

Ronald G. Knapp 那仲良: A Pioneer in Introducing Chinese Traditional Vernacular Dwelling Culture to the World

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In the early stages of research and investigation into Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings, scholars conducted some sporadic surveys. Liu Dunzhen, in his 1941 publication 'Overview of Surveys on Ancient Architecture in Southwest China,' was the first to propose vernacular dwellings as an independent architectural type. In 1956, Liu Dunzhen published *An Introduction to Chinese Residences*. The earliest books on provincial vernacular dwellings in China were published between 1960 and 1962.

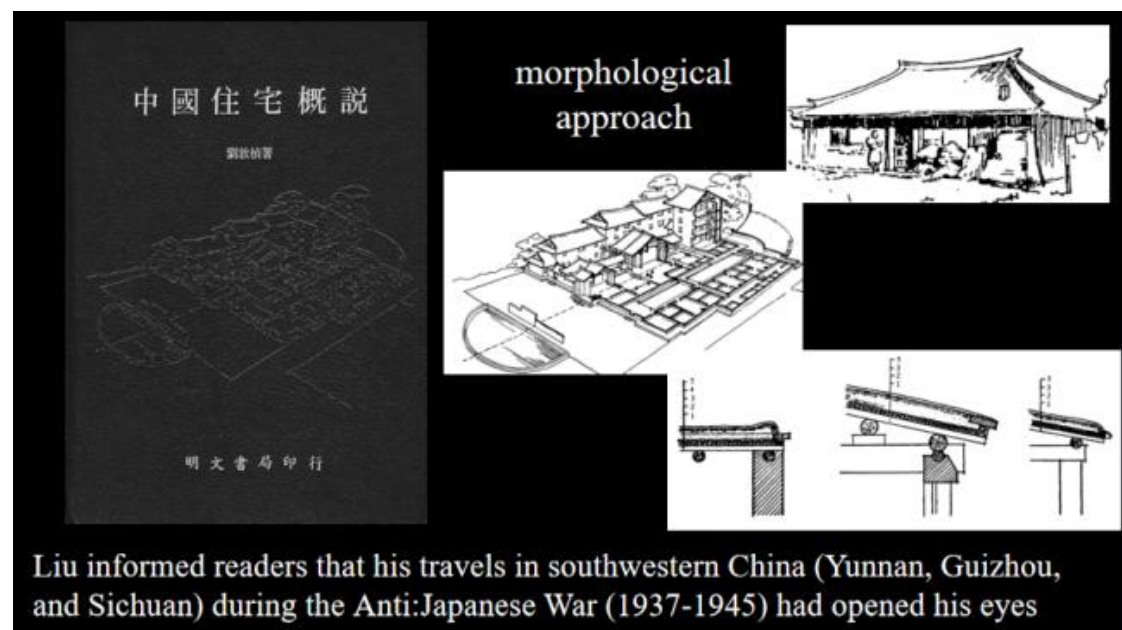


Figure 1. This is *An Outline of Chinese Residences*, a book by Liu Dunzhen, a professor in the Department of Architecture at Southeast University. Liu Dunzhen studied in Japan in his early years and received Western architectural education. Published in the 1950s, this book is one of the earliest works on traditional Chinese folk architecture.

Liang Sicheng, in his *History of Chinese Architecture* completed in 1944, categorized vernacular dwellings into four major types: those of North China and Northeast China, cave dwellings in Shanxi, Henan, and Northern Shaanxi, those of the Jiangnan region, and those of Yunnan.

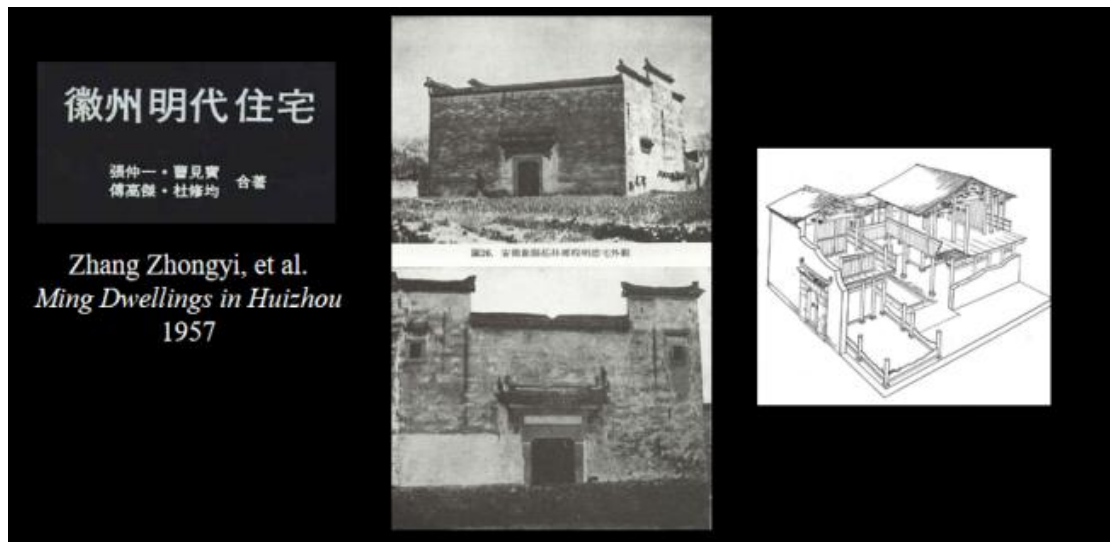


Figure 2. This is the book *Houses in Huizhou of the Ming Dynasty* published in 1957 by Zhang Zhongyi. Not many houses from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) have been preserved in China. This is one of the early works by scholars studying traditional Chinese dwellings.

The manuscript of *Zhejiang Vernacular Dwellings* was compiled in 1963 by the Research Office of Architectural Theory and History under the former Architectural Science Research Institute. This book was officially published in September 1984, making the survey results from the 1960s publicly available for the first time. Academic research on Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings was interrupted during the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution; due to the political movement, surveys on vernacular dwellings were also forced to stop. After the Cultural Revolution, China's architectural community strived to break free from the influence of Soviet classicism and sought to learn modernist architecture from the West, but struggled to understand the origins, techniques, materials, and design of modernist architecture.

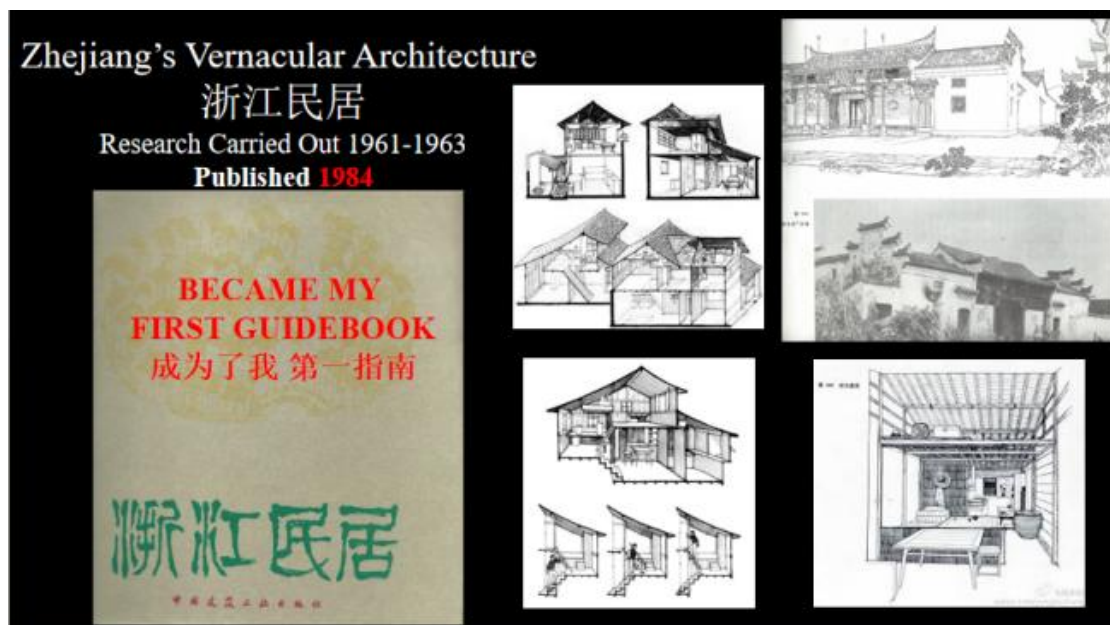


Figure 3. This is the first book published in China that provided a detailed introduction to local residences within a provincial scope. The authors are a group of people. It is the result of a survey conducted in the 1950s by a team from the China Academy of Building Research. The vast majority of the local residences mentioned in the book had already been demolished by the time the book was published until 1984.

