits: in fact, T'ou-sè-wè Press was included in Zikawei settlement, under the French aegis. In the original caption, no. 24 indicates the «Immaculate Conception Church» (that is *Lao Tang*): in the last decades of its consecration, the church was dedicated to Holy Mary.

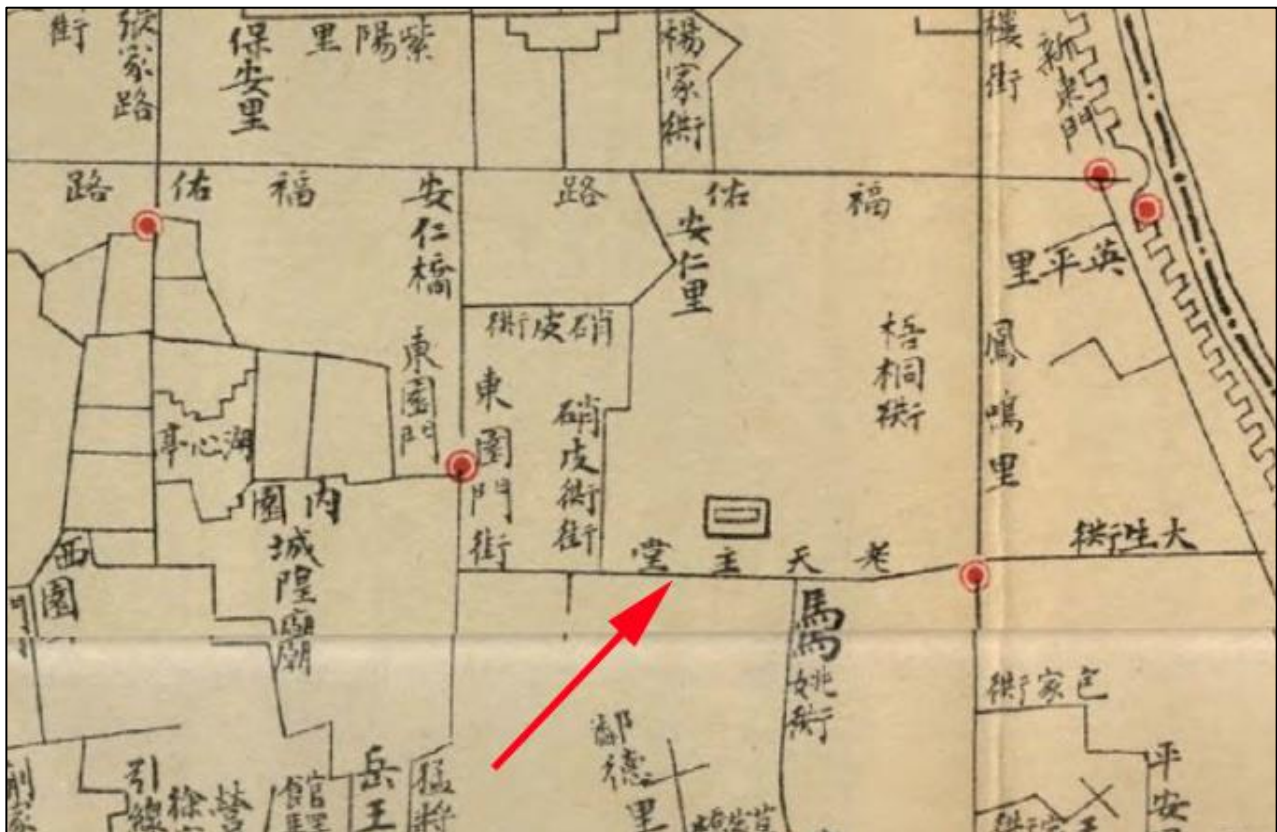


Fig. 6 – Section of 上海城内道路警岗图 ('Map of Police Stations in Shanghai'), Chinese map dating back to 1912. The street, where the church is located (here indicated by the arrow), is officially mapped as *Lao Tianzhu Tang* 老天主堂 ('Old Catholic Church'). *Source*: www.virtualshanghai.net, Document ID 1954.



Fig. 7 – Section of 实测上海城厢租借圖 / *A Consolidated Map of City of Shanghai, China*, Chinese map with bilingual title (CH/EN), dating back to 1913. The street, where *Lao Tang* is located, is officially mapped as *Lao Tianzhu Tang* 老天主堂 ('Old Catholic Church'). *Source*: U.S. Library of Congress, Library of Congress Catalog Number 2011589778 (item with handwritten notes in English, made by an unknown scholar).



Fig. 8 – Section of 上海法国新、旧租界图 ('Shanghai's New and Old French Concession'), Chinese map dating back to 1917. Original scale 1:10,000. As emphasized by the arrows, *Lao Tang* is here mapped in Chinese as *Tianzhu Tang* 天主堂 ('Catholic Church'); moreover, the street, where the religious building is located, is officially mapped with a homonymous toponym. *Source*: Shanghai Library, *老上海地圖 / The Album of Shanghai during the Past 150 years*, Shanghai, Shanghai huabao chubanshe, 2001, p. 45.

