

BORROWING OR INHERITANCE?

The Etymology of *Hútong* 胡同 and Competing Explanations in Chinese Scholarship

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Abstract - This paper examines the modern Chinese academic debate on the etymology of *hútong* 胡同, a term closely associated with Beijing's historical urban fabric. Since the late twentieth century, scholarly discussion has been shaped by competing explanatory frameworks that differ not only in their conclusions, but also in their underlying methodological assumptions. Early externalist accounts, most notably those developed by Zhāng Qīngcháng and later refined by Junast, interpret *hútong* as a loanword acquired through contact with Mongolian during the Yuan dynasty, often grounding the explanation in a semantic chain centered on the notion of a 'well.' More recent scholarship has challenged this view by reassessing phonological correspondence, textual attestations, and historical urban evidence. Internalist reconstructions, exemplified by the work of Wáng Yuè, argue that *hútong* can be explained through internal Chinese developments, tracing its evolution through pre-Yuan lexical forms, vernacular orthography, and documented sound change. From this perspective, a borrowing-based explanation is not linguistically necessary. Between these positions stands an intermediate proposal advanced by Lín Yì, which rejects the well-based semantic chain while maintaining an externalist orientation. Drawing on Altaic comparative linguistics, Lín situates *hútong* within a broader areal semantic field denoting narrow, hollow passages and proposes Mongolian *yudum* as a more plausible etymon. Rather than advocating a single definitive solution, this paper situates these competing accounts within a shared analytical framework and evaluates them in terms of evidentiary standards, explanatory sufficiency, and methodological orientation. It argues that the *hútong* debate exemplifies a broader tension in Chinese historical linguistics between contact-based plausibility and internal philological continuity, and that its persistence reflects not only empirical uncertainty but also differing conceptions of how linguistic history should be reconstructed.

Keywords: Sino-Mongolic contact; etymological reconstruction; Altaic languages; urban toponymy; historical linguistics.

1. Introduction

The term *hútong* 胡同 occupies a distinctive place in the linguistic and cultural history of Beijing. Commonly used to denote the narrow lanes that structure the city's traditional residential fabric, *hútong* is not merely a topographical label, but a word deeply embedded in historical writing, urban practice, and collective memory. Its semantic scope extends beyond physical space, evoking patterns of social interaction, neighborhood organization, and everyday life that have long been associated with the historic capital.

Despite its prominence in both scholarly and popular discourse, the etymology of *hútong* remains a matter of sustained debate in modern Chinese scholarship. Since the late twentieth century, various explanations have been proposed to account for the origin of the term, often drawing on historical sources, phonological comparison, and interpretations of Yuan- and Ming-period urban history. Representative examples include the Mongolian-loan explanations associated with Zhāng Qīngcháng (1978; 1984; 1985; 1994) and Junast (1991), the internal Chinese reconstruction advanced by Wáng Yuè (2008; 2009), and the

intermediate Altaic-comparative proposal of Lín Yì (2009). Among these, particular attention has been given to the possibility that *hú tong* entered Chinese during periods of intensive contact between Sinitic and non-Sinitic languages in North China.

At the same time, a growing body of research has emphasized the importance of earlier textual attestations, internal phonological developments, and vernacular usage in reassessing the history of the term. These studies have revisited classical dictionaries, rhyme books, local gazetteers, and premodern narrative sources in order to trace the diachronic evolution of words denoting streets, lanes, and passages in Chinese. In doing so, they have questioned assumptions about the necessity of external explanations and have drawn attention to the complexity of orthographic variation and phonetic change in premodern written records.

Rather than advocating a single definitive solution, this paper compares the competing explanations as different methodological models of etymological reasoning. It asks how each theory balances semantic plausibility, phonological regularity, documentary attestation, and contact-historical likelihood, and it argues that the persistence of the debate reflects not only empirical uncertainty but also divergent assumptions about what constitutes an adequate historical explanation. In this sense, the *hú tong* debate is not simply a dispute over one Beijing word; it is a small but revealing case study in the tension between contact-based explanation, internal philological reconstruction, and mixed models of lexical reinforcement.

2. *Hú tong* in history

Historically, *hú tong* consolidated as an urban form with the founding of Dadu (present-day Beijing) under the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368). The new capital was laid out on a strict orthogonal grid with cardinal orientation and a monumental north–south Central Axis, establishing a rational framework within which blocks, lanes, and courtyard plots were inscribed. The Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) rebuilt and extended the city on Dadu’s foundations, thickening *hú tong* networks and consolidating the pairing of *sì hé yuàn* 四合院 and *hú tong* as the characteristic inner-city fabric of Beijing, within a capital plan ordered by axial and ritual principles (Wang *et al.* 2023).

According to Xióng Mèngxiáng 熊梦祥’s *Xījīn Zhì* 析津志 (*Gazetteer of Xijin* [Liao-dynasty Beijing]) (ca. 1368), only twenty-nine *hú tong* are recorded for Dadu; their individual names, however, have not survived, as the relevant portion of the text is fragmentary.¹ A rare Yuan-dynasty literary attestation occurs in the work of Lǐ Hǎogǔ 李好古 (13th–14th c.), whose drama *Zhāng Shēng Zhǔ Hǎi* 张生煮海 (*Zhang Sheng Boils the Sea*) includes the following line:

往羊市角砖塔胡同杂货铺边来寻我。

Go to the Brick Tower **Hutong** at the corner of the sheep market, near the general store, and look for me there.

This *hú tong* still exists today at the Xīsì 西四 intersection and is regarded as one of the earliest surviving *hú tong* in Beijing.

¹ The *Gazetteer of Xijin* is extant only in reconstructed form; this passage is cited from *Xījīn Zhì jǐyì* 析津志辑佚 (Reconstructed Edition of the Xijin zhi), which collects surviving fragments from later works. The specific sentence is preserved via *Rìxià jiùwén kǎo* 日下旧闻考, juan 38 (Yu, 1983).

Compared to Dadu, Ming-era Beijing saw the proliferation of *hútong*, neatly arranged around major thoroughfares. To maximize sunlight and shield against the north winds of winter, most *hútong* oriented east-west, with north-south alignments occupying a secondary role. In 1560, a man named Zhāng Jué 張爵 compiled Beijing's street names into a book titled *Jīngshī wǔchéng fāngxiàng hútong jí* 京師五城坊巷胡同集 (*Collections of lanes and alleys [hútong] of five districts of the capital city*). According to Zhāng Jué's statistics, his era saw 1,170 streets and alleys in Beijing, including 459 *hútong*—approximately 40% of the total, nearly sixteen times the number found in Dadu. From then on, *hútong* became an integral part of the daily lives of Beijing's common people, forming a structured and organized network within the city. By the late Qing Dynasty, Zhū Yīxīn 朱一新's *Jīngshī fāng xiàng zhì gǎo* 京師坊巷志稿 (*Draft Gazetteer of the Wards and Alleys of the Capital*) recorded 2,211 streets and alleys in Beijing, with 1,121 being *hútong*, accounting for about 50% of the total number of streets.

Around 1949, the number of streets and alleys in Beijing reached its peak, with 3,216 streets and alleys in total, including 1,039 *hútong*, accounting for about 32% of the total. In the 1980s, the four urban districts of Dongcheng 東城, Xicheng 西城, Chongwen 崇文, and Xuanwu 玄武 collectively had 2,352 streets and alleys, including 1,204 *hútong*, representing about 51% of the total. While the overall number of streets and alleys decreased, the number of *hútong* increased. The reason lies in the Beijing municipal government's 1965 campaign to standardize place names. Many iconic locations were formalized by adding *hútong* to their names, such as *Jingtǔ Sì* 淨土寺 'Jingtu Temple' becoming *Jingtǔ Hútong* 淨土胡同. Following the 1990s, due to dilapidated housing renovations and urban development, by 2003, according to statistics, 891 streets and alleys in Beijing's old city districts had been demolished, including 362 designated as *hútong* (Guangming Net 2016).