After 1979, amid the tide of reform and opening up, China's architectural field experienced a significant ideological impact—the introduction of postmodernist architectural theory. The arrival of this theory was quite unique: at that time, Chinese scholars had not yet fully grasped the basic concepts of modernist architectural theory when the ‘flight’ of postmodernist architectural theory quietly landed in China first, bringing new perspectives and directions to Chinese architectural research.



Figure 4. An early program of the Communist Party and government eas to plan the original small plots of land owned by dispersed households into compact grids with a modern grandeur. So that when the Martians come down, they will all be amazed.

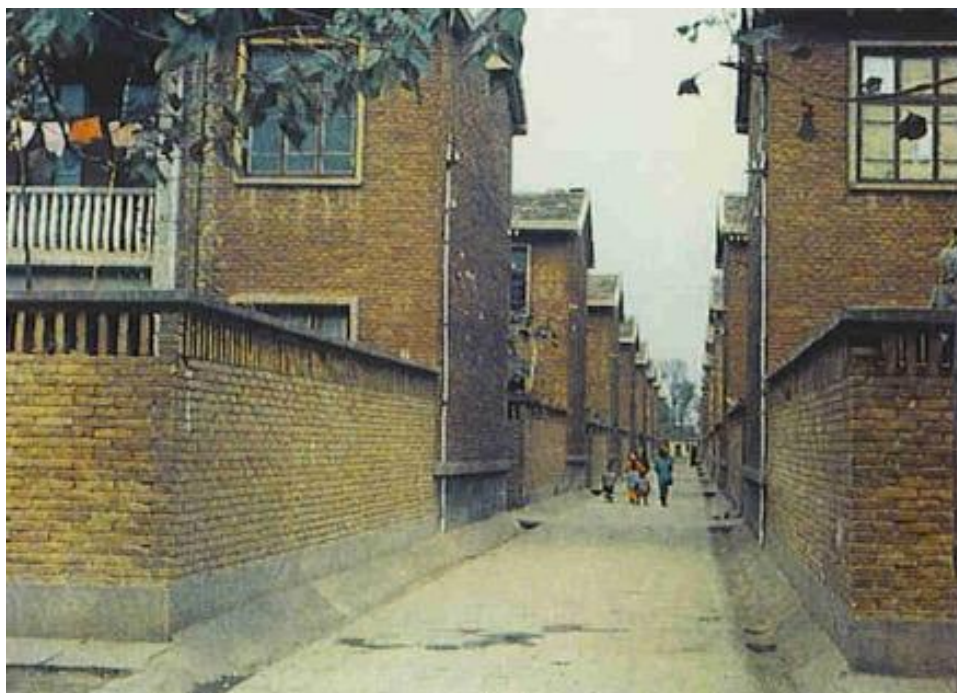


Figure 5. This is a house in a socialist new countryside under the people's commune system.

Postmodernist architectural theory has distinct characteristics. It breaks the limitations of modernist architecture, which one-sidedly pursues functionality while neglecting history, culture, and tradition. It highly values classical traditions, emphasizes that architecture should connect with historical context, focuses on drawing inspiration from traditional architecture, incorporates classic architectural elements and symbols, and pursues diversity, complexity, and cultural connotations in architecture. This respect for classical traditions naturally aligns with China's profound historical and cultural heritage and rich traditional architectural legacy.



Figure 6. Traditional houses generally were not suitable for modern people's lifestyles. China also has had a severe shortage of wood. Therefore, farmers often demolished old houses and build new ones with bricks and concrete.

It was around this time in 1977 that an American scholar came to China and began his research on Chinese vernacular dwellings. This scholar was Ronald G. Knapp. His research on Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings predated that of most Chinese scholars and has continued to this day.



Figure 7. In the early 1970s, very few foreigners entered China. Even if they did, most areas were off-limits to foreigners. This was the permit Ronald G. Knapp obtained for traveling in China. However, this did not mean he could go anywhere he wanted. When staying in a hotel, he had to stay in one of the few designated hotels approved by the government to accommodate foreigners.



Figure 8. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Knapp was investigating residential buildings in Chinese rural areas, the hospitable Chinese farmers invited him for lunch. The host was pouring baijiu (a strong Chinese distilled liquor) for him. Chinese strong baijiu has an alcohol content as high as 65 degrees, and hosts often try every means to urge guests to drink until they get drunk. Otherwise, the host will feel that they have not received the guests well.

After earning his doctoral degree from the University of Pittsburgh in the United States in 1968, Knapp taught at the State University of New York at New Paltz from 1968 to 2001 in the Geography and Asian Studies Program. The reason why Ronald G. Knapp was able to take the lead over other scholars outside China is related to his

special experiences afterward. In 1965, Knapp went to Taiwan to study Chinese and carry out field research, thus beginning his long-term research on Chinese culture and historical geography. Ronald G. Knapp's Chinese teacher gave him a Chinese name, 那仲良, and soon became fluent in Chinese. This linguistic advantage in studying Chinese culture was unavailable to other foreign scholars at that time. During his study of Chinese, Knapp developed a strong interest in the extensive and profound Chinese culture. Geography is a discipline that requires fieldwork, but due to the absence of diplomatic relations between mainland China and the United States at that time, he was unable to enter mainland China and could only learn about China from books. He yearned deeply for mainland China and once took a photo of himself looking across the sea at mainland China from the closest point on Taiwan Island to mainland China, as a testament to his feelings.



Figure 9. This is a photo of a residential house taken by Ronald G. Knapp in rural Shilin, Taipei City, Taiwan, China in 1965. This kind of house is the same as the traditional residential form in Quanzhou, mainland China. The influence of this immigrant culture was the incentive for Ronald G. Knapp to conduct investigations on residential houses in mainland China.

In the 1980s, regional and provincial books on vernacular dwellings such as *Fujian Vernacular Dwellings* and *Yunnan Vernacular Dwellings* were published one after another. Additionally, after China's reform and opening up, many universities invited foreign scholars to give lectures. Knapp not only got the opportunity to conduct surveys on vernacular dwellings in China but also was invited to participate in a series of academic seminars on traditional vernacular dwellings held by Chinese academic circles. It was around this time that I met Ronald at a conference on vernacular dwellings.

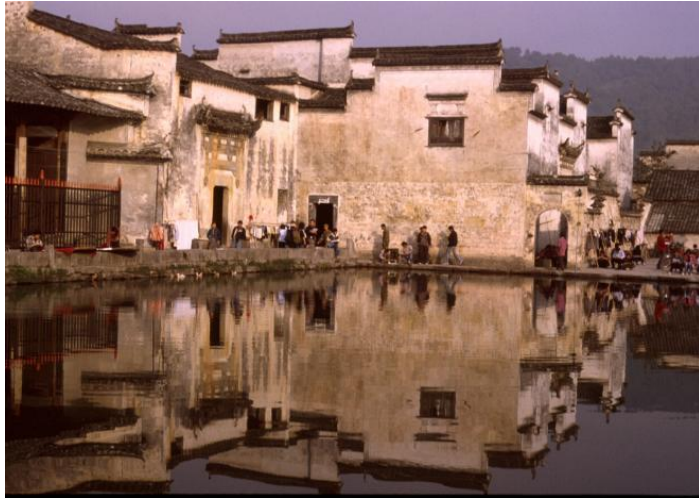


Figure 10. Hongcun Village in Yixian County, Anhui Province has become a well-known tourist attraction. Every year, many colleges and universities organize students from their fine arts departments to come here for sketching.

Ronald G. Knapp has an excellent entry point for his research on Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings, which is geography. Geography is a discipline that studies the Earth, its features, inhabitants, and phenomena. As a discipline, one of its branches is human geography, which focuses on researching how the environments and spaces built by humans are created, perceived, and managed by humans, as well as how humans influence the spaces they occupy. Unlike experts in architecture and architectural history and theory, scholars in geography, based on the research results of physical geography and human geography, pay more attention to the impact of the environment on architecture and human activities, the mutual relationship between humans and nature, and conduct research on the conditions for humans to conquer and transform nature to adapt to their own sustainable development. Even in today's Chinese academic circles, this aspect is still weak.



Figure 11. In 1949, the Communist Party made significant adjustments to Chinese society. It confiscated the large houses of the original landlords and distributed them to the poor for use. Since the houses, which were originally used by a single family, became used by many families, the vast majority of the houses allocated to the poor were renovated to accommodate more families.



