

## INTERNATIONAL DISSEMINATION RESEARCH ON CHINA'S COVERED BRIDGE CULTURE BY AMERICAN SCHOLARS KNAPP AND MILLER

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### Abstract

My academic bond with American scholar Ronald G. Knapp originated from an international symposium on traditional Chinese dwellings held in 1991. This academic encounter fostered a decades-long profound friendship and continuous scholarly exchanges spanning over thirty years. At the International Symposium on Ronald G. Knapp's Research of Chinese Traditional Dwellings hosted by the School of Architecture, Tsinghua University on 5 December, 2018, , I delivered a speech systematically introducing his fruitful achievements and academic value in the research of traditional Chinese residential architecture.

I first met another American scholar Terry E. Miller at the International Symposium on Chinese Covered Bridges jointly held in Shanghai and Qingyuan, Zhejiang Province in 2019 that was also attended by Ronald Knapp. The brief gathering forged sincere academic friendship, and we maintained close email correspondence afterward to exchange academic views and discuss research progress on Chinese covered bridge culture. Regrettably, Mr. Terry E. Miller passed away on October 1, 2025. The academic circle lost a devoted researcher dedicated to promoting covered bridge culture worldwide, and I lost a cherished overseas friend.



Group photo taken during a covered bridge survey in the mountains of Chongqing. From right to left: Terry E. Miller, Ronald G. Knapp, Liu Jie.

As an exquisite treasure of distinctive traditional wooden architecture in China, Chinese covered bridges have evolved for thousands of years. They perfectly integrate ancient Chinese construction techniques, folk customs and regional aesthetic concepts, serving as precious cultural carriers embodying China's agricultural civilization, landscape philosophy and humanistic sentiments, and an indispensable part of fine traditional Chinese culture.

For a long time, due to cultural disparities and barriers in international academic discourse, Chinese covered bridges, which are called in Chinese *langqiao*, "corridor bridges," had gained little recognition in global architectural academia, suffering from insufficient academic voice and neglected research status. Ronald G. Knapp, a senior American sinologist, and Terry E. Miller, an interdisciplinary cultural scholar, have devoted decades to the research of Chinese covered bridge culture. With broad interdisciplinary global perspectives, persistent field investigations, systematic academic exploration and achievement publication, they essentially eliminated Western academia's biased understanding and regional isolation regarding Chinese covered bridges.



A break photo taken during the survey of Chinese covered bridges. Terry E. Miller (far left), Ronald G. Knapp (far right) with A. Chester Ong, a professional photographer who has worked with Knapp on many books for more than twenty years.

Their fifteen-year cross-border joint research systematically filled the global research gaps on Chinese covered bridges. These once little-known regional folk architectural relics have gradually earned fame as world-class architectural heritage and become key candidates for global cultural heritage listing. Through their talks and publications, they have made irreplaceable contributions to the international spread of traditional Chinese architectural culture, equal Sino-foreign architectural cultural dialogue and improvement of the global cultural heritage conservation system. Based on their academic careers, core research findings and cross-border scholarly practices, this paper reviews the whole process of their efforts to bring Chinese covered bridges to the world and integrate them into global architectural civilization, and interprets the core value of their academic exploration and far-reaching significance of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Chinese covered bridges; *langqiao*, cross-cultural communication; Ronald G. Knapp; Terry E. Miller; architectural heritage; international academic research

## 1. Introduction

Covered bridges are complex architectural structures featuring transportation function, practical utility, artistic aesthetics and profound humanistic connotations. Three independent covered bridge architectural traditions have taken shape globally, namely European, North American, and Chinese styles.

Though there are archaeological examples of covered timber bridges that date to the Han dynasty, the most outstanding date to the Tang Dynasty (618–907) and Song Dynasty (960–1279). Chinese covered bridges reached their peak prosperity in the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and Qing Dynasty (1636–1912). They are widely scattered across mountainous southern China including Zhejiang, Fujian, Jiangxi and Hunan Provinces, adapting to the rainy, humid climate and riverside mountainous landforms of regions south of the Yangtze River and mountainous areas of Zhejiang and Fujian. They are also found in abundance in Yunnan and Sichuan, among other locations.



