Making conversation one night, I asked Cai — Shanghai born and raised — to explain the city’s ward system. So she fetched a ceramic bowl from the cabinet, raised it head-height, and dropped it to the floor. Against the guarantees of the Japanese omni-mart that sold it to me, it shattered into dozens of pieces. She held one pastel-toned shard up to the kitchen’s track lighting. “This piece, was it created just now? Or maybe it always existed in the bowl? Maybe I just released it?” She raised an eyebrow ever so meaningfully and I stared back, dumbfounded. I only had three bowls now. “That’s the thing no one can agree on.”

I think about that a lot. I’m thinking about it now, pinch-zooming my phone as I follow Tethi into the back. During the messiest days of ward formation, after Xia resigned but before Blue Delta got a handle on things, some of the most contentious blocks in Shanghai were at the boundaries of three wards. Claiming one of these triple points was a surefire way to goad your neighbors into alliance against you, and they went unclaimed for years. But not totally, not quite. Years later, most of them are still occupied by Chalkers, appearing in hatched grey on the ward map. And sure enough, there’s a triple point near Old New Prosperity, at the sharp bend of a stinking canal, no more than six blocks away.