Figure 12. Knapp's investigation of traditional Chinese dwellings not only focuses on the buildings themselves but also pays more attention to the relationship between buildings, villages, streets, lanes, and people.



Figure 13. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), many characters on traditional door plaques were altered. The left picture shows 'First, fear no hardship; second, fear no death,' which was the standard Mao Zedong required ordinary people to meet. The right picture shows 'A Place of Liberation.'



Figure 14. Since China's reform and opening up in 1979, its economy has developed rapidly. All land in China is owned by the state and is not sold to individuals or enterprises. What is sold is only the right to use it for several decades, not the permanent property right. The government can demolish any house. The Chinese character in these two circles is 'chai' (demolish). That means this building is about to be demolished.



Figure 15. After the 1980s, when a large number of traditional dwellings were demolished and rebuilt, governments at all levels in China began to protect some excellent ancient dwellings when their financial conditions permitted.

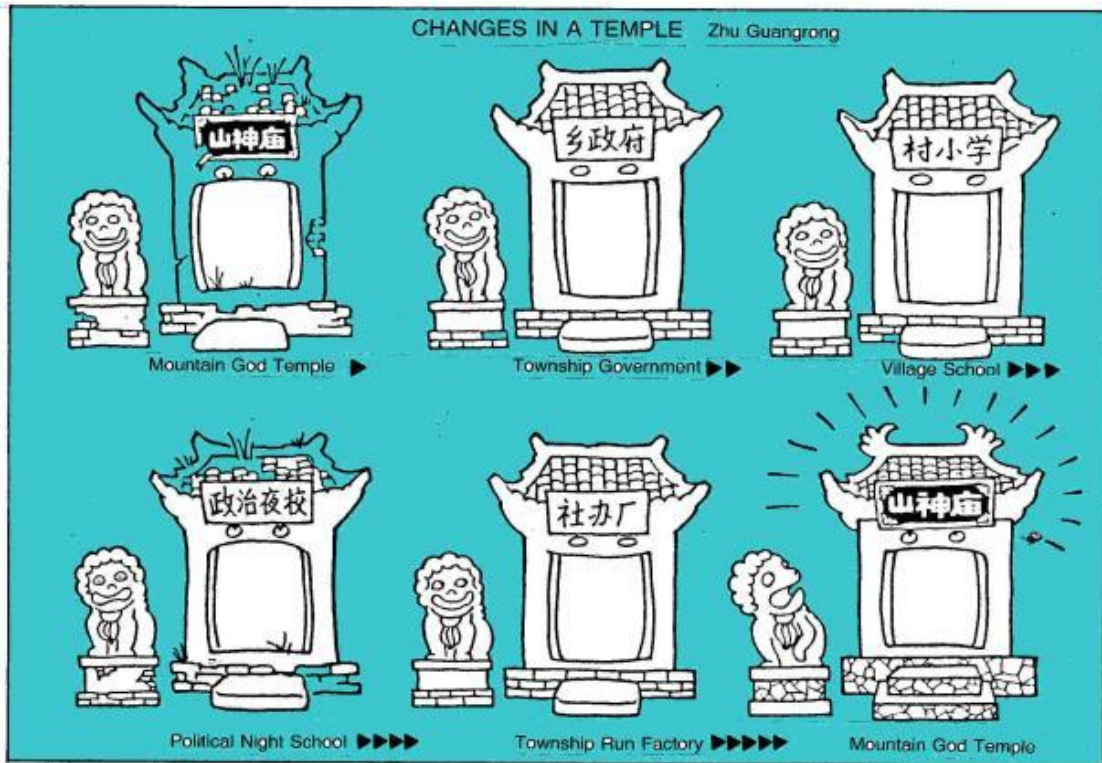


Figure 16. This cartoon depicts the different uses of the same building over several decades. This change can be seen from the plaque on the door. The change from a Mountain God Temple to serve the society at that time, and finally back to 'Mountain God Temple' was also to make money by selling tickets.

Knapp believes that Chinese vernacular dwellings carry the ethical norms of China's 'ritual order.' For example, the northern courtyard house is a typical carrier of 'ritual system': with the central axis as the core, the main building where elders live faces south and is the largest in size; the side houses where juniors live are arranged on both sides and are slightly smaller in size; the reverse houses, used for servants' accommodation or as guest rooms, are located in the south of the courtyard house, forming a spatial order of 'distinction between superiority and inferiority, and clarity between elders and juniors'; the size of doors and windows, the number of steps, and the decorations on the roof ridges all strictly follow social hierarchical norms, such as the prohibition of using dragon and phoenix patterns in ordinary vernacular dwellings. This transforms abstract ethical concepts into specific spatial structures.

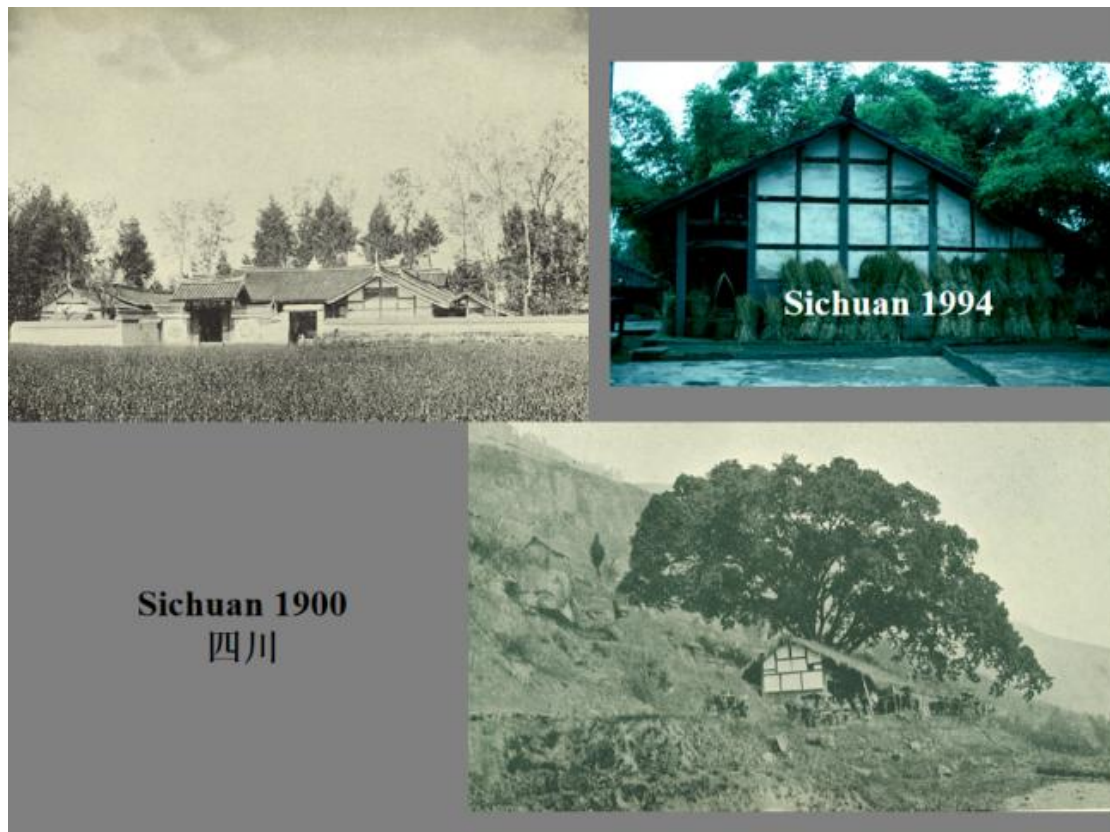


Figure 17. Two photos of residential houses in Sichuan Province, western China, taken by Ronald G. Knapp in 1994, and the picture below is a historical photo of Sichuan residential houses in 1900.

In 1949, the Communist Party overthrew the cohesive function of traditional vernacular dwellings in maintaining the ‘patriarchal clan’ that had lasted for over a thousand years. The communist government distributed the houses of the wealthy to the poor. As a result, the current owners of the good houses were not the ones who built them, so they would not use the houses according to their original functional designs, thus damaging the original appearance of the houses. However, the concept of the ‘patriarchal clan’ remains strong among the people. This clan concept has always been reflected in Chinese vernacular dwellings. Knapp believes that the Fujian earth building strengthens clan cohesion through its circular communal living form: the center of the circular earth building is an ancestral hall, serving as a place for clan rituals and discussions. Hundreds of clan members live around it. The outer wall is as thick as 1-2 meters, with only a few arrow windows left, which not only defends against external enemies and wild beasts but also maintains the clan's blood ties through the living pattern of ‘living in the same courtyard and worshipping in the same ancestral hall,’ embodying the cultural core of the ‘clan community.’