Qiancheng Bridge, Pingnan County, Fujian Province. Photo by Wang Qijun

Different from Western covered bridges which principally serve passage and rain sheltering, wooden arch covered bridges prevalent in Zhejiang and Fujian as well as elsewhere boast unique nail-free mortise-and-tenon arch structures, sophisticated ancient construction craftsmanship, millennium-old folk sacrificial culture, diverse public social functions and over a thousand existing relics nationwide. They form an unparalleled traditional Chinese architectural system superior to European and North American counterparts in structural sophistication, artistic aesthetics, and humanistic depth, fully showcasing the wisdom and ingenuity of ancient Chinese working people.

Before the 21st century, Western academic research on covered bridges centered on European and North American examples, forming a rigid Western-centric research paradigm. Western scholars held fragmented and one-sided perceptions of Chinese covered bridges, lacking basic cultural cognition and systematic English monographs. This brilliant gem of traditional Chinese architecture and vital evidence of millennial Chinese civilization was marginalized in mainstream global architectural heritage studies, with its unique architectural, cultural and historical values unrecognized internationally.

Against the backdrop of limited Sino-foreign academic exchanges and insufficient global publicity of Chinese covered bridges, Ronald G. Knapp, emeritus professor of State University of New York at New Paltz, saw his first *langqiao* in 1987 in the mountains of southern Zhejiang. Little by little, his understanding of the extent of this structural form began to take shape. and Terry E. Miller, professor of Kent State University, in time joined him and then they stood out as the leading Western scholars committed to Chinese covered bridge research. Driven by passion and reverence for traditional Chinese culture, the two scholars together conducted fifteen years of cross-border collaborative research. Their comprehensive academic practices ranging from individual studies and theoretical sorting to global publicity and heritage conservation reversed the marginal status of Chinese covered bridges in international academia, acting as pioneers promoting cross-ocean dissemination of traditional Chinese architectural culture and Sino-Western cultural integration.

## 2. Research Background and Academic Accomplishments of the Two Scholars

### 2.1 Ronald G. Knapp: Founding Authority for Global Popularization of Traditional Chinese Architecture

Ronald G. Knapp is a preeminent Western scholar specializing in Chinese historical geography, traditional rural architecture and ancient bridge art, and also a World Heritage evaluation expert of UNESCO. Having dedicated

decades to researches on traditional Chinese architecture and landscape human settlements, he possesses profound sinological knowledge, abundant field investigation experience and broad global heritage research vision.



The bookshelves at Ronald G. Knapp's home are filled with various Chinese-language books and documents about Chinese covered bridges.

Differing from conventional architectural researchers, he adopts historical geography as the core research perspective, studying architectural evolution, regional diversity, humanistic context and heritage value of traditional Chinese buildings. He excels at horizontally comparing and positioning Chinese architecture within the global architectural civilization system, providing authoritative academic support for the international promotion and value definition of Chinese architectural culture.

Knapp is a pioneering founder who first launched systematic academic research on Chinese covered bridges in Western academia. He traveled to the China mainland scores of times from 1977 on after more than a decade of research in Taiwan, conducting field surveys and documentation in core covered bridge sites of southern Zhejiang and eastern Fujian. His research sorted out regional distribution rules, structural features, craftsmanship inheritance and historical evolution of Chinese covered bridges, earning him the reputation of the foremost international advocate for Chinese covered bridges.



Over many decades, Ronald G. Knapp traveled to China scores of times to investigate traditional covered bridges and residential buildings. This photo captures him on the Wan'an Bridge in Fujian province.

Breaking away from Western-centric research stereotypes and biased labels on oriental architecture, he objectively and rigorously explored the architectural, humanistic and contemporary values of Chinese covered bridges, laying a solid academic foundation for subsequent Sino-US joint research and global cultural promotion. I have maintained over thirty years of friendship with him, and his rigorous scholarship, modest attitude and sincere love for Chinese culture are deeply admirable.

