



# CHINESE

ESSENTIALLY CHINESE

# HOUSE

波普客**POP**corn

Translated by Liu Jun



China Intercontinental Press

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(Kunyang Township, Zhejiang Province)



# Preface

We regard Chinese houses as a medium of social aesthetic values. Through recording and description, we seek after a visualized analytical system by revealing the hidden meaning of individual houses. How can we find the aesthetic values of Chinese houses? We believe that by representing matters as they are, we are interpreting them. Houses are the most obvious and handy objects of observation in our living space. A Chinese house embodies the culture and customs of the Chinese people, more importantly, it reflects the fundamental aesthetic views of the Chinese. What we did is to observe and present the images.

Among Chinese architectures, the most iconic one is perhaps the Tian'anmen Rostrum, followed by the Bird Nest that has recently become a national symbol, or the new building for CCTV designed by Rem Koolhaas. But how many people have closely observed the little-known common houses that abound in quantity in cities, counties, towns and villages? They can't provide news pegs; history hasn't bestowed the plain houses with any memorable events; nor can they offer any sparkling architectural concepts worthy of discussion. Compared with the famous landmarks, numerous ordinary houses have provided the space for most Chinese people's daily activities: living, doing business, enjoying leisure, working, studying, even paying homage to deities. ... These houses that are hard to describe and neglected by most people have formed the normal state of Chinese architecture.

China is experiencing waves of construction unseen for centuries or even millennia. From infrastructure construction with national investment to real estate business that affects the life of every Chinese, the topic of Chinese architecture covers a wide spectrum. Discussions over Chinese architecture have been heated, with most studies launched from the urban point of view. All the debates, experiments and earnest appeals have taken the city as the assumed target. But even inside the urban sphere, the explorations have been confined within official buildings and massive commercial structures. On the contrary, common Chinese houses have been ignored with their familiarity and plainness. We have been walking in cities and villages, taking photos of grassroots houses and trying to reveal their aesthetic values.

The most striking aesthetic feature of modern Chinese houses is "mixed" – this is a neutral comment. The mixed effect is seen in the multiple trends of Chinese houses: total negligence of architectural aesthetics or excessive decorations; obsession with the fengshui metaphors or amnesia of the Chinese tradition of harmony between man and nature; blind duplication of ancient Chinese styles or Western concepts. ... It is impossible to describe the aesthetic trends of Chinese houses with a simple definition. In China, houses feature "mixed styles in general and playful concoction of symbols and codes". The houses built by residents themselves often appear in comical forms. For instance, some houses in the urban suburbs of northern Zhejiang Province have adopted the pinnacles of European castles which, however, are mixed with four upturned eaves seen in traditional Chinese architectures. Such a mixture of style is not limited in the countryside. In a real estate project in Beijing where all the buildings are modernist in style, the front gate of the compound is a copy of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. No serious architectural theorist will tolerate such comic effects, but the unique Chinese social-economic structure has bred a distinctive social aesthetic consciousness that juxtaposes houses of mixed styles across the vast country.

The logic of diversity in Chinese houses does contradict the principle of universality, which led to the phenomenon that we call "harmony deficiency". Like flu, it has spread to all the cities and villages of the country. The first feature is the low level of basic standards. For example, a real estate project sold at more than 10,000

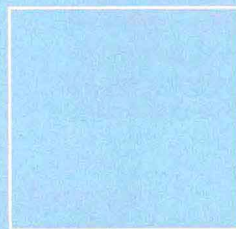
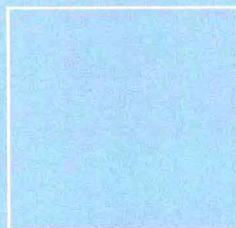
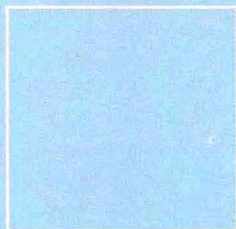
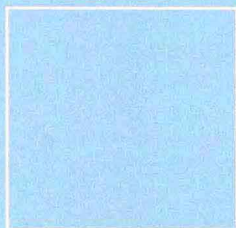
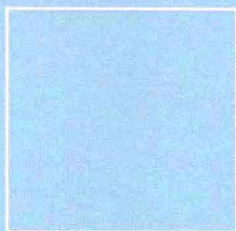