Figure 18. This village with five tulou (earthen buildings) are called Tianluokeng. Among them, two tulou were built during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The reason was the same as that for building tulou in ancient times. At that time, people thought society was unstable, so they built tulou for self-protection.

Knapp believes that Chinese vernacular dwellings hold significant meaning in customs because houses, courtyards, and villages are the spatial support and cultural witnesses of folk activities. Traditional vernacular dwellings are not only places of residence but also ‘natural stages’ for folk activities, with their spatial layouts and decorative details deeply integrated into folk scenes such as weddings, funerals, and festival rituals. Community spaces such as small squares in villages become the core venues for folk activities.



Figure 19. Throughout the 1980s and 1890s, rural areas in China were generally quite poor. Knapp rented a car to go to the countryside to investigate local residences, which attracted the local villagers to come and watch.



Figure 20. The photos taken by Knapp record folk houses and the people's livelihood of that era from a unique visual perspective.



Figure 21. In the West, it is a very elegant billiards sport, but when it was introduced to China in the 1980s, it became an entertainment activity for people in rural or poor areas.

During festivals, the courtyards of northern courtyard houses would have colorful sheds built and banquets arranged. During the Spring Festival, couplets are pasted and lanterns are hung; during the Mid-Autumn Festival, people admire the moon; during the Double Ninth Festival, people climb heights. The size and layout of the courtyard space are just right for family reunions. The ancestral hall in Fujian earth building is the core scene of clan weddings—the bride must enter through the main gate of the earth building, walk along the central axis to the ancestral hall to pay respects to heaven and earth, and then enter the bridal chamber. The ‘spatial route’ of the entire process is itself an important part of the wedding customs. The ‘sky street’ of the Cantonese wok-ear houses, that is, the alley between two courtyard complexes, is a folk venue for hanging wormwood during the Dragon Boat Festival and setting up lantern markets during the Mid-Autumn Festival, carrying the collective memory of neighborhood celebrations.



Figure 22. Beijing has an area of 16,400 square kilometers and is surrounded by mountains on three sides. This is Chuandixia Village in Mentougou District, a northwestern suburb of Beijing. It is a small mountain village. However, the layout of the village is random. The courtyards of each household are not on the same contour line, so the roads in the village are also winding and undulating, which is very ornamental.



Figure 23. This is the roof of the houses surrounding a small courtyard in a traditional residential building in the southern Anhui region. The courtyard is very small, and all the rainwater from the roof flows into the courtyard.

The folk legend implies that the ‘fertilizer water’ (symbolizing wealth) will not flow out, and wealth is kept within one's own home.

Knapp's books also state that Chinese folk architecture records folk beliefs through decorative details. The decorations of vernacular dwellings are a ‘collection of folk symbols’: in the brick carvings and wood carvings of ancient vernacular dwellings in Huizhou area in central China, patterns such as ‘pine and crane for longevity,’ ‘kylin presenting a child,’ and ‘bumper harvest of the five grains’ express folk wishes for good fortune and auspiciousness; the paper-cuts on windows and the kang paintings depicting the twenty-four solar terms or folk stories in northern Shaanxi cave dwellings are ‘living fossils’ of folk art; the ‘swallow-tail ridges’ of southern Fujian vernacular dwellings, that is, the two ends of the house ridge stick up like the tails of swallows, not only symbolize the good wish of ‘spreading wings and flying high’ but also echo the local folk belief of ‘respecting heaven and worshipping ancestors.’



Figure 24. The character ‘fu’ (meaning good fortune or happiness) is the most widely used Chinese character in the decoration of Chinese dwellings.

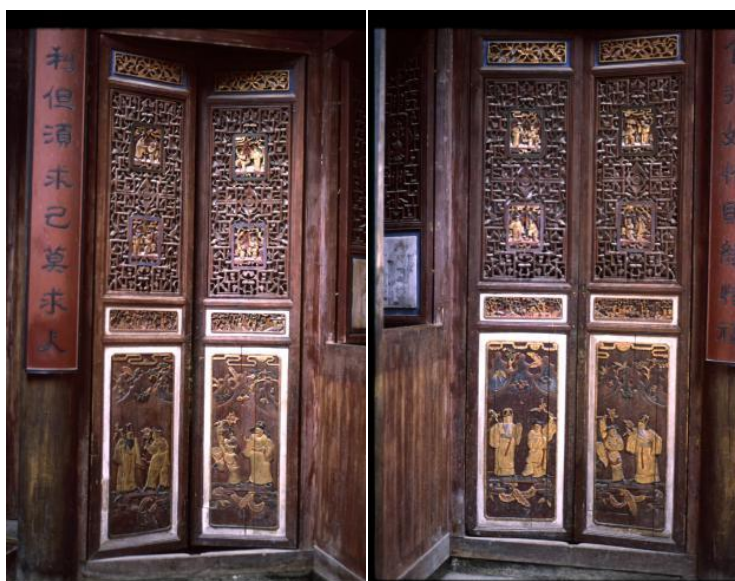


Figure 25. Many of the carved decorations in traditional dwellings depict scenes from ancient Chinese stories. This is not found in China's palaces, because the emperor did not allow anyone (even the figures in the carved decorations) to stand above his head.



Figure 26. Wood carving is one of the decorative techniques in traditional Chinese dwellings. It is often used for the lattice decoration of doors and windows. In the past, since there was no glass, people would paste window paper to let light through.

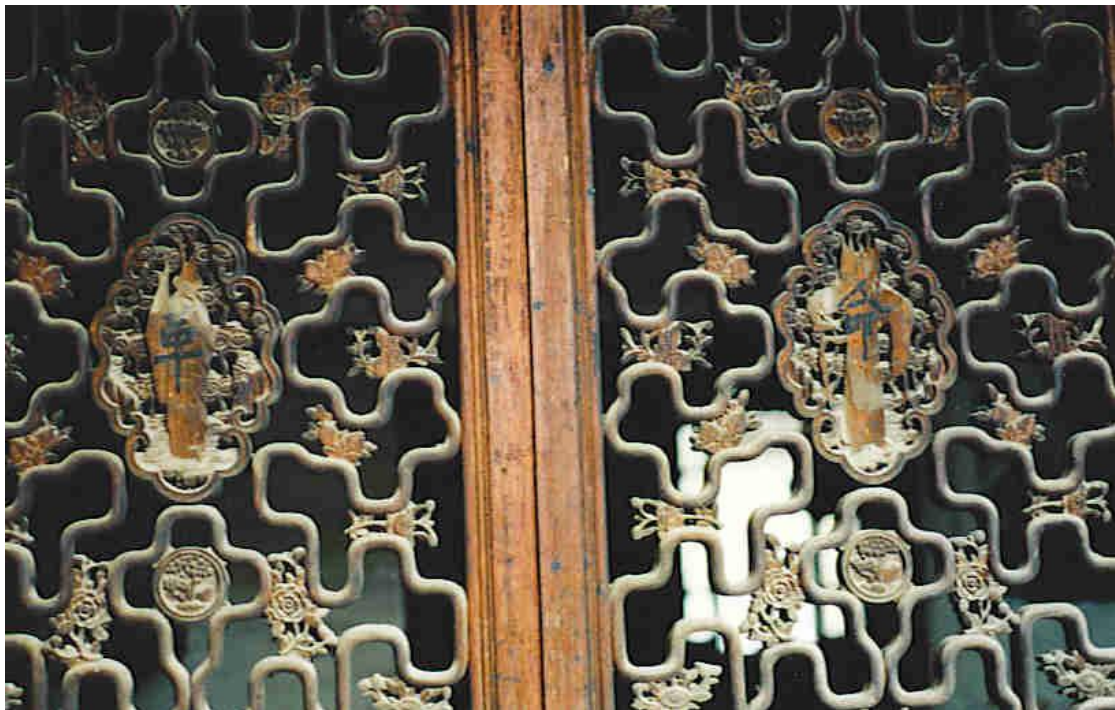


Figure 27. The patterns of the lattice are rich in variety, embodying people's expectations for a better life. Those depicted here were defaced during the Cultural Revolution.