## 2.2 Terry E. Miller: Interdisciplinary Researcher from a Distinguished Covered Bridge Academic Family

Terry E. Miller, while a renowned professor of ethnomusicology at Kent State University in Ohio, began during his teenage years in the company of his Father to devote his energies to studying American covered bridges. Nurtured by Western covered bridge academic theories from childhood, he has studied global covered bridge architecture for decades, mastering Western construction techniques, evaluation criteria and research frameworks.

His unique interdisciplinary background brought irreplaceable research advantages. Proficient in Western covered bridge theories, he interprets folk connotations, humanistic spirits and social functions of Chinese covered bridges from perspectives of cultural anthropology and folklore. His research

breaks the technical-only limitation of traditional architectural studies, endowing Chinese covered bridge research with richer depth and human warmth.

Miller's fascination with Chinese covered bridges began with a casual encounter in 2003. He was deeply impressed by the distinctive architectural shapes, landscape aesthetics, exquisite craftsmanship and harmonious integration between humanity and nature after seeing pictures of Chinese covered bridges in a travel brochure of Quanzhou, Fujian Province.



Terry Miller with his wife Sara, who accompanied him on all his international trips, at a bridge in Guizhou province.

Having acknowledged the simple structure, single function and shallow humanistic connotation of Western covered bridges, Miller recognized the diversified cultural attributes of Chinese covered bridges integrating transportation, art, folk sacrifice, leisure and cultural inheritance. He then added to his lifelong research focus from Western covered bridges to rare and precious Chinese examples, launching fifteen years of cross-border field investigations and cooperative studies in collaboration with Knapp. Though our acquaintance started relatively late, his sincere affection for Chinese culture and rigorous academic pursuit were fully reflected in our email communications. His sudden passing constitutes a great loss to Sino-foreign covered bridge research.

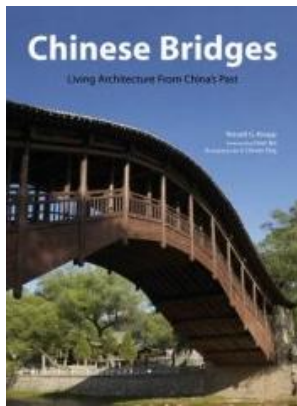


A group of international covered bridge researchers in November 2013, Sixi, Taishun County, Zhejiang Province, China. From right to left: Liu Yan, then a PhD student at the Technical University in Munich and now an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning, Kunming University of Science and Technology; Liu Jie, Professor in the School of Design at Shanghai Jiao Tong University; Terry and Sara Miller, Ronald G. Knapp, Emeritus Professor, State University of New York, New Paltz; Philip Caston, Professor of Building Documentation, Historical Building Research and Surveying at Neubrandenburg University of Applied Sciences; and Gong Difa, Gong Difa, the former curator of Shouning County Museum in Fujian.