yuan per sq m might not even get the walls straight (this could be related with the mentality of the constructors who are put at the lowest level of social ladder). Then, the houses are confused in form: Aimed at an ideal combination of the cream of Chinese and Western architectures, a casual patchwork has come into being. It is common to see a house with one side of the exterior wall painted, but the other side left naked for years. The third feature is the disharmony between house and environment. Ancient Chinese paid great attention to the harmony between man and nature, but most common Chinese houses today show no concern for the comfort index and aesthetic pursuit on the surroundings. Several mops might be left on the front gate of an important building throughout the year; or piles of sand by the side of a high-end community are neglected by most residents and left untouched for years.

What has been influencing the appearance of Chinese houses? The most important influences are still the country's rich cultural heritages. The concept of heaven being positive and earth being negative, the traditional ethics and morals have determined Chinese people's concept about architecture and living. For example, most people still strongly believe that the front gate of a house should face the south. Meanwhile, regional elements also affect the structure and materials of building houses. Another important factor is the Western influence – replicas of foreign landmarks can be found across the country. Chinese have not digested the various Western styles that streamed into the country over a short period of time. But in the global structure where centers and borders do exist, it is not surprising that Chinese have changed from being confused with Western aesthetic values to accepting everything. In the country, designing and interior decoration of residential buildings are limited to the city; most people in the countryside build houses by themselves, which brings a taste of grassroots to these buildings. On the other hand, as most people follow the public opinion, their houses would look similar. A constructor from rural Anhui Province said that when people hire them to build houses, most would point at the neighbors' houses and ask for a duplicate. We were also surprised to find that the door lintels of houses in provinces faraway from each other look almost identical. Chinese houses are also influenced by the psychology of bragging the family's wealth and power. A villager in Henan Province built his house like an extravagant temple; people in Wenzhou of Zhejiang Province often build houses of four or five storeys, where most rooms remain empty for years; there's also the story of how a village modeled upon the White House. In addition, social elements also sway the mood of Chinese constructors. From the buildings of the former Soviet Union style to the tong zi lou dormitory buildings born in the welfare housing policy of the 1980s, and the apartment buildings by real estate developers that have mushroomed since the 1990s, the forms of these houses bear clear marks of the changes in national policies. As Chinese economy develops rapidly, a lot of houses are under construction. The unfinished buildings also form part of the landscape in the cities and the countryside.

However, there is still a crucial element that has profoundly influenced the aesthetics of Chinese houses – the special aesthetic attitude of modern Chinese. Despite the theories that say architecture is determined by production power and economic basis, we still find such theories inadequate in explaining the aesthetics of Chinese houses in contemporary China, especially at a period of economic take-off. Unlike prominent architectures, plain common Chinese houses feature marginal aesthetics formed with low technology and remnants of the psychology formed in the agricultural civilization. If we say that architecture is a mirror of its time, we believe that this is a unique historical period full of houses with mixed styles.







**PUBLIC SPACE**

**公共空间**



**B**uildings carry all kinds of tags for their identity. Besides the houses where people live, most buildings in cities and towns offer public space, some refined or extravagant, others simple or shabby, in which people work, live and entertain themselves. The buildings of varied roles, from different regions and times, all have their own structures and appearances. The common buildings, which few authors talk about, directly reflect a country's policies, economic level and the people's aesthetic values while accommodating the dynamic life of the modern Chinese society.