Knapp summarized Chinese vernacular dwellings, saying that they are the core carriers and regional symbols of local wisdom. Traditional vernacular dwellings are the 'main body' of the local architectural system, embodying the unique building

materials, techniques, and wisdom of a region, and are important symbols for distinguishing different local cultures. Chinese vernacular dwellings also carry the wisdom of materials and techniques in local architecture. When building vernacular dwellings, local resources are fully utilized, forming unique local techniques: the Loess Plateau uses ‘rammed earth walls’ to build cave dwellings; Fujian uses ‘raw earth + bamboo and wood’ to build earth building; southern Anhui uses ‘blue bricks and black tiles + horse-head walls’ to build ancient vernacular dwellings; Lingnan in south of China uses ‘blue bricks + horizontal bar gates’ to build wok-ear houses. These material choices, such as loess, bamboo and wood, and blue bricks, all come from local natural endowments, and techniques such as ramming earth, mortise and tenon, and brick carving are local wisdom passed down from generation to generation, without relying on foreign technologies, reflecting the local architectural logic of ‘using local materials and adapting to local conditions.’

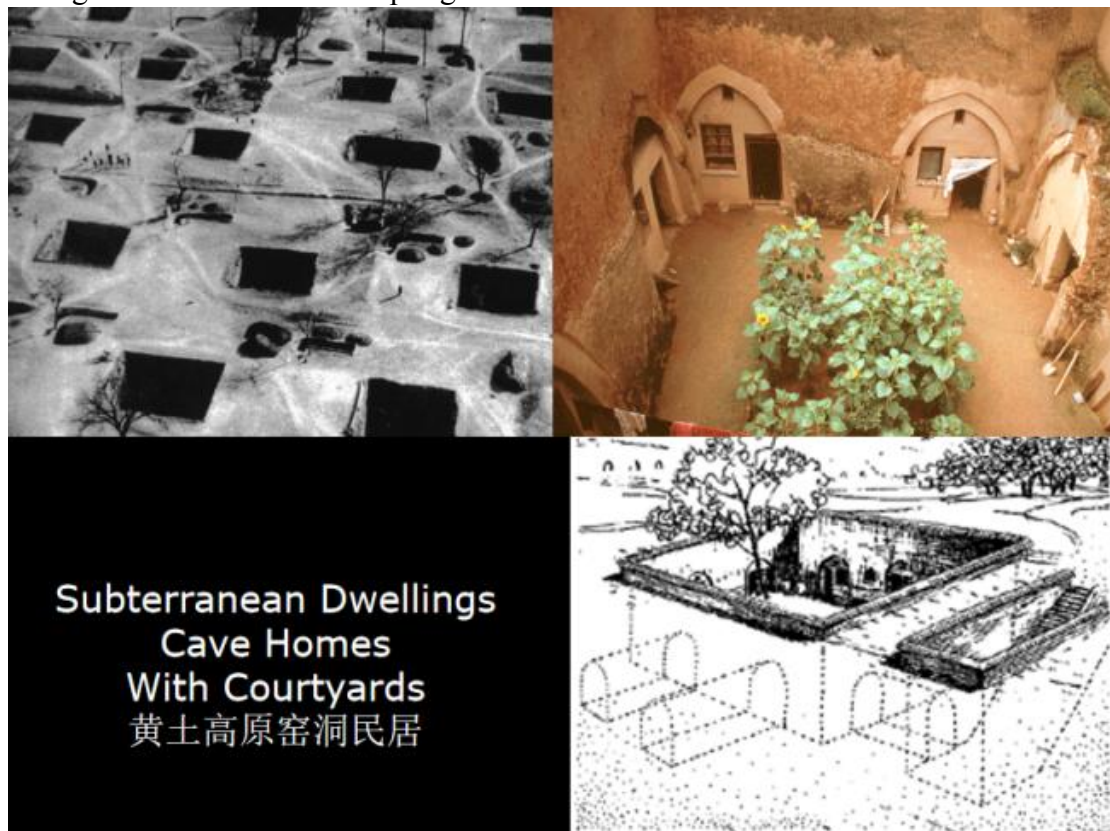


Figure 28. In the flat Loess Plateau region in western China, due to a lack of wood and the arid, rain-scarce climate, people first excavated a sunken small square downward to serve as a courtyard. Then they dug cave dwellings around it to use as residences. Among them, there is a slope-type tunnel that serves as the entrance and exit for the family.



Figure 29. This is a residential house in Cangnan County, Zhejiang Province. The walls are made of wood. The two ends of the roof ridge are upturned, forming an elegant roof shape.

Knapp used his geographical knowledge to support the integrity of China's local architectural system. His many books reveal that local architecture includes vernacular dwellings, ancestral halls, opera stages, temples, etc., among which vernacular dwellings are the 'foundation and core': ancestral halls and opera stages are mostly arranged around vernacular dwellings. For example, the center of a earth building has an ancestral hall, and an opera stage is set near a courtyard house, serving the living and spiritual needs of residents. Construction techniques of vernacular dwellings, such as rammed earth and wood carving, also extend to other local buildings, forming a unified local architectural style and maintaining the integrity and continuity of the local architectural system.



Figure 30. A memorial archway is a commemorative community gate used to honor those who have served as high-ranking officials, widows who remained chaste, or others who have performed certain meritorious deeds. Some villages even have many archways along their roads. They also serve to demonstrate that their village has produced many people worthy of praise.



Figure 31. This is the exterior of the building in the last courtyard of Baolun Pavilion (an ancestral hall of a family). It is now a national cultural relics protection unit in China.



Figure 32. Knapp focused on collecting different road landscapes, different gates, and labor tools of the time in his survey.

Ronald G. Knapp approaches from a macroscopic perspective beyond the architectural entity, and his research vision has been broader than that of scholars engaged in architectural history and theory. Therefore, Ronald G. Knapp's investigations into Chinese vernacular dwellings are highly academic, professional, and in-depth studies. His research on Chinese folk residences in the field of geography has been rarely involved in by other scholars, and his research on vernacular dwellings has unique professional perspectives from human geography, with irreplaceable academic value. In terms of presenting research results, he began to publish books on Chinese folk architecture from the 1980s, and they were written in English, which is accessible to most people. Therefore, Ronald G. Knapp has disseminated his research results on Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings worldwide and is one of the earliest scholars to study Chinese vernacular dwellings.

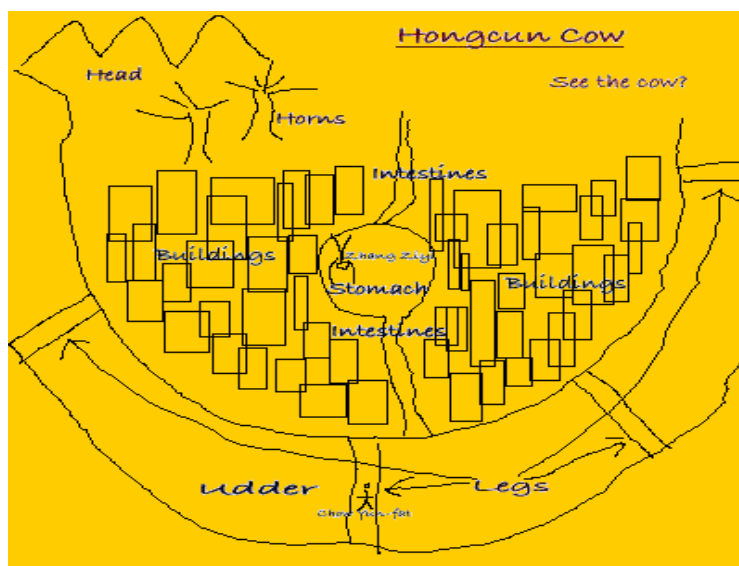


Figure 33. This land plan shows that the layout of Hongcun (located in Yixian County, Anhui Province) is like an ox' body.

China's Traditional Rural Architecture: A Cultural Geography of the Common House, published in 1986, was Ronald G. Knapp's first English work introducing Chinese local architecture to the Western world. In the nearly fifty years since then, as his research has continued to deepen, he has published more books on Chinese architecture, including: *China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* (1999) ; *China's Old Dwellings* (2000); *Chinese Houses: The Architectural Heritage of a Nation* (2005); and *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese* (ed. with Kai - Yin Lo)(2005).