3. First attestations of the term *hútong* during the Yuan and Ming dynasties

The word *hútong* most likely entered North China's urban lexicon under Mongol rule and was written 衚衕 until the Ming Dynasty. The question of its etymology has sparked heated debate in Chinese academic circles since the 1980s. Two broad families of explanation have crystallized in modern scholarship. One treats 胡同/衚衕 as a Mongolic loanword, often linked to the Mongolian (or Turkic) word for 'water well,' that shifted semantically from water source to neighborhood and then to 'lane.' The other reads the item as native, an orthographic/phonological development within the long-standing Chinese lexeme family for 'lane' (*xiàng* 街/ *xiàng* 巷/ *lòng* 弄), subsequently stabilized in the north. The debate is complicated by the documentary record: Yuan drama, Ming–Qing gazetteers, and later lexicography furnish abundant usage but sparse etymology.

The earliest attestations of the term occur in Yuan drama, whose vernacular texture is a reliable register of urban speech. The play transmitted as *Guān dàwáng dú fù dāndāo huì* 關大王獨赴單刀會 (*Lord Guan Attends the Single-Sword Meeting Alone*) contains the line: “直殺一條血胡同” (“Fight your way through a bloody *hutong*”), which shows that the graphically written form 胡同 is attested in the transmitted text of a Yuan *zaju*. Since Yuan *zaju* is widely described as a mixed medium employing substantial northern vernacular and colloquial language, this constitutes evidence that the lexeme belonged to

the linguistic repertoire available to Yuan dramatic writing, though it does not by itself prove frequency in everyday urban speech. A parallel stream of Yuan-period testimony arises in administrative/topographic discourse on the capital. Later compilations quote Xióng Mèngxiáng's *Gazetteer of Xijin*: “三百八十四火巷，二十九街通。街通二字本方言。” (“There are 384 fire lanes and 29 *xiangtong* passages; the term *xiangtong*, written with these two characters, is a dialect form.”). Even if mediated through later citation, the remark is valuable: it places lane terminology in the vernacular register of the Yuan Dadu rather than in classical exegesis. Taken together with drama, it suggests that by the 13th–14th centuries the urban lexeme existed and was perceived as everyday speech.

The first explicit attempt to explain the word's origin appears in 1593 in the *Wǎnshǔ zájì* 宛署雜記 (*Miscellaneous Notes of the Wan Office*) (1593) by the Ming magistrate Shěn Bǎng 沈榜. In the section “Streets” (*Jiēdào* 街道), Shěn Bǎng comments an administrative enumeration of lanes to state: “衙衙本元人語。” (“衙衙 is originally a Yuan people's word”). He then adds an explanation of the term which is plainly speculative:

字中從胡、從同，蓋取胡人大同之意。然二字皆從行，迨我朝龍興，胡人北徙，同於荒服，亦其識云。

The central parts of the characters are 胡 (barbarian) and 同 (unity), signifying the unity of the barbarian people. Both characters share the radical “行” [to walk]. When our dynasty rose to power, the barbarian people migrated northward, settling in the remote frontier regions, just as the prophecy foretold.

The text thus couples an early belief in a Yuan origin with hard evidence for extensive Ming-period usage in the capital.

By the Ming and Qing, the word's everydayness becomes bureaucratically visible. Zhāng Jué's *Collections of lanes and alleys of five districts of the capital city*, for example, is a systematic catalogue of Beijing's *hútong*-names, indicating the toponymic institutionalization of *hútong*. Late-imperial registers go further. The *Draft gazetteer of wards and alleys of the capital city* documents lane after lane with tell-tale annotations such as “鴨蛋井井一” (“Duck Egg Well Well One”) or records lanes whose very names incorporate *jǐng* 井 ‘well’. This textual habit demonstrates two facts: (i) 衙衙 functions as the standard northern term for ‘lane,’ and (ii) wells are salient features of the *hútong* landscape, conspicuously enough to be counted and, not infrequently, to motivate lane names.

These early sources jointly establish a strong sociolinguistic timeline. By the Yuan, the lexeme is in vernacular circulation; by the Ming and Qing, it is administratively normalized in Beijing, with extensive well-related toponymy. What they do not establish is a specific historical etymon—Mongolian or otherwise.

4. Modern interpretations of *hútong* as loanword

The modern loanword view achieved canonical form in the late 1970s–1980s through the work of Zhāng Qīngcháng 张清常. In a 1978 survey on Mongolian loanwords in Chinese and in two subsequent articles (Zhang 1978; 1984; 1985), he reviews competing etymologies (Mongolian *hötön* [enclosure], *hudag* [well], *hoton* [camp]) and ultimately supports a hybrid origin hypothesis. Zhāng framed a semantically elegant chain: begin from Mongolian (or Turkic) *quduq/khudag* (well), observe that Yuan and later Beijing

neighborhoods often clustered around wells (as preserved in lane names and well tallies), and infer the metonymic shift ‘well’ → ‘well-place’ → ‘lane.’ For Zhāng, the term *hútong* is not merely a lexical item but a sociolinguistic fossil reflecting urban form, community identity, and historical contact between languages (particularly Chinese and Mongolian).

Hútong arose through semantic convergence between the Mongolian idea of an enclosed camp (*hötön*) and the Chinese spatial notion of *xiàng* 巷, a small lane within a *fāng* 坊 ‘district’. Thus *hútong* originally meant a bounded residential cluster, later generalized to the linear alley. Zhāng distinguishes between “loan origin” and “semantic domestication”: even if the phonetic form was borrowed, its meaning matured within Chinese sociocultural logic. After the Ming reconstruction (1403 CE), the large wards dissolved into smaller, street-based divisions. In this reorganization, *hútong* filled a lexical gap: it denoted spaces smaller than *xiàng* yet socially cohesive, the everyday realm of domestic life. The word first appears as a place-name classifier in toponyms (e.g., Jinzhong Hutong 金钟胡同, Xisi Hutong 西四胡同). The linguistic spread correlates with the urban transition from walled wards to open street networks. Language, in this sense, records morphological change: as urban walls disappeared, *hútong* captured the new porosity and social density of everyday Beijing.

Phonetically, he identifies the sound correspondences between Mongolian and Chinese: *hötön* → *hudun* → *hútóng* (according to Zhāng, the nasalization of the final consonant *n* into *ng* fits early Ming Mandarin patterns). Moreover, he shows how folk etymology adapted the meaningless syllables into meaningful Chinese graphs 胡 and 同, yielding a pleasant, neutral compound. Semantically, *hútong* underwent two shifts: from ‘enclosed settlement’ to ‘alley’ and from ‘alley’ to ‘community.’ By the Qing period, *hútong* referred to both physical lanes and socio-spatial neighborhoods, a duality preserved in Beijing speech today. Linguistically, the names of the *hútong* represent a collective memory of urban labor and ethnicity. Zhāng emphasizes that while the modern city has restructured, the toponymic layer preserves pre-modern social organization. Thus *hútong* toponyms act as archives of social hierarchy, marking distinctions between inner-city elites and peripheral commoners.