Governmental agencies are still seen as the most decent places to work, and many Chinese aspire to become a public servant. It is not difficult to detect a governmental office in China without reading the name plates outside the front gate. In many areas, governmental agencies occupy the grandest buildings. The buildings of major governmental organs are extravagant, displaying over-elaborate decorations that seem to be rather popular. In some areas with a more open mindset, Western architectural elements are very fashionable, with Romanesque columns propping up roofs and beams that can stand perfectly well on their own. An extreme example of this is the office building of a town government which was modeled upon the White House. With very good reasons, this building has been a target of public outcry. Economy, after all, sets most rules nowadays. The majority of governmental office buildings are still simple, if not reserved and common. In many township governments, one room suffices for multiple purposes, and the common people can walk into the front gate without going through complicated procedures. In remote mountainous areas, some governmental agencies run mobile offices. With two desks and a national emblem, a court is ready to handle cases. However shabby it may seem, such down-to-earth attitude has touched the hearts of millions.

Ever since factories with various funding sources mushroomed around State-owned enterprises (SOE's) some 30 years ago, the number of factories in China might have exceeded anywhere else in the world. From the Pearl River Delta in South China to the Yangtze River Delta in East China and the Bohai Bay Economic Area of North China, factories big and small can be seen around any street corner of the coastal region. The products that stream out of these factories have been shipped to all major ports of the world. The small commodities – cheap, handy and convenient for daily life – have formed a unique image of China and influence the world without catching much attention. The newly built factories look very different from traditional SOE's: They are designed with simple shapes and lighter materials, enabling an enterprising investor to finish construction and launch operation within the shortest time possible. Only a small percentage of Chinese products have established their brand names. Most factories are just operated anonymously day and night, turning out little-known products. In an economic atmosphere allowed to grow in just over a few decades, Chinese enterprises have not nurtured a mature cultural environment. The design language of factories has yet to extend to architectural aesthetics, with most factories still bent on practical needs.

To survive and strive for a better life, common Chinese spend most of their time and energy working, and the means of recreation are numbered. Playing poker and mahjong are the most common pastimes, while going out for a movie or a performance is almost forgotten. Upon traditional festivals, rural operatic troupes would stage puppet shows or some folk operas in the theaters of towns or townships, which otherwise remain empty and quiet. But the audience is comprised mainly of the elderly, as the young have left for cities. As for movie theaters, they once enjoyed much glory in the 1980s and 90s. In the golden era of collective entertainment, the movie theater was the de facto town center, commanding a status comparable to that of the church in small European cities. But as one after another video room opened, followed by "home theater" championed by VCD and DVD, the audience has been declining irrevocably in movie theaters. Many towns and cities have torn down their cinemas or given them other functions. The cinemas that have survived all have a ragged, lonesome appearance. But movie theaters can still be a convenient and even wonderful spot of rendezvous for young lovers. More importantly, nothing can replace the feeling of sitting in darkness, sharing the sadness and joy of



fictional characters with perfect strangers next seat.

Department stores have replaced movie theaters to become the town center. The oldest shopping area in any town or city is often called *Baihuo Dalou* – Grand Building of 100 Commodities. Such old-fashioned stores have been replaced by trendy shopping malls or commercial streets, which are the throbbing heart of a modern city. However, to catch a glimpse of the residents' real life, one can visit the vegetable market. Whether in small towns or cosmopolis, such markets are surprisingly similar. The stalls line up in rows, with inadequate lighting throughout the year, but attracting customers who display the same eagerness in bargaining over a dazzling array of vegetables, fruits and others. Many housewives would drag small carts or carry a basket to the market. Wandering among the stalls displaying the season's freshest crops or meat, a housewife would carefully select the materials for nutritional meals of the day. Without spending too much, she can get both green leaves and tender pork. A Chinese housewife's ability to cook wonderful meal with limited cash can be amazing and admirable. Many Chinese would follow the same route on their daily shopping rounds. Perhaps very few people really care about the building of the market. Without care, these buildings are invariably dusty and gray, or simply hidden behind billboards and various ads.