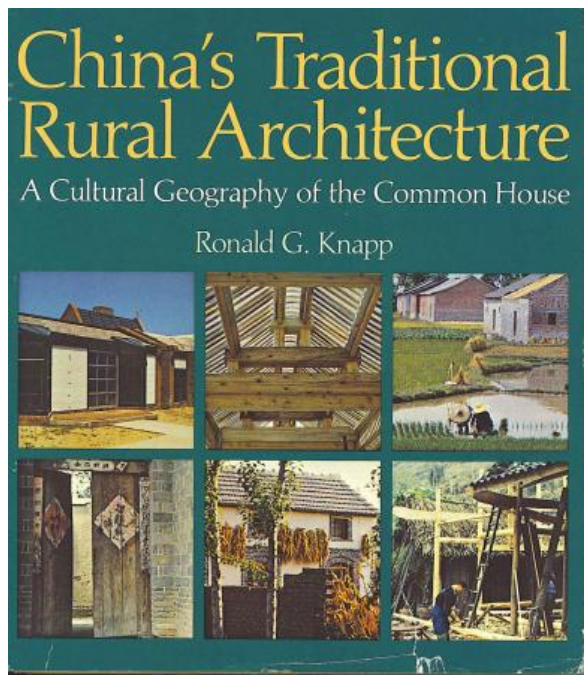


Figure 34. Titled *China's Traditional Rural Architecture: A Cultural Geography of the Common House* published by Ronald G. Knapp in 1986. This was the first book in English on the subject.

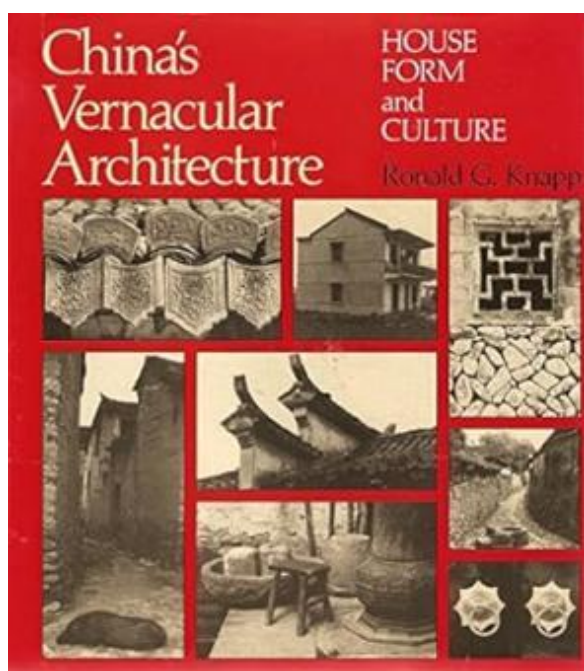


Figure 35. *China's Vernacular Architecture: House Form and Culture*, published in 1989 by University of Hawaii Press focused on a single province, Zhejiang.

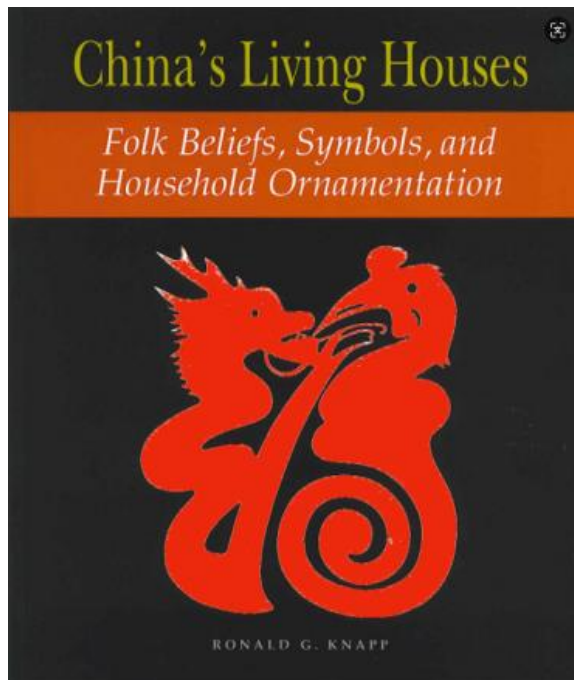


Figure 36. This is *China's Living Houses-Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation* published by Ronald G. Knapp in 1999.

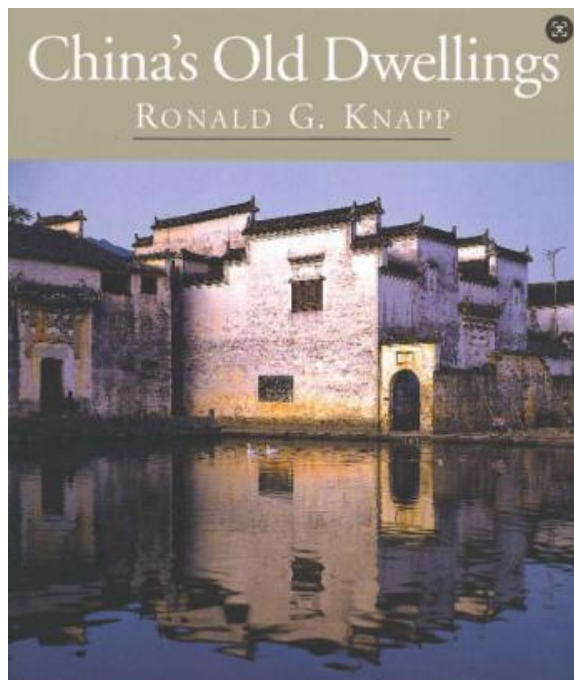


Figure 37. This is *China's Old Dwellings* published by Ronald G. Knapp in 2000.

Two of Knapp's books have been translated into Chinese. A two-volume translation of *House Home Family: Living & Being Chinese* appeared in 2011 as 家 -- 中國人的居家文化 SDX Joint Publishing Company, a well-known Chinese publishing house, published the Chinese version of *Chinese Houses: The Architectural Heritage of a Nation* as 图说中国民居 in 2018. In the same year, the prestigious School of Architecture at Tsinghua University held an international seminar specifically for his academic research.

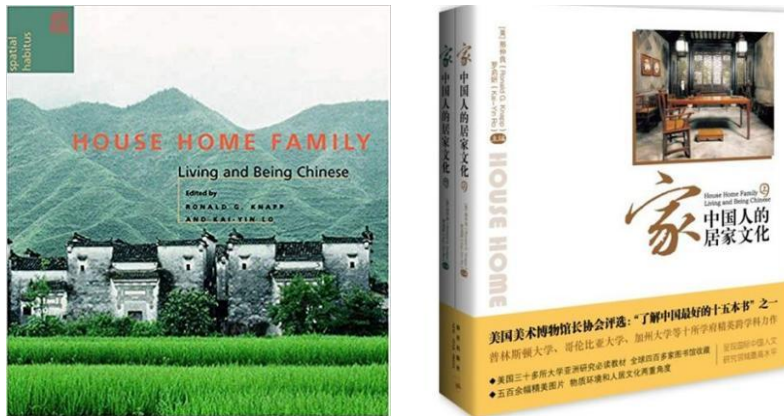


Figure 38. Based on a symposium organized by China Institute in New York City, the book *House Home Family: Living & Being Chinese* was published in 2004 by Ronald G. Knapp in collaboration with Kai-yin Lo with contributions by leading scholars from all over the world. A Chinese translation titled *家 -- 中国人的居家文化* was published in 2011.

As a geography professor, one extremely important feature of Ronald G. Knapp's monographs is that they start from the perspective of ordinary readers, especially those who have little or no understanding of Chinese history and culture, beginning with the basic knowledge of Chinese vernacular dwellings. He combines Chinese culture with traditional vernacular dwellings and introduces them to the world in English, enabling more readers and scholars around the world to understand Chinese traditional vernacular architecture and the excellent Chinese culture. Although a few Chinese scholars have written books in English introducing ancient Chinese architecture and published them abroad, the influence of their works is completely incomparable to that of books written by an American professor, a native English speaker, and published by American publishing companies in Western society.