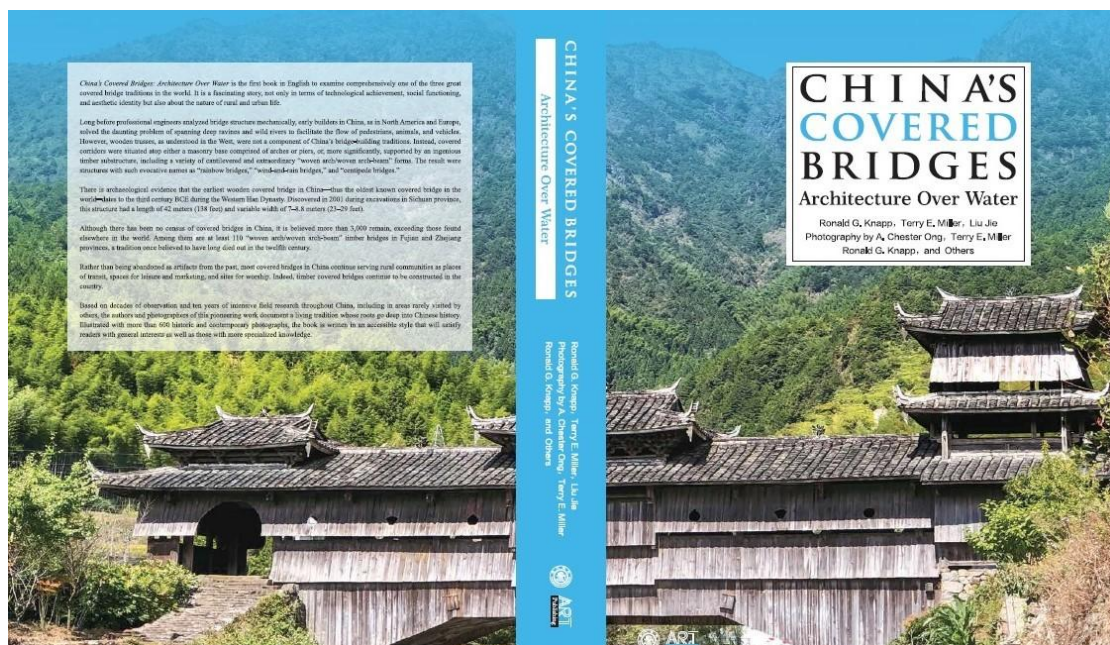
### 3. Core Process and Academic Practices of Global Dissemination of Chinese Covered Bridges

#### 3.1 Initial Exploration: Groundbreaking Achievements Opening International Recognition (2008)

At the beginning of the 21st century, Sino-foreign architectural cultural exchanges remained inadequate, with no authoritative English publications introducing Chinese covered bridges, which were barely known overseas. Knapp took the lead in breaking this deadlock and published the academic monograph *CHINA'S COVERED BRIDGES* in 2008.



With Gansu province's Baling Bridge on the cover, this 2008 book by Knapp included the first images in an English language book of Fujian and Zhejiang woven-arch bridges, plus other covered bridges in Anhui, Hebei, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Sichuan.



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Chinese Bridges: Living Architecture from China's Past was published by Tuttle Publishing.

As the first comprehensive English academic work systematically illustrating the complete system of ancient Chinese bridges, this book takes wooden arch covered bridges in Zhejiang and Fujian as core research objects, elaborating on millennial construction techniques, structural principles, regional distribution, historical evolution and cultural inheritance value of Chinese wooden arch covered bridges. At the time, Knapp had little knowledge of *langqiao* elsewhere in China that over the next decade was filled in by reading what Chinese scholars had written.

This landmark publication eliminated Western misunderstandings of traditional Chinese bridges and brought Zhejiang-Fujian wooden arch covered bridges into the core research scope of global architectural and heritage conservation circles. Leveraging his identity as a UNESCO World Heritage expert, Knapp continuously promoted the cultural value of Chinese covered bridges at international heritage assessments, academic conferences and university lectures. Knapp's first international article on the subject titled "Rainbows and Centipedes: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Discoveries of China's 'Lost' Bridges" was published in 2008. He subsequently was a UNESCO consultant in 2009 that led to success with the proposal 'Traditional Design and Practices for Building Chinese Wooden Arch Bridges' was inscribed on the UNESCO List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. He continues to advocate for the World Heritage nomination of Zhejiang-Fujian wooden arch covered bridges, establishing formal international academic channels for global publicity.

*Rainbows and Centipedes: 20th Century Discoveries of China's 'Lost' Bridges*

Ronald G. Knapp

With Photography by A. Chester Ong

In 75 years since Liang Sicheng (1893-72) discovered the Anji (Anji Covered) Bridge, China's oldest standing bridge and an iconic element in her pantheon of "treasures and lost" (Fig. 1). Also called the Zhongnan Bridge after its location in southern Hebei province, the Anji bridge, which was completed in 605, is the world's first span-arched super-arch stone bridge. Liang, China's pioneering architectural historian, viewed the bridge as an "astonishing and 'unique'" structure, noting that "China lacks such a type of official and a poet during the Tang Dynasty (618-907), compared to monuments or objects that we see everywhere."

