

BOOK REVIEWS

China's Living Houses

Folk Beliefs, Symbols, and Household Ornamentation

By Ronald G. Knapp

HONOLULU: UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII PRESS, 1999
185 PAGES, 249 ILLUSTRATIONS

With increased interest in China's culture, philosophies, history and politics over the last few decades, much has been written, both in scholarly and popular works. Ronald G. Knapp has now provided a thorough and highly readable book on a lesser-known part of Chinese life and traditions—its domestic architecture.

For over thirty years, Knapp has traveled throughout China, noting daily life in relation to rural homes and popular beliefs. In various articles and publications he has reported on different aspects of Chinese folk traditions and the built environment. This profusely illustrated volume brings together Knapp's past writings and ongoing research. It would be a valuable resource for both secondary school and college libraries.

China's Living Houses is divided into two broad categories. The first deals with protection, in terms of both orientation and symbolism, the second with the iconography of good fortune. The author makes clear from the beginning that this is an interdisciplinary field, bringing together complexities of town planning, architecture, and daily life with age-old beliefs and philosophies.



A papercut for affixing to a wall or lattice window, showing the auspicious mythological beast *qilin*, bringer of sons who will rise to official position. Page 132 of *China's Living Houses*.



In his early chapters, Knapp presents ways in which the “quest for harmony” can be accomplished by way of site choice, construction precautions, and protective symbols. Chinese buildings, tending to be conservative in design, also communicate cosmological beliefs, fears, and aspirations. Both site placement and room relationships must be carefully considered to insure safety and good fortune for the inhabitants of any dwelling.

Knapp explains how *fengshui*, an ancient practice linking heaven and earth, is still followed today in China and that it is gaining popularity in the West. A *geomancer*, or wind and water interpreter, armed with a fengshui compass (*luopan*) and a copy of the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), can gain access to the mystical ecology which will reveal the most auspicious site for building.

Even before ground is broken, special rituals must be performed and charms used to unleash hostile forces. Throughout construction various magical verses or symbols are written on paper or cloth and attached to such key locations as doorways, window frames, and ridgepoles. Upon completion, a homeowner takes such defensive measures as placing images from the *Lu Ban jing*, or carpenter's manual, over the main door. In his many photographs, Knapp shows the variety of charms and images over doorways, at windows, and even on rooftops, by which the rural Chinese continually ward off evil.

The second part of *China's Living Houses* shows some of the many ways in which homeowners may summon good fortune. Ornaments of luck, often red in color, include protective amulets, auspicious emblems, or pictorial puns, used singly or in combination. Such charms appear frequently at doors and windows, but are also placed appropriately throughout the home. Specific deities or symbols may have their own location, such as the Stove God, Zaojun, who blesses the kitchen. Often depicted enthroned, Zaojun is thought to survey the family's behavior, reporting to the Jade Emperor in heaven at New Year.

The ways to image good fortune (*fu*) are numerous. Popular interpretations refer to three aspects of *fu*: material wealth, longevity, and the gift of sons. Bats, seen positively as graceful flying creatures, are prevalent lucky signs, while the backward swastika expresses immortality. Marital harmony and the blessing of many sons are of major importance to the Chinese family, and imagery abounds to insure such fortune. (Today's “one child per family” rule presents problems counter to this tradition.) Goldfish and lotuses, separately or together, are among auspicious signs of wedded happiness and fertility. The composite benevolent mythical beast, the *qilin*, is said to bring many sons “who will rise to official position.” An image of a *qilin* often

appears on the gate or door of a young couple's home. Well-known folk deities of good fortune such as the *Fu Lu shou*, or Stellar Triad, often appear as sculptures on rooftops, or are imaged on paper prints hung over doorways. Similarly, the Daoist Eight Immortals, or *Baxion*, are used in either human form or as symbols for the purpose of bringing fu to a home.

While Knapp gives most of his attention to traditional folk beliefs that have continued over centuries, he devotes his last chapter to the modern day. Calling this essay "Resilience," he shows how communism has been worked into some of the popular symbolism to maintain a connection with the past while presenting a new interpretation. Finally, he illustrates incorporation of Western icons through a 1997 photograph of Mickey and Minnie Mouse replacing protective deities on a house door. On a red lozenge beside each figure is the character for fu.

This volume is well suited for colleges or secondary schools. Educators and their students in several disciplines would benefit from Knapp's excellent coverage, which includes not only art and architecture, but anthropology, sociology, religion, and politics as well. An extensive bibliography and the index, which acts also as a glossary, will facilitate both understanding and research. ■

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