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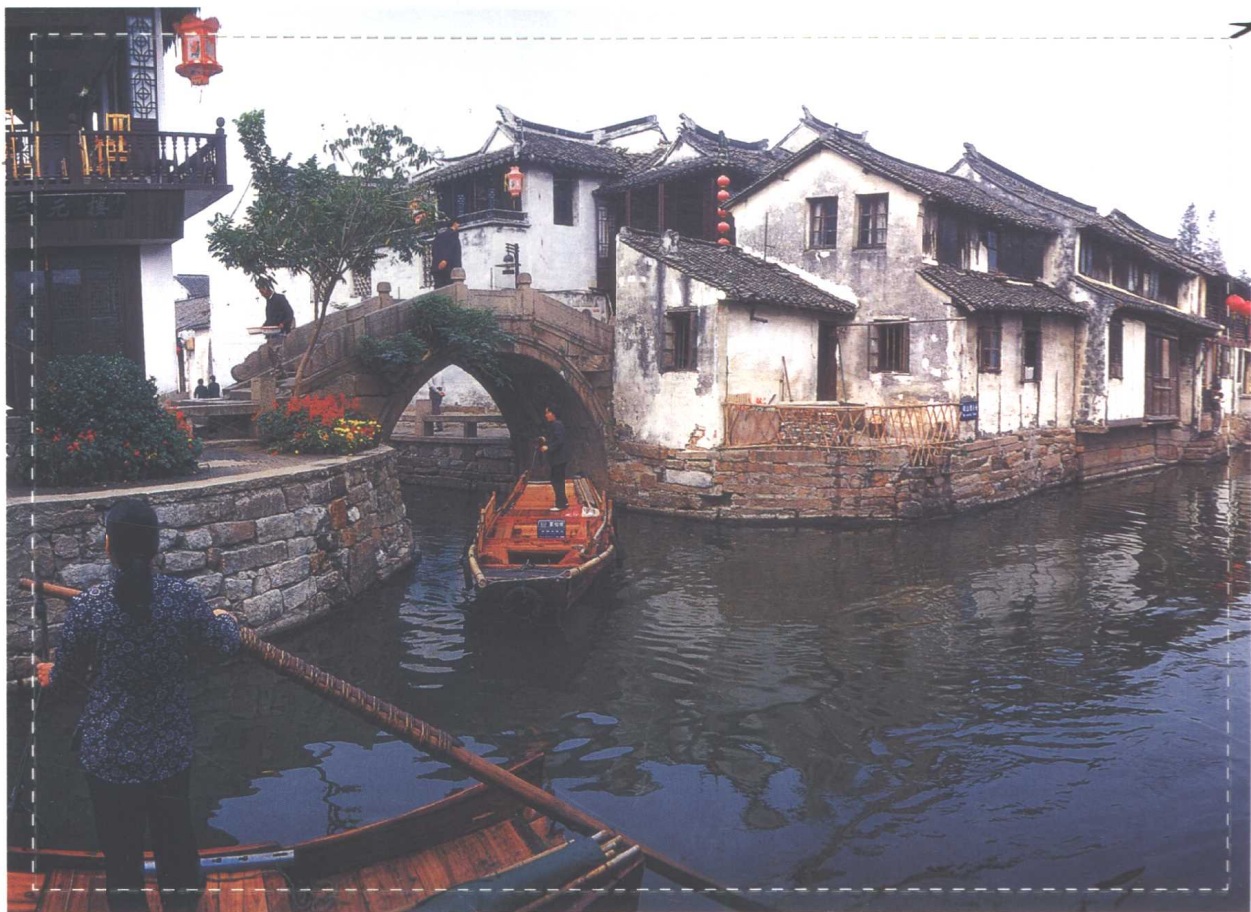
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An aerial, high-angle view of a traditional Chinese city, likely Beijing, showing a dense grid of courtyards and buildings. The architecture is characterized by traditional tiled roofs and courtyards. The image is rendered in a light, almost monochromatic style with subtle color washes, giving it a historical and artistic feel. The title 'Traditional Chinese Residences' is overlaid in a large, bold, reddish-brown font across the middle of the image.

Traditional Chinese Residences

By Wang Qijun

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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A Survey of Traditional Chinese Residences

In prehistoric times, dwellings were crude, and tended to be similar in design the world over; they differed only in the availability of local building materials and the topography they had to adapt to.