The theory’s appeal lies in how neatly it aligns contact history and urban morphology: a Mongol-ruled, polyglot capital whose residential micro-units formed around wells, and a word whose modern meaning perfectly fits the resulting space. This scholarly narrative passed quickly from journals and monographs into lexicographic authority. Although lexicographic sources cannot in themselves establish etymology, they are nonetheless informative as indicators of disciplinary reception and stabilization. From the 1980s onward, several authoritative Chinese dictionaries and reference works came to attribute *hútong* to a Mongolian source, often glossed as a phonetic borrowing rather than a semantically motivated derivation.² Such entries do not provide independent philological argumentation, but they codify an explanatory framework that had already gained currency in specialist scholarship. In this sense, the appearance of the Mongolian-origin claim in general and normative dictionaries reflects not evidentiary closure, but the institutionalization of a particular scholarly consensus. The lexicographic record thus documents the afterlife of Zhāng’s externalist account within standard reference culture,

² See, for example, 胡同 in Liú 1984, which classifies the term as a borrowing from Mongolian, reflecting its inclusion within a systematic inventory of foreign lexical items in Chinese.

even as subsequent research has continued to reassess its phonological and semantic foundations.³

The strengths of this position are clear. It matches the sociopolitical setting (Yuan rule; Sino-Mongolian contact), resonates with the documented density of wells in *hútong* names and inventories, and is typologically plausible (metonymic semantic extension from a prominent landmark to the surrounding micro-district).

The weakness is documentary and phonological. There is as yet no Yuan-era bilingual administrative text that explicitly equates a Mongolian form *quduq/khudag* with Chinese 胡同/衢衢; the phonological path from [qɒduq]/[xɒdag] to *hútong* is not self-evident and requires positing intermediations that the textual record does not unambiguously attest. That absence does not disprove the loan; it simply means the argument remains circumstantial and semantically driven rather than textually clinched.

In 1986, the Japanese scholar Tada Sadaichi 多田贞一 suggested that *hútong* comes from Mongolian *hoton*, meaning ‘settlement’ or ‘small town’ (Tada 1986). Tada relied on anecdotal reports from Mongolian informants, claiming that groups of five or six yurts were called a *hútong*, and that the term was later used in Beijing for ‘small streets.’ Junast (1991) criticizes this as hearsay-based and linguistically implausible. Phonetically, Mongolian *hoton* (with vowel *o*) would have been transcribed in Chinese as *he* or *huo*, not *hu*. Moreover, Mongolian *hoton* ends in *n*, not *ng*, and the semantic leap from ‘settlement’ to ‘narrow alley’ is unconvincing.

In 1991 Junast 扎那斯图 (照那斯图) revisits the etymology of *hútong* (Junast 1991). While earlier scholars agreed that it entered Chinese from Mongolian during the Yuan dynasty, they disagreed on what Mongolian word it derived from. Three competing theories dominated: (i) *hoton* or *khoton* (small town); (ii) *khotong* or *khutong* (lane); (iii) *hudag* or *khudag* (well). Junast argues decisively for the third interpretation and provides new textual, phonological, and geographical evidence to support it. The ‘well’ hypothesis, most prominently defended by Zhāng Qīngcháng and historian Chén Gāohuá 陈高华 (Chen, 1982), asserts that *hútong* comes from Mongolian *hudag* (худаг), meaning ‘water well.’ Junast takes this further by adducing new philological and toponymic evidence supporting the *hudag* derivation. The author begins with a comparative phonology of Yuan and Ming transcriptions of Mongolian. He reviews multiple cases of the Mongolian *hoton* (settlement) being rendered in Chinese as *huōtuán* 豁团, *huǒdūn* 火墩, *hétuō* 合托, *hétún* 合屯, *hétuō* 合脱. In all these transliterations, the first syllable has the *o* vowel, corresponding to [ɔ] or [o], not [u]. Therefore, if *hútong* derived from *hoton*, it would begin with *huo-* or *he-*, not *hu-*. By contrast, the Mongolian *hudag* was consistently transcribed in Yuan and Ming bilingual glossaries with a vowel *-u* character, such as 忽都 *hūdū* or 古都 *gūdū*. All these variants show the same phonetic structure [hu/t/g + du/dag] and frequently end in *-g* or *-k*, a consonant easily adapted into Chinese as *-ng*. This regularity would suggest that *hútong* arose as a sinified adaptation of *hudag* following Chinese phonological habits of the 13th–14th centuries, where final stops often became nasalized.

Junast connects Zhāng’s discovery—*hútong* first appearing in Ming author Shěn Bǎng’s *Wǎnshǔ zájì* 宛署雜記 (*Miscellaneous Notes of the Wan Office*) (1593)—with new textual evidence. The Ming encyclopaedia *Wǔbèi Zhì* 武備志 (*Treatise on Military*

³ Comparable formulations appear in later normative reference works, including Hanyu Da Cidian Editorial Committee (1986–1994) s.v. 胡同, where the Mongolian-origin claim is reiterated as part of standard lexical annotation.

Preparedness) (1621) lists Mongolian glosses for ‘well’ (*hudag*) as both *kūdūsi* 苦都四 and *hūdòng* 忽洞. The latter corresponds to the modern form *hútong* in sound. Since the *Miscellaneous Notes* described *hútong* as “a Yuan people’s word,” and the *Treatise* contemporaneously records *hūdòng* meaning ‘well,’ Junast argues that these two attestations together prove a historical equivalence between *hútong* and ‘well.’

Moreover, Ming- and Qing-era Beijing had numerous alley names directly referencing wells—e.g., *Dōngjǐng Hútong* 东井儿胡同, *Xījǐng Hútong* 西井胡同, *Nánjǐng Hútong* 南井胡同, *Běijǐng Hútong* 北井胡同—which, Junast argues based on Zhāng (1978), preserve the semantic memory of ‘well’ as community center.

Junast supplements the textual record with toponymic data from *The Gazetteer of Inner Mongolian Place-Names* (Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region Place-Name Committee, 1977-85), which lists dozens of settlements whose Mongolian names end in *-hudag* but are written in Chinese as *hūdòng* 忽洞, *hútòng* 胡同, *húdòng* 胡洞, *húdòng* 湖洞, or *hútǒng* 胡筒 (e.g. *Kēméng Hūdòng* 柯盟忽洞) (Junast 1991, pp. 33-34). These forms, spread across Chahar, Wuchuan, and Ulanqab, retain the early phonetic correspondence between *hudag* and *hútong*. They demonstrate that the Chinese character transcription 胡同 systematically represented the Mongolian suffix *-hudag*, confirming phonological regularity across centuries.

Junast strengthens his claim by referencing general principles of Sino-Mongolian phonetic adaptation. Yuan and Ming translators often used Chinese *-ong* to represent Mongolian final *-g*, just as *hēi* 黑 *hei* or *xí* 习 could render the short vowel *-g*. Thus the shift from *hudag* → *hudong* → *hutong* follows predictable historical sound change.

Therefore, *hútong* ultimately reflects a pan-northern Altaic root for ‘water well,’ with Mongolian *hudag* as the immediate source through Yuan-era bilingual contact. According to Junast, the ‘well’ origin aligns with the socio-spatial structure of Yuan-Ming Beijing. Each residential cluster or alley typically formed around a shared well, serving as its center of daily life. Thus, when Chinese speakers borrowed *hudag*, they extended its meaning from ‘the well itself’ to ‘the area around the well’, and, eventually, to the alley community. This semantic shift mirrors processes in other languages, where words for central features (e.g., square, market, mosque) come to denote the surrounding district. The author emphasizes that this explanation preserves both phonetic plausibility and social logic, unlike the ‘settlement’ or ‘alley’ hypotheses.

