
Andus Emge
Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Köln


This small, but well-produced book corresponds in format to P.Gibbs’s Building a Malay House from the same publisher, in a series intended to provide introductions for a non-specialist readership. As such, its scope is evidently limited, and for the purposes of this review should be considered for what it can offer the student. The author has written at greater length for the University of Hawaii on various aspects of Chinese rural architecture, besides studies of the Taiwanese variations, so the present format can be assumed to the publisher’s concept. One may ask whether it makes sense to describe rural dwellings in isolation. To the reviewer it seems that there should have been at least a minimal discussion of the interaction with the great urban tradition which was so early in evidence.

Of the four chapters, the first is headed “The north and the south”, the second “Craft: techniques and materials”, the third “Symbol and tradition”, and the last “Trends in contemporary China”. Chapter 1 makes use of the contrast between building types in north and south to demonstrate differences in response to local climatic conditions. In China this contrast reflects, of course, an historical difference too, in that Han culture originated in the Huanghe valley in the north, and the cultures of the Yangzi River basin were not strongly influenced by the north until the supremacy of the Han dynasty (206 B.C. - A.D. 220). These differences are summarised in the introduction, with reference to the emergence from pit dwellings in the north, compared to the evidence, already by 7000 B.C., for pile construction and elaborate timber jointing in the south. Rather tantalisingly, the author can only refer fleetingly to the more remarkable local developments, such as the circular, multi-storied complexes of Fujian and Guangdong in the southeast. He draws attention to the constant factors in China’s climate, the solar exposure and summer wind, which have led to the common east-west orientation of the ridged roof. The basic elements of the northern house are clearly explained with the help of drawings, and an excursus deals with cliff dwellings and pit-courtyard
houses, though here the important factor of the earth as heat reservoir is not explained. Formally, one would like to know how the vault came to be used only in these contexts, other than in early subterranean grave complexes. The social element in planning, though alluded to, is neglected. The preference of an eastern position for the elder generation, for instance, or the precise nature of hierarchical order, and the extent to which it is influenced by marriage practice are surely as relevant as the physical conditions, and interact with them; the social reasons for the seclusion of walled courtyards also need exploration here (both these are touched on again in ch.3, but hardly elaborated: only the lack of primogeniture is cited as a potential cause of conflict and thus a reason for the relative infrequency of joint households). For southern houses, the importance of greater room depth, thicker walls, smaller windows, whitewash, verandahs and overhanging eaves as defences against radiation, with ventilation as a means of ameliorating humid conditions in summer, are well set out. Surprisingly, though, the window grills that are one of the glories of Chinese building are scarcely mentioned. Some space is given here to local variations, and the effect of social class. The difficult question of interaction between northern and southern styles is underlined by the existence of Han dynasty models, one of which is illustrated here, showing a fully-developed northern house in a southeastern context. This is not really taken up; nor is the question of why the piled dwelling was replaced here, when it became so widespread in Southeast Asia.

In the following chapter on structure, after having described the fundamental modular system based on posts, Knapp introduces the distinction between systems with load-bearing walls, and those where the walls are separated from a load-bearing frame. A short discussion of the reasons for this separation is helpful here, especially when it extends beyond China’s borders to the Himalayas: it is clear that flexibility of interior space is not the only advantage. It is probably intended to resist earthquake damage, the integrity of the relatively elastic frame being maintained, as well as the unbroken bonding of the wall running past the uprights. It appears to be connected with the idea that a massive roof frame adds to stability. The basic techniques of rammed earth and adobe construction are well described, though the role of baked brick, historically and geographically, is not as fully explored as it should be. The exposition of the two types of roof frame makes it clear that the southern system, in which the purlins rest directly on pillars, and the tie beams are secondary, must be derived from the earlier pile structures, though this is not mentioned, even if the possibility that the alternative, northern, pillar and beam system is a response to timber shortage. The advantages offered by the greater roof height connected with increased room depth in the south are pointed out. One wonders whether the lack of interest in this in the north was wholly due to the need to trap the winter sun on the rear wall, or whether there was less socio-economic pressure to build upwards. A final section is devoted to the impressive roof profiles, though here, surprisingly, the varieties are not adequately illustrated. It seems that the curvilinear form prevalent in the south can be associated with the Southeast Asian complex.

Chapter 3 is mainly concerned with Fengshui, the system of divination-cum-geomancy which underlies most Chinese planning, even in modern office blocks. Knapp succinctly refers to both the cosmological and topographical aspects of the procedures involved, giving some generalised examples, and conveying something of the, to the Westerner, curious blend of psychology, magic, physical response, and common sense in natural observation. The concept of qi as a life force pervading the building clearly has a parallel with semangat in Southeast Asia; whilst the gender associations of yin and yang seem to carry with them social implications. Exploration of both themes promises to be rewarding. The system is undoubtedly metaphorical,
but one may ask whether it is really symbolic, or rather in a Western sense, scientific, that is concerned with measurable findings and effects in the practical world, even if the terms in which it is couched are unfamiliar. Further space is devoted to parallel methods for securing the most auspicious circumstances for the house: the timing of building with the help of almanacs, and examples of other practices which clearly involve sympathetic magic or word play. In these the ridge is again given particular attention in the south. The author also refers to the dubious practices by which craftsmen seek to affect the fortunes of the household for good or ill, at greater length to the use of pictograms to bring fortune, and finally to apotropaic devices.

A last, short chapter is given to modern developments, with comments on building programmes, standards of construction, changes of material due to shortages or economy, and deterioration in building skills. Less expectedly, it mentions the misuse of agricultural land for brick and tile production. Most significantly, it refers to the increasing nuclearisation of the Chinese family, and the departure from the former five-generational ideal. Nevertheless, in a wry comment on traditionalism, Knapp reproduces an award-winning design of 1981 which is scarcely distinguishable from the Han model shown at the beginning of his book.

In view of the scale of the subject, the work is all too short. As a result rather too few questions are asked, especially those in a broader context: why is it, for instance, that the modular system was developed so much less than in Japan? There is, certainly, enough to arouse the interest of the reader, and the book is easily written so as to lead one on, but to function properly as a spur to further study it should have been provided with a full array of notes so that the student could follow up any point of interest. As it stands, there are no notes, and the bibliography of 21 sources is undoubtedly much shorter than the author could have furnished. The black and white illustrations are placed in the text where they relate directly to the subject matter, but the colour plates, though in corresponding sequence, are not referred to at all, so one’s use of them is arbitrary.

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Der Band enthält Beiträge, hervorgegangen aus Vorträgen, die 1989 während eines Symposiums zur Religionsethnologie am Institut für Ethnologie und Afrika-Studien der Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität Mainz gehalten wurden.