Zhang Zhaohou, another Tang poet, is said to have likened the Anji bridge to "a long rainbow drizzling from heaven" and subsequently many other bridges throughout China were also referred to similarly as long rain or "rainbow bridges." Even today, historic references are used to describe bridges like the Anji bridge that, by the stretch of anyone's imagination, hardly ever let rain touch a string or, or that are even multi-colored – in other words, a vast range of bridges of different heights, materials and structures.

No bridge carrying the label "rainbow bridge" is better known than the one which provides the visual focus of the handbook (*Qingsheng zhongyuan* in *Along the River During the Qing Dynasty*), attributed to Zhang Zhaohou (1882-1947) (Fig. 2). In the painting, which surfaced in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing in 1974, the bridge appears to be constructed using a prominent stone-arched design as suggest-

design that is not seen in any other well-known painting, including what are viewed today as later "copies" of the *Qingsheng zhongyuan* in its all of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasty copies, the bridge appears clearly to be built of stone. Perhaps the best known example in the 19th century hand-drawn in the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which is said to have been painted collaboratively by the court artists (Fig. 6). Speculation can easily discuss many such historical and other misrepresentations in the later world, including southern motifs and details that would not have been



Fig. 1. Anji Bridge, Hebei province, China, c. 605 AD. Photo courtesy "Palace Museum, Taipei."

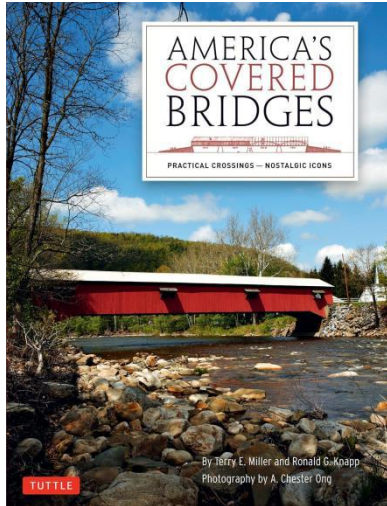


Fig. 2. Anji Bridge, Hebei, 1974. After a hand-drawn image in a well-known painting.

Knapp's first international article on the subject titled "Rainbows and Centipedes: 20th Century Discoveries of China's 'Lost' Bridges" was published in 2008.

### 3.2 In-depth Cooperation: Fifteen-year Research Establishing Comprehensive International Research System (2004–2019)

After beginning his new research orientation in 2003, Miller established close academic cooperation with Knapp first with a book titled *America's Covered Bridges: Practical Crossings - Nostalgic Icons* in 2024. Following this important book, which was the first comprehensive book on the subject, they shifted their focus to China teaming up with Liu Jie, a leading scholar on Chinese covered bridges from Shanghai Jiao Tong University, forming a cross-border and interdisciplinary research group.



This is the book *America's Covered Bridges: Practical Crossings - Nostalgic Icons* by Terry E. Miller and Ronald G. Knapp, with photography by A. Chester Ong, published by Tuttle Publishing in 2014.

Over less than ten years, the team conducted extensive field surveys in core covered bridge concentrated areas of southern Zhejiang and eastern Fujian as well as elsewhere in China, investigating hundreds of well-preserved ancient covered bridges. Massive first-hand field data and image materials were collected regarding architectural forms, traditional craftsmanship, folk sacrificial activities, inheritance status and conservation difficulties, filling Western academic gaps lacking on-site investigation and authentic data support.

The cross-border cooperation generated remarkable complementary academic strengths. Knapp's historical geography perspective clarified regional evolution, spatial distribution and world-class heritage value of Chinese covered bridges. Miller's cultural anthropology research revealed folk culture and rural social functions behind these structures beyond technical analysis. Chinese scholars' local academic accumulation guaranteed authentic, professional and culturally appropriate research outcomes, avoiding cross-cultural comprehension barriers.