As the techniques of production improved, the styles of clothing, cuisine, transportation, etc. of different peoples gradually took on their own national colors and cultural characteristics. The same was true for the shelters that people built to dwell in, and a wide diversity of styles formed all over the world. Chinese residences, in particular, occupy a unique place in the history of world architecture.

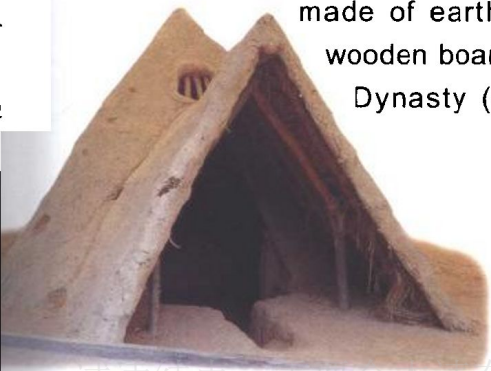
The Development of Traditional Chinese Residences

In the remote past people lived in caves, and under trees and crags. Six to seven thousand years ago, when the matriarchal society was in its prime, large houses were built to accommodate all the members of a clan. Archaeologists have discovered several thousand relics of residential buildings of that period, which can be divided into northern and southern types.

The northern type, represented by the building relics of the Yangshao culture, features semi-underground, shallow caves with cone-shaped or reversed V-shaped roofs made of wood and straw, or underground caves.

The southern type, represented by the building relics of the Hemudu culture, features wooden or bamboo houses built on stilts.

In the Shang Dynasty, over three millennia ago, according to records inscribed on bones and tortoise shells, the walls of buildings were made of earth compressed between wooden boards. In the Western Zhou Dynasty (c. 1100-771 B.C.), the



The typical semi-underground dwelling of a family during the period of patriarchal society 5,000 years ago was built with earth and wood, with a fire pit in the center. The small window in the roof lets in light, ventilates the dwelling, and lets out smoke from the cooking fire. The dwelling in the picture is a reconstruction made by modern scholars.



The caves found near Yangshao Village in Mianchi County, Henan Province, are the earliest dwellings of the Yangshao Culture (5,000 to 7,000 years ago) known so far. The primitive people dug these calabash-shaped caves in the ground with stone tools. They were entered from the surface. Erosion over centuries has revealed the longitudinal sections of the caves.



earthen walls of some buildings were covered with bricks on the outside. Imperial palaces, ancestral temples of the imperial family and aristocrats' homes were roofed with plate or semicircular-shaped tiles, marking important progress in ancient Chinese architecture. The earliest courtyard houses known so far also came into being in that period. Remains of pottery drainpipes have been found in ruins of buildings dating from Western Zhou.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (772-221 BC), residential buildings and palaces already had arches over gateways and double-eaved roofs. Some windows were decorated with crossed latticework. The floor inside a house of that time was separated from the ground outside by a wide space. One took off one's shoes before entering a house, and sat on the floor. The buildings of the Warring States Period are marked by decorative roof tiles featuring a mythical beast called *taotie*, and swirl and cloud patterns in relief.

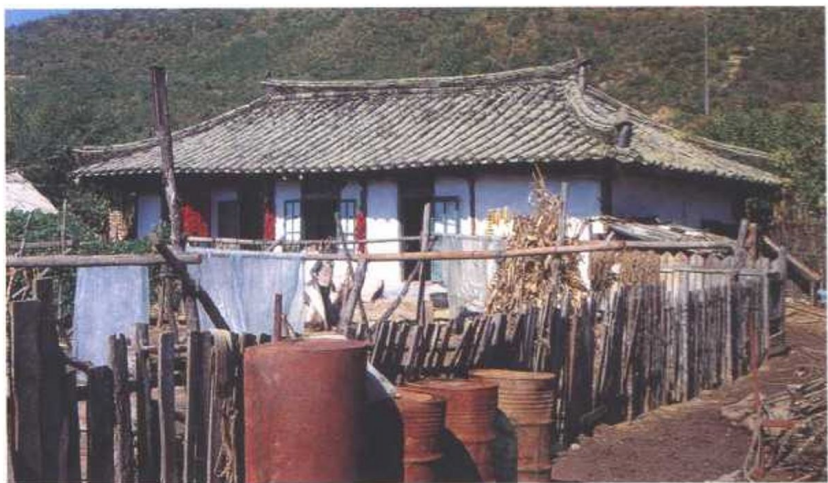


The ancient city of Jiabei in the Turpan Depression, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, remains as it was in the Tang Dynasty. The picture shows the ruins of residences around a large courtyard.