For Junast, *hútong* stands as a living fossil of linguistic and cultural contact between steppe and sedentary civilizations. The ‘well’ theory not only satisfies phonetic and semantic criteria but also resonates with the historical morphology of Beijing’s urban life.

In 1994, Zhāng Qīngcháng’s article “Clarifications on ‘Hutong’ as Borrowed from Mongolian ‘Wells’” (Zhāng 1994) responds to the long-standing controversy over its etymology, partially reviewing his own interpretations of two decades earlier. Zhāng’s article does not entirely reject a Mongolian connection, but he challenges the specific claim that *hútong* was directly borrowed from Mongolian. His essay aims to clarify conceptual confusion, phonological mismatch, and semantic inaccuracy in that claim.

Zhāng begins by reviewing the Mongolian lexemes often cited as the source of *hútong*: *hōtōn* (хотон) — meaning fenced courtyard, camp, or herd enclosure; *hudag* (худаг) — meaning well or water source; sometimes a variant *hutong/hudong*, transcribed inconsistently in Chinese records. According to earlier writers, Chinese speakers under Yuan rule allegedly adopted the Mongolian word for ‘well,’ which then came to designate

the alleys surrounding wells in the imperial capital. Zhāng argues this chain of reasoning suffers from three errors:

- Lexical conflation: the Mongolian for ‘well’ is *hudag*, not *hötön* or *hú tong*. The term *hötön* refers to an enclosure or camp, often associated with royal quarters or livestock pens, never with wells.
- Phonetic inconsistency: the vowel and consonant correspondences between *hudag/hötön* and *hú tong* do not align with known Yuan-era Mongol-Chinese transcriptions. The final *-g* or *-n* of Mongolian words was generally retained in Middle Chinese transliterations, not replaced by *-ng*.
- Temporal disjunction: Chinese records attest to the word *hú tong* only after Mongolian administrative divisions had already adopted Chinese spatial vocabulary (e.g. *lǐ* 里 ‘neighborhood’ and *fāng* 坊 ‘district’). Therefore, *hú tong* likely represents a Sino-Mongolian hybridization rather than a simple borrowing.

Zhāng then situates the discussion within the urban morphology of the Yuan Dadu. Under Mongol rule, the capital was organized along orthogonal streets and residential wards (*fāng* 坊), yet the Mongols introduced new terminologies for smaller residential and service compounds.

Some historical texts, such as the *Yuán Shǐ* 元史 (*History of the Yuan*) (Song, 1976), mention *hötön* to denote royal encampments or palace precincts, not civic streets. The term referred to imperial or aristocratic quarters enclosed by walls—for example, “the *hötön* of the empress.” In Chinese translation these were sometimes rendered *gōngchéng* 宫城 ‘palace city’ or *gōngshǔ* 宫署 ‘palace office’.

Zhāng observes that no contemporary document equates *hötön* with ‘well’ or with commoner alleys. Thus, the claim that *hú tong* evolved from ‘well’ as a metonym for a water source in Beijing neighborhoods lacks textual support. Instead, Zhāng proposes, the functional similarity between the Mongolian ‘enclosure’ and the Chinese ‘alley block’ might have prompted semantic convergence, producing a hybrid sense of “residential lane.”

A core part of Zhāng’s essay is a careful linguistic comparison between Yuan-period Mongolian and Middle Chinese phonetics. He lists several documented transcriptions of Mongolian words in Chinese sources—such as *hutu*, *hudu*, *hutong*, *hotun*, *khoton*—and demonstrates that variability of vowels (*u/o*) and finals (*n/ng*) results from Chinese orthographic adaptation, not direct equivalence.

He notes that *hú tong* in early Ming texts already stabilized with the graph pair 胡 + 同, which had no etymological relation to Mongolian orthography but followed Chinese phonetic convenience and aesthetic symmetry. Chinese writing conventions favored meaningful characters even when used phonetically; hence *hú tong* might have been chosen for its neutral or auspicious associations rather than for faithful sound reproduction.

Zhāng also discusses phonological evolution within Beijing dialects: the rounded vowel [u] and the alveolar-nasal [n] could easily merge into a velar nasal [ŋ] in rapid speech, yielding *hú tong* from *hutun* or *hudun*. Thus, even if the term was once related to a Mongolian source like *hötön*, the phonetic path was mediated by Chinese phonology, not a direct borrowing.

Therefore, Zhāng argues that the semantic development of *hú tong* within Chinese reflects indigenous processes of urban re-territorialization rather than imported meanings. In Ming and Qing Beijing, *hú tong* referred concretely to the alleys running between residential compounds, but also abstractly to neighborhood communities. The earliest

Ming gazetteers already list dozens of *hútong* names, suggesting official recognition of the alley as an administrative and social unit.

This usage aligns with the historical street-and-alley system (*jiēxiàngzhì* 街巷制) that had evolved since the Song, not with a Mongolian notion of ‘well.’ Indeed, most *hútong* were dry lanes, not centered on wells. The idea that “each *hútong* formed around a well” appears to be a retrospective idealization by twentieth-century writers seeking to link Beijing’s morphology to pastoral or communal images.

Furthermore, the semantic path from ‘enclosure’ (*hōtōn*) to ‘residential alley’ is typologically plausible—many languages use terms for ‘compound’ or ‘yard’ to denote streets of houses—but the step from ‘well’ to ‘alley’ is semantically implausible. Wells are point features; alleys are linear. The alleged metaphor lacks spatial logic.

To reinforce his critique, Zhāng conducts a close reading of Yuan- and early Ming-period documents. He cites the *Dadu cheng fang xiang zhi* 大都城坊巷志 (*Gazetteer of the Wards and Lanes of Dadu*) and the *History of the Yuan*, neither of which ever equates *hútong* with ‘well.’ The Dadu gazetteer uses *fāng* and *xiàng* for urban divisions but does not list *hútong* as a category.

The earliest clear appearance of *hútong* as a Beijing toponym occurs in Ming Hongzhi 弘治-era sources (late 15th century). By then, the Mongol empire had collapsed for a century, and Mandarin phonology had absorbed many northern steppe loanwords. The timing indicates that *hútong* was a residual hybrid term stabilized within Chinese rather than a contemporaneous Yuan borrowing.

Having dismantled the ‘well’ hypothesis, Zhāng proposes a more nuanced alternative. He suggests that *hútong* may have originated from a contact zone between Mongolian and North-Chinese dialects during the Yuan, where the term *hōtōn* was reinterpreted by Chinese residents through analogy with their own ward-alley system. This process would yield a semantic blend Mongolian *hōtōn* ‘enclosure, settlement’ and Chinese *xiàng* ‘lane, neighborhood’, resulting in *hútong*, an inhabited passageway or micro-settlement within the capital.

Over time, this hybrid term displaced *xiàng* in Beijing vernacular, acquiring both administrative and social connotations. By the Ming and Qing, *hútong* referred to physical lanes, social communities, and symbolic markers of Beijing identity, a semantic richness typical of naturalized loanwords.

Moreover, Zhāng links linguistic evolution to urban morphology. The street-alley system, re-articulated under Yuan–Ming administration, provided fertile ground for such hybrid terms: as streets replaced wards, new names arose for the in-between spaces of everyday life. The adoption of *hútong* thus reflects not only linguistic borrowing but also the social transformation of the city itself—from imperial ritual space to lived neighborhood fabric.

