

# Living heritage: vernacular architecture in China

Knapp, Ronald G. and Kai-Yin Lo, eds. 2005. *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. xxi + 453pp. ISBN 0 8248 2953 0

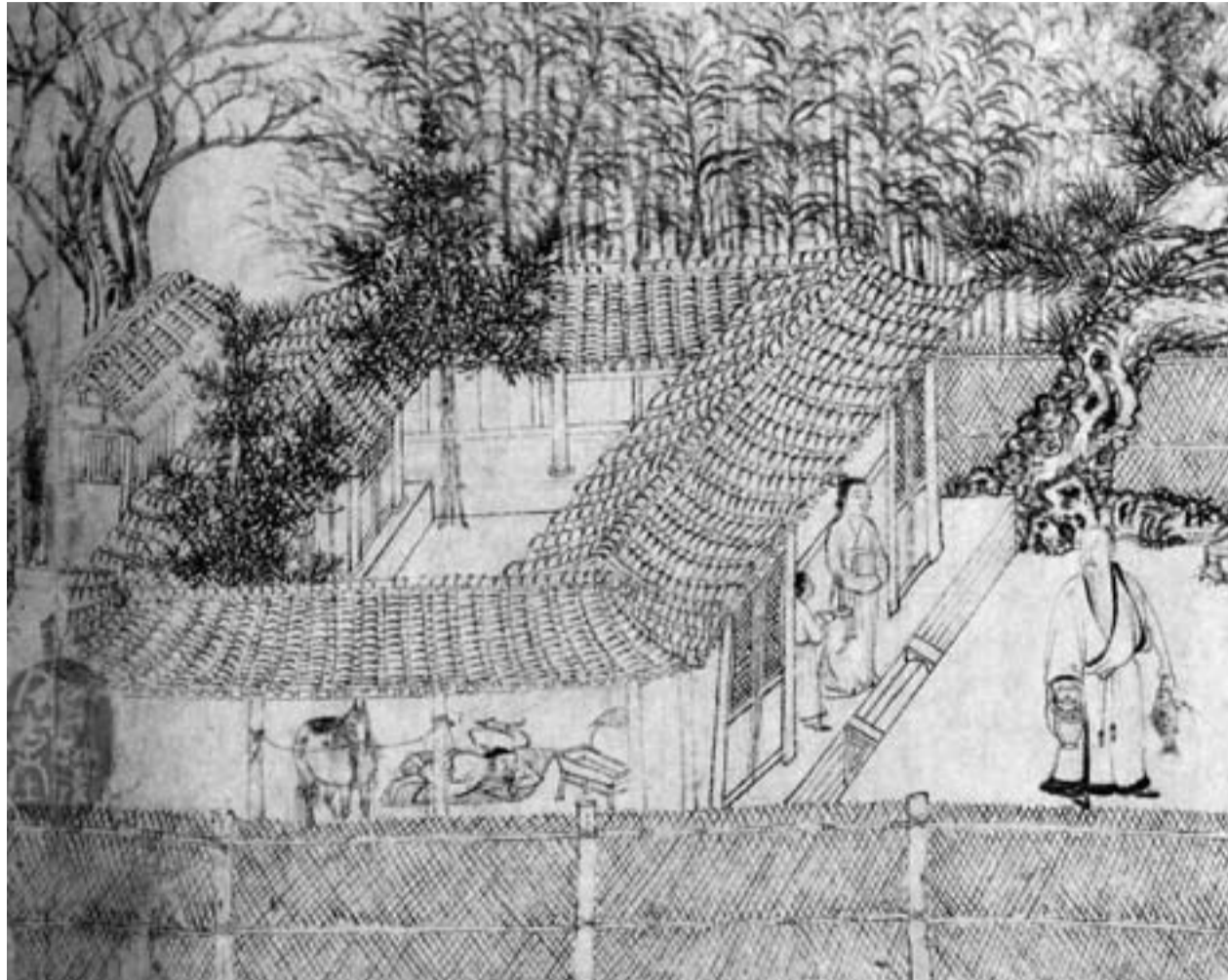
Marcel Vellinga

The vernacular architecture of China is characterised by a striking consonance among built forms. Although significant geographical variations reflect the country's rich ethnic diversity, a number of architectural, spatial and cultural elements are shared by many, if not most, traditional Chinese houses, royal palaces, town dwellings and farmhouses alike. These include, for example, the use of modular units (*jian*); the complementary creation of closed and open spaces (courtyards); and the ritual importance of the location and orientation of buildings. Evidence from archaeological excavations and classical texts suggests that these elements are not just geographically widespread but deeply rooted in history and relate closely to Chinese notions of 'family' and 'home'. Sadly, just when interest in and understanding of the intimate relationship between Chinese architecture, social organization and cultural values is growing, the built heritage concerned is in serious decline owing to the rapid economic and cultural development of recent decades.