Multi-storied buildings were in fashion during the Han Dynasty which are far different from the residences of later ages. As the wooden frame technique had matured, and wood materials were easy to acquire, people of that time built many multi-storied buildings. The picture shows a funeral object in the shape of a model building in the collection of the Suzhou Museum in Jiangsu Province. It has low eaves and a roofed courtyard.

Geomancy, known in Chinese as *fengshui*, took shape in China during the Qin and Han dynasties (221 BC-AD 220). Based on the theories of *qi* (vital energy), *yin-yang* (opposite forces) and the five elements (earth, air, fire, wood and water), and using the Eight Diagrams of the *Book of Changes* as a means of divination, geomancers would choose what was considered the ideal place to situate a building.



Korean dwelling houses maintain the general characteristics of Tang Dynasty residences. The picture shows a Korean house in Longjing County in the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, Jilin Province.

In the Han Dynasty, especially the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24), the most common type of residential building consisted of one hall and two bedrooms. A "bedroom" was about 11 square meters, and a "hall" was twice the size of a bedroom. The layout of such a house, together with its yard, was a square.

Quite different from the northern residential buildings of later years, storied buildings were in vogue during the Han Dynasty. Some manor houses of that time included a watchtower, which contained a drum to be beaten in case of danger.

It was not until the period of the Five Dynasties (907-960) that ordinary Chinese people gradually stopped sitting on the floor, and adopted chairs and other forms of furniture for their houses. Basically, all types of furniture used in later ages could be found in that period.

The rulers of the Tang Dynasty (618-907) introduced the community-precinct system into their cities. A precinct was a group of residential buildings surrounded by walls on the four sides.

Outside the walls were streets. A large precinct had a gate in each wall, while smaller ones only had gates in the east and west walls.

Each residential building in a community or precinct was also surrounded by high walls. So a residential building was protected by at least three walls: the city wall, the precinct wall and the courtyard wall. Within the courtyard wall were more yards and walls, and one had to pass the outer gate, middle gate, hall, etc., before reaching the bedrooms. This system was abolished during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

Ancient Chinese residential buildings followed a strict hierarchical system. According to the *History of the Song Dynasty*, "The home of a prince in office is called *fu*, that of an official is called *zhai*, and that of a commoner is called *jia*." Specific stipulations were given on the size and form of the dwellings at each hierarchical level.

In the Song Dynasty (960-1279), the entrance to the house of an aristocrat or high official often had three bays, through the middle one of which carriages and horses could pass. Rooms were built along the sides of the courtyard in place of the Tang-dynasty porches, enlarging the living space. The layout of aristocrats' residences followed the Han Dynasty tradition of "hall at the front and bedrooms at the rear." The hall and bedrooms were connected by corridors. The accumulation of furnishings made houses higher and narrower.

Song Dynasty buildings had the distinct architectural characteristics known as *juzhe* (raising and depression), *shengqi* (rise) and *cejiao* (batter). As a straight gable roof would look dull, *juzhe* was to give the pitched roof a concave curvature, and *shengqi* was to keep the ridge and eave of the central bay level, while creating a graceful curvature of the eave line and roof ridge toward the corners of the building. *Cejiao* was to slant the columns of a building towards the center.

Drawing lines linking the columns at the upper and lower ends respectively, one could see that all the columns lean towards the central point. Such a building looks narrower toward the top. Folk buildings with the above characteristics were more stable, and looked more elegant in general.

Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) residences were much larger than those of the previous ages. As the patriarchal clan system was prevalent at this time, there were many large families of three or four generations, and all disputes within the clan were settled in the clan hall. Many examples of Ming residences still exist today, some of them very large in scale. In that period, with the development of brick making, brick residences took up a larger proportion than before. Although there were still many timber structures, the wooden columns were enclosed in brick walls. This brought about a change in the exterior of ordinary residences: Elevations emphasized the beauty of brick structures instead of wooden structures.