In conclusion, the core analytical framework and empirical observations advanced by Zhāng Qīngcháng in the mid-1990s remained remarkably stable across his subsequent scholarship. The arguments first articulated in *Hutong and Others* (1996) and systematically elaborated in *A Historical Account of Beijing Street and Alley Names* (1997), the sociolinguistic reading of urban toponymy as a sedimented record of social practice, administrative change, and everyday language use, were largely reaffirmed in his later writings. Rather than representing a theoretical departure, these later texts consolidate and refine earlier positions, clarifying methodological premises and expanding the documentary base. Their republication in *Collected Works of Zhang Qingchang, vol. 3: Hutong Studies* (2006) thus functions less as a retrospective compilation than as a

confirmation of the internal coherence and long-term validity of Zhāng's approach to *hútong* studies and Beijing urban linguistics.

5. Internalist interpretation

Set against the loan thesis is a Sinitic internal account, articulated most forcefully by the Beijing linguist Wáng Yuè 王越. In “Beijing Hutong Revisited: On the Irrelevance of Wells to the Origin of Hutong” (Wáng 2008), Wáng Yuè undertakes a systematic reassessment of the ‘well’ hypothesis concerning the etymology of *hútong*. Wáng's central claim is unequivocal: *hútong* has nothing to do with wells, either linguistically, historically, or spatially. Through extensive textual criticism, quantitative analysis of historical gazetteers, and phonological comparison, he argues that the well hypothesis rests on conjecture rather than evidence.

Wáng reconstructs first the intellectual genealogy of the well hypothesis. He shows that the idea did not emerge from rigorous philological inquiry but from a series of speculative claims beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, often repeated without verification.

The first major section addresses the claim that naming alleys after wells originated in the Yuan dynasty and thus reflects Mongolian influence. Wáng demonstrates that using wells as toponymic markers is a long-standing Chinese tradition, predating the Yuan by many centuries. Drawing on classical sources such as *Lǚshì Chūnqiū* 呂氏春秋 (*The Spring and Autumn Annals of Master Lü*) (239 BCE), *Shuōwén Jiězì* 說文解字 (*Explaining simple graphs and analyzing compound characters*) (100 CE), and Tang–Song historical texts, he shows that wells had been named, classified, and commemorated in Chinese urban culture since antiquity. The existence of ‘four-eye wells’ (*sìyǎnjǐng* 四眼井) and similar structures in cities such as Hangzhou and Chizhou well before the Yuan dynasty decisively undermines the claim that such names must reflect Mongolian linguistic input. If well-based names implied Mongolian borrowing, Wáng argues, then countless southern Chinese alleys should also be called *hútong*, which they are not.

In the second section, Wáng turns to quantitative toponymic evidence from Ming-period Beijing. Using Zhāng Jué's *Collections of lanes and alleys of five districts of the capital city*, he tabulates all recorded streets, lanes, and *hútong* within the thirty-six wards of the Ming capital. Out of 1,211 named thoroughfares (excluding city gates), only 26—approximately 2.1%—contain the character *jǐng* 井 ‘well’. By contrast, names derived from temples, official institutions, markets, crafts, aristocratic residences, or military installations are far more numerous. Moreover, seventeen out of the thirty-six wards contain no well-named alleys at all. This statistical distribution, Wáng argues, makes it impossible to maintain that wells were a defining or salient feature of *hútong* as a category.

The third section examines Yuan-dynasty evidence, focusing especially on *Gazetteer of Xijin*. Wáng shows that wells in Yuan Beijing were not located in narrow *hútong*, but rather in wide, open spaces such as temple forecourts, city gates, major streets, and specially designated public water stations known as *shīshuǐtǎng* 施水堂. These installations were designed to accommodate heavy human and animal traffic in what contemporary sources describe as a “city of men and horses.” Crucially, none of these well sites were referred to as *hútong*. Wáng emphasizes that if Mongolian speakers had indeed equated ‘well’ with *hútong*, such usage would be reflected in Yuan texts, but it is not.

Wáng deepens then the spatial analysis by turning to Qing-period data, particularly Zhū Yīxīn's *Draft Gazetteer of the Wards and Alleys of the Capital* (1885). Proponents of the well hypothesis had claimed that the sheer number of wells recorded in this source—over 1,200—demonstrated a close association between wells and *hútong*. Wáng counters this by conducting a fine-grained spatial breakdown of well distribution in the outer western city of Beijing. His results are decisive: wells cluster overwhelmingly in vegetable gardens, open land, and major streets, while *hútong* contain very few wells. Of 107 *hútong* in the area studied, more than three-quarters have no wells at all, with an average of only 0.31 wells per *hútong*. These figures directly contradict the idea that *hútong* were defined or structured around wells.

The final major section addresses the phonological argument for Mongolian origin. Wáng shows that the pronunciation of the Mongolian word for 'well' varies considerably across historical sources and modern reconstructions, including forms transcribed as *hudug*, *huduy*, *guduhe*, and *khudag*. None of these, he argues, corresponds convincingly to the phonological structure or tonal pattern of *hútong*. Drawing on Yuan- and Ming-era bilingual glossaries such as the *Zhiyuán Yiyǔ* 至元譯語 (*Glossary from the Zhiyuan Era*) and the *Huáyí Yiyǔ* 華夷譯語 (*Glossary of Chinese and Foreign Terms*), and the *Wúbèi Zhì* 武備志 (*Treatise on Military Preparedness*) (1621), Wáng demonstrates that historical Chinese transcriptions of Mongolian 'well' consistently diverge from the pronunciation of *hútong*. He also notes tonal mismatches, most notably that Mongolian forms correspond to rising or entering tones, while *hútong* is firmly established with level tone in Chinese. For Wáng, these discrepancies rule out a direct borrowing scenario.

In conclusion, Wáng Yuè argues that the well hypothesis is a modern conjecture unsupported by historical linguistics, textual evidence, or urban geography. Wells certainly played an important role in Beijing's urban life, but their cultural and functional prominence does not entail etymological derivation. Wáng insists on a clear methodological distinction between toponymic practice, urban infrastructure, and lexical origin. By dismantling the well hypothesis, the paper calls for a return to philological rigor and warns against the uncritical repetition of speculative etymologies in scholarship, education, and popular discourse.

In 2009, Wáng Yuè reiterates his position and further broadens his analysis, introducing compelling evidentiary elements in support of his thesis on the basis of *Lǎo Qīdà* 老乞大 (*Lǎo Qīdà*), a Sino-Korean conversational manual compiled in several versions during the Yuan–Ming period for training Korean interpreters in Northern Chinese vernacular, a crucial primary source for the study of premodern spoken Chinese because it records everyday vocabulary and pronunciation with a high degree of phonological transparency. In "'Hutong' as a Name Originating from the Han-Dynasty 'Alley'" (Wáng 2009), he systematically undermines the loanword hypothesis, arguing that *hútong* is not a Mongolian borrowing, but rather a native Chinese term with deep roots in early Sinitic phonology and lexicon. By tracing the history of the term from the Han to the Ming, Wáng argues for an internal Chinese etymological line rooted in the older lane word *xiàng* 巷 (also associated in his reconstruction with *héng* 衡). He does not, however, posit a single strictly linear development from *héngtōng* 衡通 to *húdòng* 胡同. Rather, he treats *héngtōng* as a southern/Wu dialectal form parallel to *nòngtáng* 弄堂, while *húdòng* represents the northern reflex of the same older lexical base; the later written forms *hútòng* 衡衡 and *hútòng* 胡同 are then understood as subsequent orthographic stabilizations of the northern form.