Adopting the research framework combining global vision, Chinese local cases and Sino-Western comparative analysis, the team compared architectural forms, cultural origins, artistic features and evolutionary history of covered bridges in China, Europe, North America and Southeast Asia. They defined the unique status, core advantages and irreplaceable civilization value of Chinese covered bridges among the three major global covered bridge traditions, founding the first complete international research system on Chinese covered bridges.

### 3.3 Achievement Delivery: Groundbreaking Authoritative Monograph Realizing Systematic Global Promotion (2019)

After years of persistent field research and revision, Knapp, Miller and Chinese scholars jointly published *China's Covered Bridges: Architecture Over Water* by Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press in 2019. The book was republished by University of Hawaii Press in 2020 with worldwide distribution.



Contrasting covers of the 2019 Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press cover with Fujian's Wan'an Bridge and the University of Hawaii Press cover with Knapp's photograph of Zhejiang's Rulong Bridge.

This is the world's first authoritative English monograph specially focusing on Chinese covered bridges, filling long-standing blank space in international systematic research. It sorts out the historical development of Chinese covered bridges from the Tang and Song dynasties origin, Ming and Qing dynasties prosperity to contemporary inheritance, classifies regional architectural genres, and analyzes wooden structures, intangible craftsmanship, folk culture and artistic value. The work fully presents the integrated value system of technology, art, culture and folk custom of Chinese covered bridges to Western readers.

Supported by substantial field data and cases, the book confirms that China preserves more than 3,000 ancient covered bridges, surpassing European and North American counterparts in quantity, historical depth, structural complexity, craftsmanship level, and cultural richness. In fact, it can now be argued that China's covered bridges represent the oldest, most vigorous, completely inherited, and culturally valuable covered bridge tradition worldwide, revising Western dominant biased viewpoints. The book is scheduled to be translated into German, Spanish and other languages, expanding cultural influence across Europe, America and Belt and Road countries.

After the publication of this book, their article “China’s Corridor Bridges: Heritage Buildings over Water” (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s43238-020-00010-w>) in *Built Heritage* journal published by Tongji University is in the top 5% of all research outputs scored by Altmetric.

#### 4. Core Value and Far-reaching Significance of the Two Scholars’ Researches

##### 4.1 Academic Value: Filling Research Gaps and Restructuring Global Covered Bridge Research Pattern

Prior to their systematic studies, global covered bridge research was dominated by European and American academic systems with deep regional prejudices and research blind spots. Chinese covered bridge culture was marginalized without due academic attention and value affirmation.

The two scholars incorporated China’s covered bridges into mainstream global architectural heritage research through persistent exploration, rigorous argumentation, abundant field data and diversified interdisciplinary perspectives. They ended Western monopoly of academic discourse power, enabling Chinese covered bridges to participate equally in global architectural civilization dialogues.

Their research established an innovative covered bridge research mode featuring global comparison, local exploration, integration of humanity and technology, and combination of history and modernity. It enriches research dimensions of traditional Chinese wooden architecture, optimizes ancient Chinese architectural research system, and provides new reference standards and research directions for global covered bridge studies. The global research field has evolved from regional European-American focused studies to diversified comparative and inclusive collaborative research, greatly elevating the international academic standing and discourse power of traditional Chinese architecture research.

##### 4.2 Communication Value: Eliminating Cultural Barriers and Shaping International Image of Chinese Architectural Culture

The international promotion of traditional Chinese architectural culture has long been hindered by cultural differences, incompatible discourse systems, insufficient professional translation and cognitive gaps. Numerous precious architectural heritage, ancient craftsmanship and traditional culture fail to gain accurate understanding and worldwide recognition.

As prestigious Western scholars, Knapp and Miller delivered precise, authoritative and internationally accessible interpretation and dissemination of Chinese covered bridge culture with standard academic expressions, effectively breaking cross-cultural communication obstacles.

Independent research and promotion by Western local scholars carry stronger objectivity, authority and persuasiveness. Their academic findings and cultural interpretations are readily accepted by international academia, heritage institutions and the public, reversing stereotyped negative impressions of crude craftsmanship and low value of Chinese folk architecture. The world gains comprehensive understanding of exquisite ancient wooden construction techniques, harmonious architectural philosophy, rural mutual assistance folk tradition and profound Chinese civilization, pioneering new paths and setting fine examples for global dissemination of traditional Chinese architectural culture.