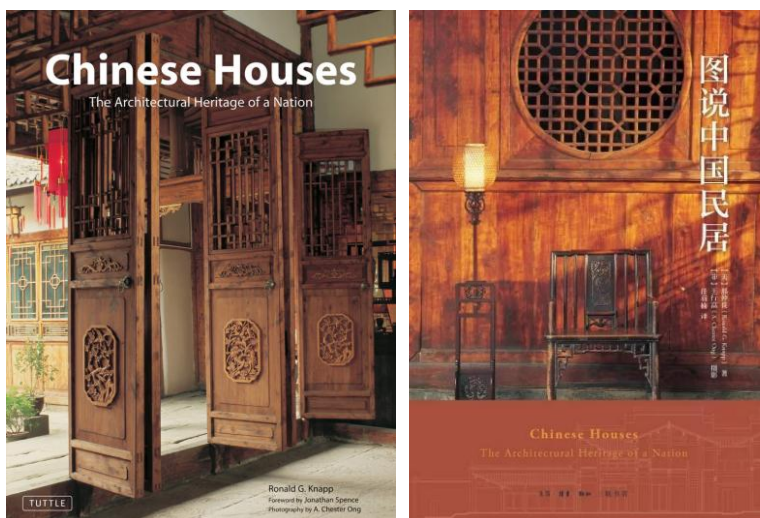


Figure 39. *Chinese Houses: The Architectural Heritage of a Nation*, published in 2005 was translated and published in two volumes in China in 2018 as *图说中国民居*

In Ronald G. Knapp's books, extensive materials and numerous vivid and interesting illustrations are used to supplement and explain his viewpoints. These materials and illustrations include not only high-quality photos specially taken by Filipino photographer A. Chester Ong but also many interesting and rare historical photos. The photos not only show buildings but also living scenes in vernacular dwellings, as well as scenes of processing and producing vernacular dwelling building materials and constructing vernacular dwellings. There are also floor plans, elevations, sections, cutaway perspectives of buildings, as well as architectural diagrams from local chronicles or genealogy. There are illustrations selected from ancient books such as *Tiangong Kaiwu* (The Exploitation of the Works of Nature) and *The Twenty-Four Filial Piety Stories with Retribution Illustrations*, as well as folk prints, folk New Year paintings, folk paper-cuts, and even images of some amulets. There are also architectural images on ancient brick carvings and ancient architectural images in ancient paintings. Many of these images come from collections outside China, such as the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, so they are quite novel to Chinese readers. Ronald G. Knapp has conducted down-to-earth investigations in mainland China, and also carried out field research in rural areas in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and overseas Chinese communities in Southeast Asia to study folk residences. As a geographer, these personal investigations have provided him with a large amount of first-hand fieldwork data, which has played a key role in his accurate classification and description of Chinese vernacular dwellings. With economic development and the deepening of modernization, rural areas in China have carried out large-scale demolition, renovation, and new construction of traditional vernacular dwellings from the 1990s to the present, causing the vernacular dwellings to gradually lose their original appearance. The early collected photographs in Ronald G. Knapp's books have thus become precious materials for readers to understand the original style of Chinese vernacular dwellings.

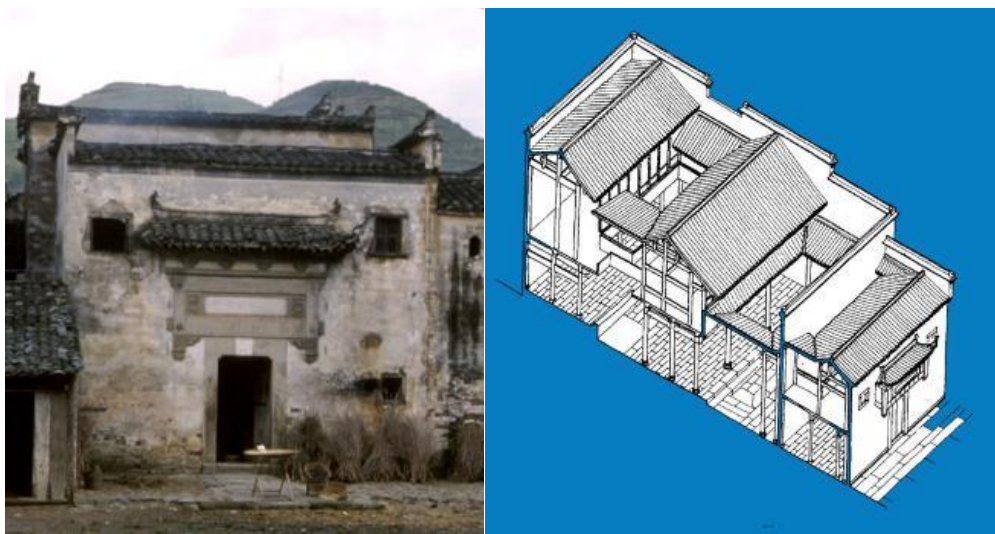


Figure 40. This is a photo of the front elevation and a sectional projection view of a traditional folk house in southern Anhui.



Figure 41. There are door plaques on the doors of traditional dwellings, which express one's ideals or highlight the family's status. Those here were plastered over with revolutionary slogans during the Cultural Revolution.

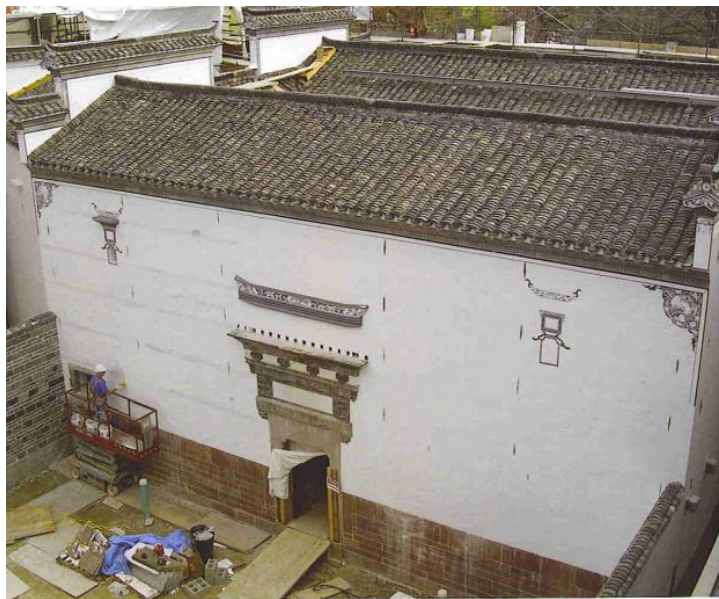


Figure 42. When the local government saw that traditional residences were constantly being demolished by their owners to be rebuilt into modern ones, it began to protect a small number of better-preserved traditional courtyard residences. This is the reconstructed exterior of Yin Yu Tang in the United States.

The reason why Chinese vernacular dwellings can become a discipline is that they are architecture without architects. The designers and builders of Chinese vernacular dwellings are the owners of the dwellings. Therefore, the order arrangement, cultural connotations, organizational efficiency, historical changes, etc., of Chinese vernacular dwellings as the basic spatial units of traditional society have become an intangible cultural heritage beyond the physical entities of Chinese vernacular architecture. For Chinese readers who have grown up in the local cultural environment but have never investigated or visited typical traditional vernacular dwellings and have never explored the traditional architectural culture that they think they are familiar with, such a book will arouse their interest in Chinese traditional culture. On the basis of realizing how little they know about traditional architecture, it will further inspire them to visit those ancient vernacular dwellings scattered in various places during their travels, and then generate a sense of mission to embrace and inherit their own maternal culture through reflection.