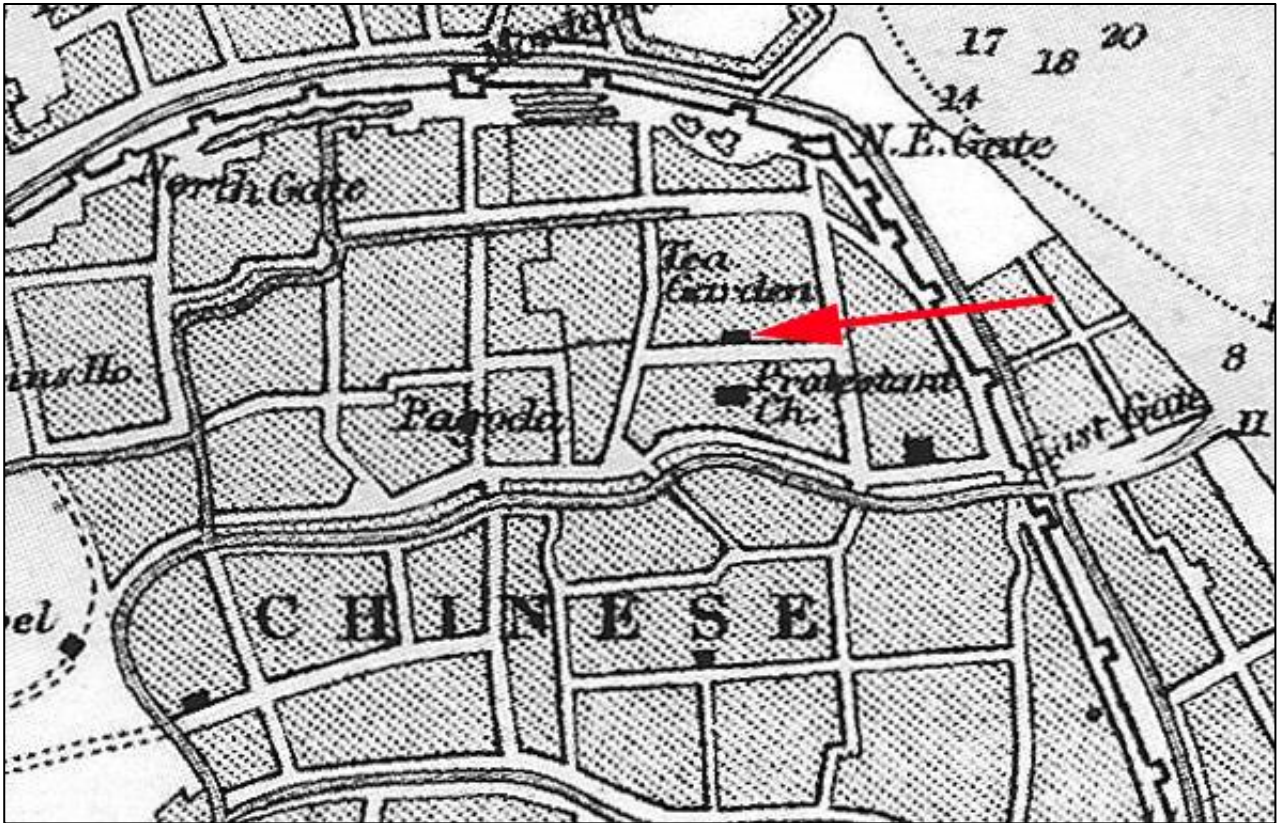


Fig. 9 – Section of *Shanghai*, British map published by Edward Weller in 1869. As a reflection of the English cultural background of this city plan, a ‘Protestant Ch.[urch]’ is clearly mapped, while *Lao Tang*, the Catholic church re-instituted in 1861, is not mapped, or perhaps it is mapped just as a ‘black rectangle’ (here indicated by the arrow), but without any official toponym. *Source*: D.G. Crow, *Old Shanghai’s Bund*, Hong Kong, Earnshaw Books, 2012, p. 3.



Fig. 10 – Section of U.S. Army Map Service, *Plan of Shanghai (Sheet 1)*, American map dating back to 1945, but directly derived from Shanghai Municipal Council maps dating to 1933. Original scale 1:15,840. *Lao Tang* is not mapped. *Source*: University of Texas, Perry-Castañeda Library, Map Collection.



Fig. 13 – *Lao Tang* in 2013 (Photo by S. Piastra). Currently, the former church, deconsecrated after the rise of the People's Republic of China, is annexed, in critical structural conditions, to a primary school of Shanghai's 'Old City'. A restoration and regeneration of it into a museum, focused on China's cultural encounter with the West, are warmly recommended. On the lintel, above the window, a stylized 'M' stands for Holy Mary, to Whom the church was dedicated in the last decades of its consecration.