Compared with shopping malls, shops in counties and towns are less flaring but more amiable. Residents may turn a small part of their apartment that faces the street into a small shop which sells daily necessities like vinegar and soy sauce. Such shops may function as a mini community center, as neighbors lounge about on chairs provided by the shop owner, exchanging latest news in town. Such unobtrusive shops that scatter everywhere have provided much convenience to the neighborhood.

For students, the most important public building is their school. The classroom and the playground are where they spend most of the day. For most Chinese children born in an average family, studying remains the only channel to change their fate. If a teenager succeeded in the examinations to enter a prestigious senior middle school or a university, he or she will definitely be regarded as a model by anxious parents in the community. An old tale goes that a diligent young man hung his hair on the beam and thrust an awl at his leg to keep himself awake while reading deep into the night. Such stories have remained popular in the nation as the pressure of the huge population forces people to strive hard for any chances. For those who have succeeded, donating for public education always wins applauses. Many middle schools and universities would name a building or a laboratory with the name of the generous philanthropist. Architectures will remain standing for many years in normal times, thus it's wise to turn cash with undulating value into something tangible. The Hope Project has gained numerous people's support. Some donate money, others volunteer as teachers, they've all joined in the surging torrent of sending warmth to underprivileged children. Dilapidated rural schools may lag behind luxurious private schools in many ways, but the sound of children's chanting is equally soul-touching, symbolizing the hopes of a family and an entire nation.

Temples can be seen in most villages and cities. It's interesting that most of the religious buildings carry similar traditional styles: symmetrical layout, roof covered with glazed tiles, walls painted with stories of deities or ghosts. It's safe to say that temples are the best means to carry on the ancient Chinese architectural tradition. In the mountains or around urban street corners, the small temples for various gods have attracted faithful followers who bring offerings to gain blessing for various wishes. But most people don't really follow strict religious doctrines. Many even cannot distinguish the various deities. For them, the God of Stove or the God of the City are gods who may help them fulfill certain wishes.

The various common public buildings that are either thronged with people or resound with sparrows' chirping are not unique in their structure, shape or decoration. But each detail is imprinted with modern Chinese people's aesthetic options and embodies a repertoire of folk tales.









The gate decorated with eaves tile originated from traditional Chinese buildings. The gray tone and symmetry bring a solemn air to the gate. The grand crimson front gate is seldom opened. Most people use the small gate at the corner. *(Beijing)*





< **Left:** This office building of a local government is influenced by the former Soviet Union. Without much decoration, it is designed to serve practical functions. (*Shenyang, Liaoning Province*)

> **Right:** The traditional *siheyuan* courtyard has been turned into a neighborhood public security station. The universal blue for public security system is painted on the unique folk decorations. (*Beijing*)





公安

POLICE

北京市公安局  
东城分局

交道口派出所

POLICE SUBSTATION

16 厂胡同  
7





延庆县  
张山镇  
北京市  
延庆县  
张山镇人民  
代表大会



< **Left:** In the courtyard of a governmental office, the rockery represents a popular aesthetic trend that came into being decades ago. Such artificial rocky mountains are seen everywhere. The national emblem, national flag and name plate state the building's nature clearly.  
(Yanqing District, Beijing)



> **Upper right:** For a town government, the office building featuring solemn symmetry with a spacious front square is indeed grandiose.  
(Zhongshan, Guangdong Province)



> **Middle right:** This township government looks almost identical with local residential buildings. It has followed the principle of simplicity without leaving room for redundancy.  
(Suixi County, Guangdong Province)



> **Lower right:** The village committee has been rebuilt out of debris after the devastating earthquake that struck Sichuan and other areas of Southwest China in May 2008. The makeshift office is simple in material, but the name board solemnly announces the presence of the village's power center.  
(Shifang, Sichuan Province)