Far from being an isolated etymological note, Wáng's study exemplifies a broader trend in Chinese historical linguistics—namely, the re-evaluation of Yuan-period contact phenomena in light of older philological continuities. His argument is not merely nationalist in impulse, but grounded in careful analysis of sound correspondences, textual attestations, and dialectal parallels.

In the early 2000s, the Mongolian-loan theory had become the dominant explanation. Wáng Yuè's 2009 paper directly refutes this line of reasoning. He opens by observing that the lexical motivation for borrowing is absent: ancient Chinese already possessed a rich repertoire of native terms for 'lane' or 'alley' (*jiē* 街, *fāng* 坊, *xiàng* 巷, *lòng* 弄, *lǐxiàng* 里巷, *hòutóng* 后衙 etc.). Borrowing occurs when a language encounters a new cultural object or concept—such as *pútáo* 葡萄 'grape', *púsà* 菩萨 'bodhisattva', or modern *shāfā* 沙发 'sofa'—not when equivalent terms already exist. The semantic field of 'street' and 'alley,' Wáng insists, was saturated long before the Yuan. To import a phonetically and semantically mismatched foreign word into this domain would have been redundant.

Moreover, he points out, the phonetic distance between *khudag* and *hútong* is substantial. The initial consonants, vowel quality, and final nasal differ significantly, and there is no documented intermediary form bridging the two. Wáng thus rejects the 'well' derivation as a conjectural projection rather than a linguistically demonstrable loan.

Wáng constructs his counter-hypothesis from philological continuity rather than cultural contact. His central claim is that *hútong* descends from an ancient Chinese morpheme meaning 'lane' or 'connected passage.' The *The Shuōwén Jiězì* defines 衙 as *tōngjiē* 通街 'a connecting street', implying an early sense of passage or corridor. Southern Song poet Lóu Yuè 楼钥 (1135–1210) uses the term *hòutòng* 后衙 'back lane' in his poem *Xiǎoxī Dàozhōng* 小溪道中 (On the Road along the Little Stream): “后衙环村尽遨游，风山寺下换轻舟” (“After wandering freely around the village's back lanes, I changed boats beneath the Wind-Mountain Temple”). This usage, Wáng notes, clearly predates the Yuan dynasty and demonstrates that 衙 (pronounced *dòng*) functioned as a living term for 'lane' well before Mongolian contact.

Phonologically, 衙 had two readings recorded in the *Guǎngyùn* 广韵, a Chinese rhyme dictionary compiled from 1007 to 1008: *tóng* (*píngshēng* 平声, level tone) and *dòng* (*qùshēng* 去声, falling tone). The latter, pronounced like 洞, directly anticipates the Yuan-era form 胡洞 found in texts such as the *Lǎo Qǐdà* 老乞大 (*Lǎo Qǐdà*). Wáng emphasizes that the tonal and syllabic pattern of *húdòng* corresponds perfectly to the *qùshēng* reading, while later *hútong* reflects orthographic standardization rather than semantic change. The text records a colloquial sentence: “这胡洞窄，牵着马过不去” (“This *hudong* is narrow; one cannot lead a horse through”). In a Ming reprint of the same book, the sentence becomes: “这衙衙窄...,” demonstrating that 胡洞 and 衙衙 were variant spellings of the same spoken form. Korean *hangul* transcriptions accompanying the Yuan text mark both syllables with voiced initials and falling tones, precisely the phonological features expected of *húdòng*. This discovery, confirmed by the 1998 edition of *Lǎo Qǐdà* (Wāng, 2005), preserving Yuan usage, provides direct contemporary evidence for *húdòng* as a living vernacular word meaning 'narrow alley.'

This attestation establishes that *húdòng*—and not *khudag*—was the immediate ancestor of modern *hútong*. The orthographic evolution 胡洞 → 衙衙 → 胡同 reflects changes in script and pronunciation rather than foreign derivation.

How, then, did the word *húdòng* 胡洞 arise from earlier Chinese words? Wáng proposes a chain of internal sound change rather than external borrowing. The key

intermediary is the Song-dynasty form *hòutòng* 后衕 ‘back lane’. He observes that during the Tang–Song period, words in the *hóu* [侯] phonetic series often underwent a vowel shift *ou* → *u*, resulting in alternations such as 猴 *hóu* → 胡猻 *húsūn* ‘monkey’; 喉咙 *hóulóng* → 胡咙 *húlóng* ‘throat’. Through this regular phonological drift, *hòutòng* 后衕 could easily yield *húdòng* 胡洞, the form attested in Yuan sources.

Once the *hu-* form was stabilized, the character *tòng* 同 gradually replaced *dòng* 洞 as a convenient phonetic and graphic substitute. The modern orthography 胡同 therefore represents a late Ming or early Qing normalization of an earlier phonological reality.

Although Wáng rejects direct borrowing from Mongolian, he does not entirely exclude the possibility of areal convergence. He notes that related forms—Daur *kotung*, Manchu *hoton*, Evenki *xoton*, Hezhe *xoton*, Oroqen *xoton*—all mean ‘town’ or ‘settlement.’ These widespread cognates indicate a northern Eurasian word family with similar phonetics and meanings.

However, rather than seeing *hútong* as derived from these languages, Wáng interprets the resemblance as parallel development or secondary diffusion through regional contact. The semantic field ‘settlement → street → lane’ occurs across the Altaic and Sino-Tibetan area. In this respect, *hútong* may share an ancient areal pattern, but its immediate source remains internal to Chinese.

Wáng closes his paper by situating *hútong* within a Sino-Tibetan comparative framework. He observes that the Old Chinese word *xiàng* 巷 was reconstructed as *groongs* in Baxter’s system, paralleling Tibetan *grong* ‘town, village’. Both derive from a protoform meaning ‘settlement.’ The semantic overlap between Chinese *xiàng* and Tibetan *grong* thus reveals a shared conceptual root, long predating Mongolian contact.

Moreover, the northern dialect reflexes of *xiàng* illustrate phonological developments consistent with the transformation from *groong* to *dong/tong*. This Sino-Tibetan correspondence, Wáng argues, explains the semantic continuity of *hútong* far more naturally than the speculative Mongolian well hypothesis.

In this way, the author shifts the discussion from the narrow question of Yuan-era borrowing to a broader diachronic perspective on Chinese lexical evolution within an areal linguistic continuum.

Wáng Yuè’s paper marks a significant methodological advance in the study of *hútong*’s etymology. His argument succeeds not merely by refuting the Mongolian hypothesis, but by replacing it with a testable philological model supported by multi-period textual data and sound-change analysis.

Nevertheless, Wáng’s conclusion that *hútong* is wholly native may be somewhat overstated. The Altaic parallels he himself lists—*hoton*, *kotung*, *xoton*—suggest that *hútong*’s form and meaning resonated with a broader northern areal pattern. The possibility of mutual reinforcement—whereby a native word’s form or usage was subtly reshaped by contact with Mongolian or Manchu—remains open. In other words, while *hútong* was not imported from *khudag*, its Yuan-era semantic prestige as the “Beijing lane” may still reflect Mongol administrative geography.

6. An intermediate interpretation

In 2009, Lín Yì 林毅, in *Altai-Linguistic Perspective on the Semantic and Etymological Study of ‘Hútong’* (Lín 2009), reopens the long-standing debate on the origin of the Chinese word *hútong* by reassessing both the semantic range of the term and its possible

sources within the Altaic linguistic sphere. The paper positions itself against the two views that have dominated earlier discussions: on the one hand, the claim that *hútong* is an entirely native Chinese word; on the other, the theory that it derives specifically from a Mongolian term meaning ‘well.’ Lín argues that neither position adequately accounts for the comparative linguistic evidence and proposes instead a more nuanced Altaic etymology grounded in semantic typology and cross-linguistic correspondence.