Although the Ming Dynasty followed the traditional hierarchical system of residences, many high officials, rich merchants and landlords ignored it. According to records, some of them had houses containing up to 1,000 rooms and splendid gardens, and covering an area of several square kilometers. The extant Ming residences, such as that of Lu, a bureaucrat-landlord, in Dongyang, Zhejiang Province, after management of

several generations, were large, majestic and splendidly decorated complexes. The extant Ming residences in Shexian and Yixian counties of Anhui Province are famous for their gorgeous decorations far exceeding the relevant provisions for residences in the *History of the Ming Dynasty*.

The earliest apartment buildings known so far are also from the Ming Dynasty. The oval-shaped Qiyun Building in Shangping Village, Hua'an County, Fujian Province, was built in the 18th year of the reign of Emperor Wanli (1590). The round Shengping Building with enclosing granite walls, located in the same area, was built in the 29th year of the reign of Wanli (1601). They both have a main courtyard in the center, and 20-odd apartments, each with its own kitchen, small courtyard, hall, bedrooms, drawing room and staircase. According to the clan records, the history of the Qiyun Building can be traced back to the fourth year of the reign of Emperor Hongwu (1371). In other words, China had apartment buildings as early as 600 years ago.

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) saw a great development in building techniques, such as earth ramming, glazing, carpentry and brick arch building. However, there was no breakthrough or innovation in the architectural form of ordinary residences. From the middle of the Ming Dynasty to the Opium War in 1840, the commodity economy grew, and the class



Qing Dynasty residences are found in large numbers throughout China. The picture shows the gorgeously decorated interior of the Qing Dynasty, Chenqizai Hall, in Hongqun Village, Yixian County, Anhui Province.

of merchants grew wealthier. The latter pursued affluence and artistic beauty, which is reflected in the sometimes excessive stress on decoration in their homes.



In the history of Chinese residences, many innovations were made in the wooden framework and shapes of houses during the Song, Jin and Yuan dynasties. The crescent beam, broken threshold of the entrance house, asymmetrical connection of roof trusses, layouts formed with verandas, and so on, brought about variety to architectural styles. However, the forms of wooden frameworks of folk residences in the Ming and Qing dynasties tended to be more simple and fixed. In the Central Plains, many residences built in those dynasties, lacking the gentle curvature of the roof line, display a more serious, restrained and solemn style. During the reigns of the Qing emperors Kangxi and Yongzheng, in particular, expensive houses were fully decorated with carvings, from architraves to gate piers. The gables were decorated with fine, intricate carvings, and the verandas had walls of polished brick at both ends. In southern areas, fire-blocking gables in various shapes gave an effect of luxury and elegance. And in northern areas, the inner gates in traditional



In Zhangzhou Prefecture, Fujian Province, round earthen buildings occur in peculiar shapes. The Eryi Building, over 200 years old, has a common round shape but ingenious interior design. This is a bird's-eye view of the building from the top of a nearby hill.

compound houses were painted in rich colors. Although the carvings and other decorations are sometimes criticized as over-elaborate, Qing dwellings display far more advanced architectural techniques than those of previous ages. A lot of examples of Qing Dynasty residences still remain, some of them perfectly preserved.

From pre-Qin times to the beginning of the 20th century, the basic features of Chinese buildings remained the same, in spite of changes in architectural styles in different dynasties and areas. A wooden framework was the main part of the structure, and there was usually a group of single buildings.

The Artistic Features of Traditional Chinese Residences

Proper Layout: The Void Accompanied by the Solid

Just as in traditional Chinese painting, so in traditional Chinese buildings—spacing is one of the most important principles. Standing on a stone arch bridge in a small town south of the Yangtze River, one can see the spacing principle in the layout of the dense roofs and white walls.

As a saying goes, "Density to the point of impermeableness, and emptiness to the point of allowing horses to gallop through."

It is the beauty of contrast. Density and emptiness should be arranged properly. In addition, the roofs of traditional buildings are arranged unevenly to avoid monotonousness, and the rhythmic undulation of the roof is often reflected in the walls. This "void accompanied by solid" principle holds a unique place in the history of architectural aesthetics. Large, solid walls, like the white space in Chinese paintings, are decorated with eye-catching doors and windows. The rhythmic variance of the void and the solid gives to a residence a certain charming air of unaffectedness, tranquility and secludedness.



Residences along the Tuojiang River in Fenghuang (Phoenix) County, Hunan Province.