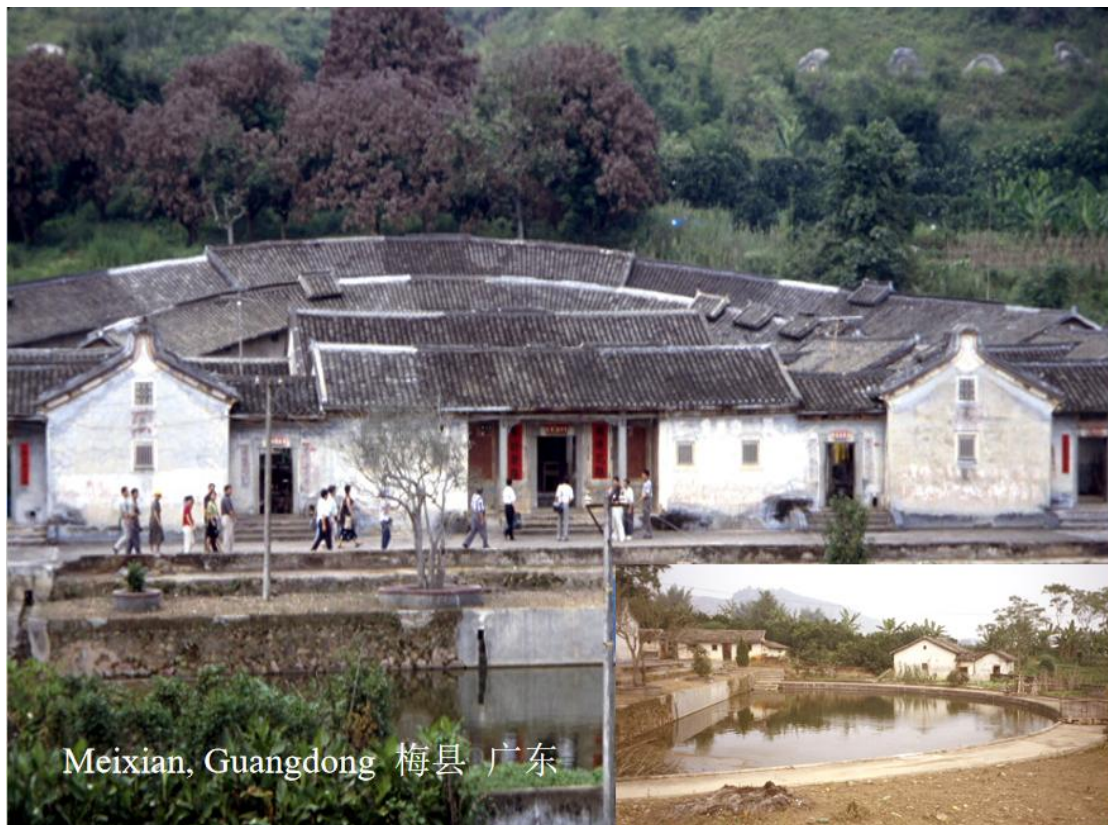


Figure 43. This is a traditional residential building in Meixian County, Guangdong Province, in southeastern China, called Weilongwu (circular dragon house). From a plan view, the house has a semicircular layout, with one circle enclosing another. In front of the house, there is a small square, and further ahead, there is a semicircular pool. The overall layout is like the plan of a stadium track. When Ronald Knapp was conducting his investigation, the local villagers followed him curiously to watch.

Ronald G. Knapp has persisted in his research for decades without being influenced by others while introducing the writings of Chinese scholars to Western readers. He has a broad vision and rich field investigation experience, and holds a large amount of first-hand survey data. He has benefited from both Chinese and English reference materials. Moreover, he has benefited from close collaboration with Chinese architectural historians, and geographers over his six decades studying rural China. Therefore, his research perspective on Chinese vernacular dwellings has always been distinct from the strengths of domestic scholars researching vernacular dwellings, each having different scopes and characteristics. Over the past decade, he has carried out research on Chinese bridges--another form of vernacular architecture--especially the extraordinary langqiao 'corridor bridges.' His two books about langqiao have introduced to Western readers using the common English term 'covered bridges.' Ronald G. Knapp established his academic goals early on and adhered to them for a long time without wavering, ultimately achieving his special academic status in the field of Chinese traditional vernacular dwellings.

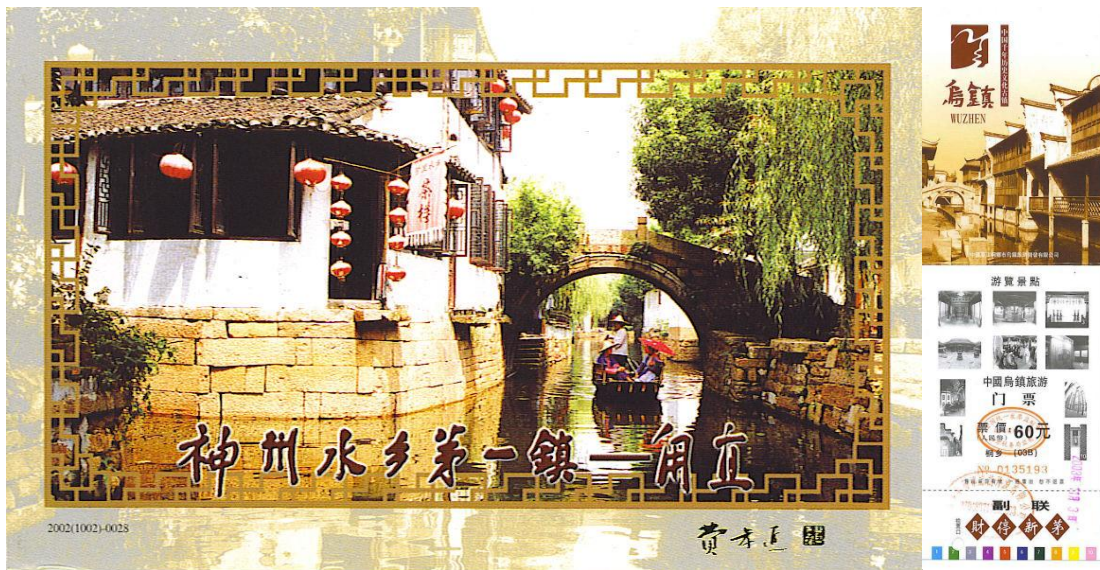
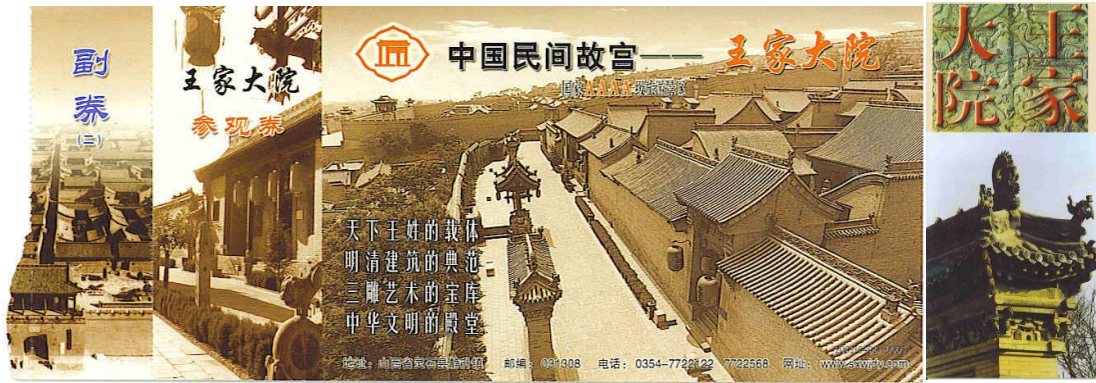


Figure 44. Ronald G. Knapp's investigation into Chinese vernacular dwellings covers a very wide range. The above is a ticket for the Wang Family Grand Courtyard in Lingshi County, Shaanxi Province, northern China. The following is a ticket for Luzhi Village, Wuzhen District, Suzhou, Jiangsu Province (near Shanghai on the south bank of the Yangtze River).

All photos in this article are provided by Ronald G. Knapp



Recent photos of Ronald G. Knapp

Appendix:

Ronald G. Knapp's Books

China's Traditional Rural Architecture: A Cultural Geography of the Common House

Publisher: University of Hawai'i Press

Publication Year: 1986

A pioneering English-language study of China's vernacular architecture, surveying the forms, materials, and cultural geography of rural common houses across regions. Knapp documents spatial organization, building techniques, and the social meanings embedded in dwellings, bringing decades of fieldwork to a comprehensive, scholarly account.

China's Living Houses: Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation

Publisher: University of Hawai'i Press

Publication Year: 1999

Explores how folk beliefs and auspicious symbolism shape the design and decoration of Chinese homes. The book connects everyday domestic ornamentation to ritual practice and cosmology, revealing how visual symbols structured daily life within the household.

China's Old Dwellings

Publisher: University of Hawai'i Press

Publication Year: 2000

A richly illustrated, in depth synthesis of Chinese domestic architecture, covering spatial components, construction methods, regional types, and preservation challenges. Knapp situates traditional housing within the social and economic changes that threaten these environments.

Chinese Houses: The Architectural Heritage of a Nation

Publisher: Tuttle Publishing

Publication Year: 2005

Presents twenty exemplary traditional houses from urban and rural China with extensive photography and historical context. Profiles highlight architectural features, craftsmanship, and cultural significance, offering an accessible overview of the nation's domestic heritage.

House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese (ed. with Kai Yin Lo)

Publisher: University of Hawai'i Press; China Institute in America

Publication Year: 2005

An edited volume examining how Chinese families organize domestic space and how the concepts of house and family (家) shape each other. Essays analyze regional diversity, symbolism, and social practices that structure everyday life within Chinese homes.

Chinese Bridges: Living Architecture from China's Past

Publisher: Tuttle Publishing

Publication Year: 2008

A comprehensive, photographically rich survey of China's historic bridges—stone, timber, arch, and covered—presented as living architecture. Includes detailed case studies and essays on distinctive design elements and the cultural landscapes surrounding them.

China's Covered Bridges: Architecture Over Water

Publisher: University of Hawai'i Press (distributed); ISBN 9781952461026

Publication Year: 2020

The first comprehensive English-language treatment of China's covered bridge traditions—documenting timber corridor bridges and other types with over 600 images, based on decades of observation and ten years of field research by Knapp, Terry E. Miller, and Liu Jie.

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