Lín’s core contribution lies in his systematic comparison of how *hútong* is translated in multilingual pedagogical and lexicographic materials produced in Korea and China. He examines several versions of the *Lǎo Qǐdà*, including Korean, Manchu, and Mongolian editions. In all Korean versions of *Lǎo Qǐdà*, *hútong* is consistently translated as *kol*, while the Manchu *Qīngyǔ Lǎo Qǐdà* 清語老乞大 (*Lǎo Qǐdà in Manchu Language*) glosses it as *holo*, and the Mongolian *Méngyǔ Lǎo Qǐdà* 蒙語老乞大 (*Lǎo Qǐdà in Mongolian Language*) renders it as *jaba*. This consistent pattern, Lín argues, is highly significant: it suggests that historical translators did not associate *hútong* with the concept of a well, but rather with a different semantic domain shared across Altaic languages.

Lín then explores the meanings of these corresponding Altaic forms. In Korean, *kol* 골/谷 denotes ‘valley,’ ‘ravine,’ or ‘village,’ and historical sources such as the *Samguk Sagi* 三國史記 (*History of the Three Kingdoms*) (1145) and the *Samguk Yusa* 三國遺事 (*Records of the Three Kingdoms*) (ca. 1281–1287) show that earlier forms of *kol* (reconstructed as *kol* or *xol*) could also mean ‘city’ or ‘fortified settlement.’ Similarly, Manchu *holo* refers to ‘mountain ravine,’ ‘gully,’ or ‘depression,’ while Mongolian *jaba* means ‘valley’ or ‘cleft between cliffs,’ a sense attested as early as *The Secret History of the Mongols*, where it is transcribed in Chinese characters and glossed as a geographical feature. Lín does not claim that Korean *kol/xol*, Manchu *holo*, and Mongolian *jaba* form a single phonologically coherent cognate set. Rather, he argues that Korean *kol/xol* and Manchu *holo* are phonologically and semantically related, while Mongolian *jaba* serves as a semantic parallel attesting the broader meaning of “ravine” or “narrow hollow passage.” This allows him to posit an areal semantic field for *hutong* before turning, more specifically, to Mongolian *gudum* as the more plausible direct etymon.

From this comparative evidence, Lín infers that the original meaning of *hútong* was not ‘alley’ in the strictly urban sense, but rather a more general concept, ‘narrow, hollow passageway.’ This semantic core could apply equally to a mountain valley, a ravine, or a narrow urban lane. Lín strengthens this argument by pointing to Chinese literary evidence in which *hútong* clearly refers to non-urban features. A key example is drawn from chapter 67 of *Xīyóu Jì* 西游记 (*Journey to the West*) (ca. 1590), where the term is used to describe a narrow mountain passage filled with rotting persimmons. In this context, *hútong* cannot plausibly mean ‘city alley,’ but instead denotes a confined, channel-like space.

Lín traces the subsequent semantic evolution of *hútong* as a process of narrowing and specialization. Over time, the broad meaning ‘narrow hollow passage’ gradually acquired additional semantic features tied to urban environments, eventually becoming restricted to the sense of ‘narrow alley’ in northern Chinese cities. This type of semantic narrowing, Lín argues, is typologically common and does not require a separate explanation based on wells or other specific urban infrastructure.

In the final section of the paper, Lín returns to the question of Mongolian influence, refining rather than rejecting the contact hypothesis. He argues that while the Mongolian word for ‘well’ is unlikely to be the source of *hútong*, Mongolian remains the most promising donor language due to the intensity of contact between Mongolian and northern Chinese during the Yuan dynasty. Lín revisits an observation made by Liú

Zhèngtán 刘正琰, who suggested, without detailed argument, that *hútong* might derive from Mongolian *gudum* (Liu 1984). Lín develops this suggestion in detail. The Mongolian form *gudum* (modern *γυдам*) denotes a ‘long narrow passage,’ ‘corridor,’ or ‘alley,’ and its derived form *gudamj* refers explicitly to streets or lanes. Lín demonstrates that both the phonological shape and the semantic profile of *gudum* correspond closely to *hútong*. He further argues that the phonetic adaptation of *gu-* to Chinese *hu-* is unproblematic, and that nasal consonant shifts in word-final position are cross-linguistically common.

On this basis, Lín concludes that Mongolian *gudum* is a highly plausible direct etymon of Chinese *hútong*. This proposal preserves the strengths of earlier contact-based explanations while avoiding the semantic and phonological difficulties associated with the well hypothesis. At the same time, Lín emphasizes that the borrowing did not introduce a foreign concept into Chinese, but rather mapped onto an existing semantic category already available in Chinese and other Eurasian languages.

In sum, Lín Yi’s paper is best read as an attempt to rescue an externalist explanation while abandoning the ‘well’-based semantic chain. He reframes the debate on *hútong* by shifting attention from isolated semantic associations to broader areal patterns and comparative evidence. By integrating Altaic linguistics, historical lexicography, and semantic typology, the study offers a sophisticated alternative to both strict internalist reconstructions and narrowly defined loanword hypotheses. Rather than treating *hútong* as either wholly native or derivable from a single Mongolian word meaning ‘well,’ Lín presents it as the product of contact-induced lexical transfer operating within a shared Eurasian semantic field. His discussion leaves some lexical relationships insufficiently clarified, especially the role of Mongolian *jaba* in the *Lǎo Qǐdà* tradition and its divergence from the Korean and Manchu forms, as well as the relation of this semantic field to Mongolian *xot* / *hoton* ‘town, settlement’. Lín’s contribution is therefore most persuasive not as a final solution, but as a methodological reorientation of the debate away from the “well” hypothesis and toward a broader topographic semantic domain.

7. Comparative Assessment of the Competing Hypotheses

Having reviewed the principal externalist, internalist, and intermediate accounts, it is now possible to compare them not only in terms of conclusion, but also in terms of method. The disagreement is not simply over whether *hútong* is of Mongolic, Chinese, or mixed origin; it also concerns what kinds of evidence are treated as decisive. Zhāng and Junast privilege contact-historical plausibility and broad semantic motivation, Wáng gives priority to documentary continuity and internal philological reconstruction, while Lín seeks a middle position by combining contact history with a revised semantic model. A comparative assessment therefore helps clarify that the debate is structured less by a single lexical problem than by different models of etymological explanation.

Criterion	Zhāng (1994) / Junast (1991)	Wáng (2009)	Lín (2009)
Semantic mechanism	Semantic shift through the “well” hypothesis: the source term originally denotes a well or water point, then extends metonymically to the lane, neighborhood, or urban space organized around it.	Semantic continuity within an inherited Chinese lane lexicon: <i>hútong</i> ultimately belongs to an older Chinese lexical family of lane/passage terms rather than deriving from a foreign “well” word.	Broader topographic semantic field of hollow / narrow passage / ravine; rejects “well” semantics and relocates the discussion to terrain and passage rather than water source.
Phonological	External borrowing from	Internal Chinese	Comparative Altaic