#### 4.3 Heritage Conservation Value: Facilitating World Heritage Nomination and Dynamic Cultural Inheritance

Outstanding Universal Value and authoritative international academic verification are essential prerequisites for World Heritage inscription. Zhejiang-Fujian wooden arch covered bridges especially possess exclusive architectural, historical and cultural value as vivid witnesses of millennial Chinese architectural civilization. Nevertheless, insufficient international academic endorsement and low overseas recognition slowed down its World Heritage application progress.

The two scholars' research results make up for this critical deficiency, providing decisive authoritative academic evidence and defining its unique world-class heritage value, serving as core theoretical support for the World Heritage nomination of Zhejiang-Fujian wooden arch covered bridges.

Their decades-long research and global publicity enhance public awareness of the rarity, preciousness, and endangered status of Chinese covered bridges, driving improved restoration, conservation, inheritance and revitalization mechanisms nationwide. The intangible cultural heritage of traditional covered bridge construction craftsmanship achieves dynamic inheritance and innovative development. These efforts protect distinctive regional cultural heritage and establish Chinese covered bridges as vital windows showcasing Chinese civilization and narrating Chinese cultural stories globally.

#### 4.4 Cultural Exchange Value: Building Bridges for Sino-foreign Architectural Cultural Dialogue

Fifteen years of steady cross-border academic cooperation established a sound model for in-depth equal Sino-foreign architectural cultural exchanges and mutual learning. Based on pure academic research, Knapp and Miller discarded cultural prejudices and estrangement, building regular communication platforms for Chinese and American architects, heritage conservation organizations and cultural researchers, promoting diversified

integration and two-way learning in traditional architecture research, heritage protection and folk culture inheritance.

Their academic practices prove that traditional Chinese architectural culture is not isolated regional civilization but an indispensable splendid component of global architectural civilization. It sets an excellent model for equal dialogue and integrated development of Sino-foreign traditional cultures, continuously boosting international influence and cultural soft power of China.

## 5. Conclusion

Ronald G. Knapp and Terry E. Miller are two authoritative Western scholars dedicated to Chinese covered bridge research and global cultural promotion, as well as my respected long-time overseas friends. Dedicating their lifelong careers to studying and popularizing Chinese covered bridge culture, they successfully elevated Chinese covered bridges *langqiao* (“corridor ridges”) from obscure local relics to world-famous cultural treasures.



Taken on September 21, 2019 in Qingyuan, Zhejiang Province: Wang Qijun, the author of this article, stands on the left; Ronald G. Knapp in the middle; and photographer Li Yuxiang on the right. Ronald G. Knapp and Li Yuxiang first met in the 1980s. They have maintained a decades-long friendship ever since.

From Knapp’s pioneering research opening international recognition in 2008 to the release of the world’s first authoritative English monograph on Chinese

covered bridges in 2019, the two scholars filled global systematic research vacancies and restructured the overall pattern of international covered bridge studies with interdisciplinary visions, sincere cross-border cooperation and rigorous academic attitudes.

Their academic achievements provide core theoretical support for World Heritage application, architectural heritage preservation and traditional craftsmanship inheritance of Chinese covered bridges. Professional and objective international discourse eliminates Western prejudices against traditional Chinese architecture and accelerates global recognition of fine traditional Chinese architectural culture.

Although Terry E. Miller has passed away, his joint research achievements, cultural communication bridges and Sino-foreign friendship established with Ronald G. Knapp remains everlasting. Their cross-cultural communication experience offers valuable references for contemporary overseas promotion of Chinese traditional culture and Sino-foreign cultural exchanges, demonstrating the vital driving force of academic research in international cultural dissemination. The sincere affection and selfless contributions the two scholars devoted to Chinese culture will be forever remembered by Sino-foreign academic circles.

**Note: All images in this article are provided by Ronald G. Knapp.**

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