The close relationship between the Chinese house and notions of family and home is the focus of *House, Home, Family: Living and Being Chinese*. The book is the outcome of a symposium organised by the China Institute in New York in 2001, which complemented the exhibition *Living Heritage: Vernacular Environment in China*. In the preface, the editors state their main aim is to enhance the understanding and appreciation of China's vernacular built heritage. Such understanding and appreciation, they hope, will contribute to a greater awareness of the need to study and conserve the buildings and environments concerned. Focusing on the close inter-relationship between aspects that so far have been dealt with mainly in isolation (eg, houses, gardens, furniture, family relations), the book definitely meets its first aim. One can only hope that a greater awareness of China's rich vernacular heritage will follow.

## A neglected heritage

Given its rich diversity (comprising traditions as varied as hierarchically organised courtyard houses, massive



Painting of compact rural dwelling, Northern Song Dynasty, 1123

Taken from the book under review. Used with the permission of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. (Purchase F80-5) Photo credit: Robert Newcombe"

multi-storied fortresses, cave dwellings and transportable tents), it is remarkable that this heritage didn't attract serious academic interest until the 1980s. Before that, only a small number of Chinese scholars expressed interest in the vernacular; most, such as Liu Dunzhen and Liang Sicheng, had to work in difficult political circumstances, but it was their work during the 1950s that provided the first glimpse of building types previously unknown or believed to have been lost. Over the past two decades, this glimpse has expanded into an ever more comprehensive and detailed picture, as an avalanche of work published by a growing number of American, Chinese and European scholars has significantly increased our knowledge of vernacular architecture in China.

Many of these studies, both Chinese and foreign, have focused on houses only as objects – physical structures that may be of academic interest simply for

their distinctive forms, use of resources or spatial organisation. However, as noted by several of the book's contributors, houses are more than just physical structures and in all societies relate closely to social groups and cultural identities. Gender relations, age rankings, economic status, cultural beliefs and values are all embodied in such aspects as construction materials, spatial layout, internal and external orientation, furnishings and building forms. In order to understand this intimate and dynamic relationship between architecture and people (exemplified in China by the character *jia* [家], which refers simultaneously to notions of 'house', 'family' and 'home'), it is necessary to look beyond the physical building at the many ways in which the house is dialectically linked to the family. By combining chapters on aspects of Chinese houses and families such as spatial patterns, gardens, construction rituals, furniture, lineage structures, gender

relations, ancestral halls and domestic rituals, and studying each from a variety of disciplinary perspectives (including architecture, art history, anthropology and cultural geography), this is exactly what *House, Home, Family* does.

## Long on architecture but short on what it reflects

The book is divided into two parts. Part one focuses on the house as a building and devotes chapters to different architectural aspects of Chinese houses, such as spatial division, architectural aesthetics and the function of building rituals. Themes not commonly included in studies of vernacular architecture, such as the relationship between a house and its garden or the positioning of furniture within it, provide an insightful overview of the nature of Chinese vernacular traditions and some of the cultural values underlying it. Part two focuses on the concepts of home and family and indicates how social and cultural aspects

such as gender, economy, family type, residence patterns and ancestor worship closely and dynamically relate to the house as a building. In combination with part one, it presents a fascinating overview of the way in which vernacular buildings, through their layout, furniture and decoration, embody aspects of Chinese culture.

Because of its integrated coverage of elements such as spatial layout, gardens, decoration, furniture and construction rituals, *House, Home, Family* is a must for all those interested in either the study of vernacular architecture or Chinese cultural history. However, it does not sufficiently address China's vast ethnic diversity and its reflection in architecture and spatial patterns. As Ronald Knapp notes (page 4), the 'Chinese' referred to in the title and throughout the book should be read as 'Han', the majority ethnic group that represents 92% of the country's total population but is in itself extremely differentiated. To what extent the architectural and spatial patterns and features identified in the book also hold for other minority ethnic groups like the Mongol, Hui or Uyghur, Knapp adds, remains to be researched.

Nonetheless, more than any other book on the subject, *House, Home, Family* goes a long way to providing an initial understanding of the intimate, complex and dynamic ways in which people and vernacular architecture in much of China relate to one another. Such an understanding is especially valuable today, when rapid modernisation threatens to erase China's vernacular heritage in favour of new forms of architecture inspired by western or global precedents. In view of the many social, economic and ecological problems that this rapid development entails, it would seem that China's varied vernacular traditions, as a 'living heritage', still have a lot to contribute to the development of architecture that is both culturally and environmentally appropriate and sustainable. <

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Courtyard house (siheyuan) in Chuandixia. Photograph by Ronald G. Knapp 2001.



Fortress house in Xinyou village, Longman county, Jiangxi province. Photograph by Ronald G. Knapp 1993.