reasoning	Mongolic, followed by later graphic and phonetic adaptation within Chinese. The argument relies on the plausibility of contact-era transfer and subsequent sinographic stabilization.	phonological and orthographic development: later forms are derived from older Chinese lane words through regional phonological differentiation and subsequent written stabilization.	argument: semantic parallels across Korean, Manchu, and Mongolian are used to redefine the semantic field; among Mongolian candidates, <i>gudum</i> is preferred over <i>hudag</i> as the more plausible source.
Documentary base	Zhāng: stronger reliance on a contact-era Mongolic scenario, often more reconstructive than textually continuous. Junast: toponymic and lexicographic support, including Inner Mongolian place-name evidence and later lexicographic materials.	Textual and philological continuity from Chinese sources, including historical texts, gazetteers, vernacular materials, and reinterpretation of forms such as <i>héngtōng</i> 衡通 and <i>húdòng</i> 胡洞.	Multilingual <i>Lǎo Qidà</i> evidence plus broader Altaic comparison; uses Korean, Manchu, and Mongolian parallels to reframe the semantic problem.
Historical model	Externalist borrowing model: <i>hútong</i> enters Chinese from Mongolic under conditions of close Yuan-era contact.	Internal Chinese development model: the term emerges through long-term Chinese lexical continuity rather than borrowing.	Mixed / contact-reinforcement model: accepts contact as historically important, but does not treat the word as a simple borrowing of a “well” term; instead proposes transfer or reinforcement within an already existing semantic field.
Main strength	Emphasizes the historical plausibility of contact under Mongol rule and seeks to explain why the term becomes prominent in Yuan–Ming urban contexts.	Offers the strongest case for documentary continuity and for reading the term within a broader Chinese philological tradition.	Provides the most forceful critique of the old “well” hypothesis and shifts the debate onto a more convincing topographic semantic basis.
Main weakness	The semantic leap from “well” to “lane / alley” remains difficult to justify fully; the borrowing scenario is historically plausible, but semantically strained.	Although strong on internal continuity, some reconstructions remain speculative, and the developmental path is not always strictly linear.	Strongest in critique, but some lexical relations remain underexplained, especially the role of <i>jaba</i> and its relation to <i>xot</i> / <i>hoton</i> and to the Korean and Manchu comparanda.
Overall assessment	Historically plausible, but weakest where semantic mechanism is concerned.	Philologically strong, but not all phonological steps are equally demonstrable.	Methodologically innovative and probably the strongest corrective to the “well” hypothesis, though not a complete resolution of all comparative issues.

Table 1
Comparative assessment of the competing hypotheses.

Seen in comparative perspective, the disagreement is not simply between a Mongolic and a Chinese origin of *hútong*. It also reflects different models of etymological explanation. Zhāng and Junast privilege contact-historical plausibility and broad semantic motivation; Wáng gives priority to documentary continuity and internal philological reconstruction; Lín seeks a middle position by retaining the relevance of contact while redefining the semantic field in topographic rather than hydraulic terms. The debate therefore turns not

only on lexical evidence, but also on what each scholar considers decisive evidence in the first place.

For this reason, the present state of the debate does not support a definitive resolution, but it does allow a clearer methodological conclusion: the older “well” hypothesis now appears weaker than both Wáng’s internal continuity model and Lín’s contact-based topographic model, even if neither of the latter resolves every phonological and documentary difficulty.

8. Conclusion: Methodological Implications and the Politics of Explanation

The modern debate on the etymology of *hútong* reveals far more than a disagreement over the origin of a single lexical item. It exposes a set of competing methodological orientations within Chinese historical linguistics, each grounded in different assumptions about what constitutes valid evidence and explanatory sufficiency. When examined in this broader perspective, the controversy surrounding *hútong* becomes a case study in how language contact, internal reconstruction, and historical documentation are weighed and prioritized.

Early externalist accounts, most prominently those associated with Zhāng Qīngcháng and subsequently refined by Junast, established a contact-based framework that located the origin of *hútong* in Mongolian, specifically through a semantic chain anchored in the notion of a ‘well.’ These studies played a decisive role in foregrounding the multilingual ecology of Yuan-dynasty Beijing and in emphasizing the relevance of non-Sinitic languages for understanding northern Chinese vocabulary. At the same time, the evidentiary basis of the ‘well’ hypothesis has proven difficult to sustain, particularly with regard to phonological correspondence and the uneven distribution of wells in historical urban space.

More recent internalist reconstructions, exemplified by the work of Wáng Yuè, have systematically undermined the necessity of a borrowing-based explanation. By tracing a continuous chain of pre-Yuan attestations and by foregrounding internal phonological developments and vernacular orthographic variation, this line of research demonstrates that Chinese possessed the lexical and semantic resources required to account for *hútong* without recourse to external derivation. In doing so, it reasserts the importance of philological continuity and raises the evidentiary threshold that loanword hypotheses must meet.

Between these two positions lies the intermediate proposal advanced by Lín Yì, which abandons the ‘well’-based semantic chain while retaining an externalist orientation. By situating *hútong* within a broader Altaic semantic field centered on the notion of a narrow, hollow passage and by proposing Mongolian *gudum* ‘corridor’ as a plausible etymon, Lín’s account preserves the insights of language-contact research while avoiding some of the specific difficulties that undermine the ‘well’ hypothesis. This position illustrates that externalist explanations need not rely on culturally overdetermined narratives, but can instead be grounded in comparative semantics and typological plausibility.

Taken together, these three approaches delineate a methodological spectrum rather than a binary opposition. The persistence of the debate suggests that the disagreement is not merely empirical, but epistemological: it concerns how much weight should be assigned to contact plausibility versus internal sufficiency, and how to balance historical

context against phonological and textual rigor. In the case of *hútong*, the internalist account currently offers the most parsimonious explanation on strictly linguistic grounds, while externalist perspectives continue to illuminate the broader areal and historical conditions in which the term acquired its modern salience.

From the perspective of lexical borrowability, the externalist theories are historically plausible but require closer scrutiny than they usually receive. Tadmor, Haspelmath, and Taylor (2010) show that borrowing is constrained by lexical domain: basic vocabulary is comparatively resistant to borrowing, whereas culturally or historically specific terms are more easily transferred. This distinction is crucial for the etymology of *hútong*. If the word is interpreted as nothing more than a generic equivalent of “lane,” then a borrowing account is less convincing, since the semantic domain is too close to core everyday vocabulary, for which Chinese already possessed several native terms. If, however, *hútong* is treated as a more specialized urban term linked to the spatial and administrative conditions of Yuan Dadu, then borrowing becomes more plausible. The problem with the older Mongolian “well” hypothesis is precisely that it fails to explain why a supposedly basic spatial term would be replaced through borrowing. Lín’s revised account is more persuasive because it relocates the discussion from basic vocabulary to a narrower topographic and urban lexical field, where contact-induced transfer is easier to justify.

On balance, the three positions differ less in the quantity of evidence they mobilize than in the weight they assign to different kinds of evidence. Zhāng and Junast privilege contact-historical plausibility and semantic motivation; Wáng privileges documentary continuity and internal phonology; Lín is strongest where he exposes the weakness of the “well” hypothesis, but less complete in specifying the exact lexical relations within the broader Altaic semantic field he invokes. For that reason, the most convincing outcome of the debate at present may be negative rather than definitive: the old “well” derivation no longer appears sufficient, but neither has a single alternative account yet resolved all semantic, phonological, and documentary difficulties.

Finally, the prominence of *hútong* as an object of inquiry reflects its symbolic status within narratives of Beijing’s urban past. As such, the debate inevitably intersects with questions of cultural continuity, historical identity, and the interpretive frameworks brought to bear on linguistic evidence. Recognizing these dimensions does not diminish the scholarly value of the discussion; rather, it underscores the need for methodological transparency and for a clear articulation of explanatory standards. In this sense, the study of *hútong* exemplifies how historical linguistics operates at the intersection of language, history, and interpretation, and why seemingly narrow etymological questions can resonate far beyond the lexicon itself.

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