China's living houses :
folk beliefs, symbols, and household ornamentation /
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CHAPTER 2

Dwellings as Social Templates

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE in much of the world is seen as the "unselfconscious" expression of people's ideas. In the case of Chinese buildings—even common houses—it is important to acknowledge the "self-conscious" way in which space traditionally was shaped and ornamented. Throughout China, techniques of construction and the methods of raising structures have always been viewed as more than mere building, or the application of craft to materials. Besides revealing a conservative building tradition that results in similar designs, Chinese buildings—whether palaces, temples, or houses—clearly embody and communicate striking elements of the Chinese people's cosmological beliefs, fears and aspirations, and social norms. These beliefs, fears, aspirations, and norms are manifested even today in decisions and rituals associated with the selection of a building site, the determination of a structure's orientation and proportions, the timing and ordering of specific construction tasks, the spatial form that a dwelling takes, and the inclusion of structural and seasonal ornamentation that is at once decorative and meaningful. Whereas some of these building efforts produce outcomes that are conspicuous and tangible, many others are subtle and elusive, even as they contribute to the beauty of a dwelling and its suitability as a home for a family. The *Bazhai zaofu zhoushu* [Complete book of creating good fortune in houses of all directions], a seventeenth-century manual, tells us:

> The shape of a house is of the highest importance. If the shape (*xingxiang* 形象) is unfavourable, the house will be hard to live in definitively. Whether a house is favourable or unfavourable, unlucky or lucky, can be told by the eye. As a rule, a house is favourable if it is square and straight, plain and neat, and pleasing to the eye. If it is too high and large, or too small and tumbledown, so as to be displeasing to the eye, then it is unfavourable. (quoted in Ruitenbeek 1993, 38)

The pursuit of such seemingly ordinary qualities, according to Klaas Ruitenbeek, "comes close to a theory of architecture and its aesthetics." Crucial decision making was not left to chance or the vagaries of individual memory. Instead, relevant technical information was provided by craftspeople as well as ritual specialists who drew upon oral tradition as well as upon voluminous written materials that were accessible to literate and illiterate alike. Ritual accompanied each stage of house construction, both for cosmological reasons and to counteract the craftsmen's literally unsettling actions in the course of building a house. What took shape was a structure, a dwelling, a habitat in which space was organized as a template that would help mold the family living within it. Ethics-shaping messages were encoded in the very framework of the dwelling's layout, then reinforced by meaningful applied ornamentation. Rituals tied to the calendar, which were observed once the house was occupied, helped connect the dwelling and its residents to the dynamic web linking the past and the present, as well as the world of the living and that of the otherworldly. Calligraphic and noncalligraphic charms of many types were marshaled to protect the family from misfortune. To ensure well-being and happiness, prodigious amounts of ornamentation whose purpose was to summon good fortune came to be added on and about dwellings of all types. These themes are

central to this book, in that they help animate structures into "living" dwellings. Chinese traditional practices and folk ornamentation were certainly more common in late imperial China than they are today. Yet, as this book shows through its photographs and text, one can still observe an enormous variety of practices and ornamentation that echo those of earlier times. That so much ornamentation and so many practices are prevalent in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the prosperous areas of the southeastern mainland suggests that the cascading pace of development is as likely to resurrect elements from the past as to expunge them.

"Each culture has different expectations of its dwellings," Paul Oliver tells us, "and makes demands on them which are related to its social structure and to the ways in which its members organize their daily lives" (1987, 128). In traditional China, a house or home was a humanized space, structured to shape family organization, and an instrument for weaving the web of Chinese social and ethical norms. The layout of fully formed Chinese dwellings creates a matrix in which space is designated according to a patriarchal system in which there are hierarchies defined by generation, gender, and age. The degree to which spatial divisions are apparent in any dwelling is a function of its scale as well as the wealth and status of the household living within it. The diverse sizes and forms, even the eccentricities, of Chinese dwellings at any place and at any time generally reflect actual differences in household composition that themselves result from a variety of vital circumstances. Smaller dwellings throughout China still pulse with occupancy patterns that echo those of earlier times, even though the rhythm of familial life associated with the archetypal *siheyuan*—the classic courtyard house with its hierarchical plan—has long since been muted.

No dwelling is static and fixed in time; rather, each dwelling mutates as fortune and human circumstances change. Whenever one encounters a complex dwelling, one must generally see it as an accretion of elements formed over a period of time that may be quite long. The conditions affecting a newly established domicile in a frontier area differ significantly from those affecting a well-established household with a lengthy history in a long-settled area. A new dwelling all too often appears relatively sterile and detached from the cultural context in which it takes form, whereas a very old one is packed with layers of meaning that current residents frequently cannot fully comprehend.

Under frontier conditions, humble and makeshift huts made of bamboo or grass matting that serve as mere shelter are transformed over time into structured domiciles as households take shape and their fortunes improve. Over the centuries, when Chinese males migrated into frontier areas on China's cultural periphery, for example, family formation was not hastily accomplished because migrants usually saw themselves as mere sojourners (Knapp 1986, 88–107). However, once conjugal units were formed, rough tributary communities of simple structures were created that stood for long periods of time before being recast into normative forms like those found in the hearth areas the migrants had left. Often clashing with indigenous groups, frontiersmen cleared wilderness, reclaimed land, and eventually accumulated the resources necessary for building fully formed—if often only modest—dwellings. Under frontier conditions and in areas of new settlement, a Chinese family [*jia* 家] emerged initially as a conjugal unit of both production and consumption. Changes in the size and composition of a two-person household came about through the birth of children and, later, through the marriages of sons. Family organization usually moves from a nuclear form to a stem form, perhaps even a joint family form, before division of family property [*fenjia* 分家] restarts the cycle with the advent of new nuclear family forms. Empirical studies by anthropologists show the internal and external forces that generally act on Chinese families as they navigate from one family organizational form to another (Cohen 1976). As summarized by Arthur Wolf,

> Differences in family size and complexity cannot be explained with reference to rules, norms, or ideals. Basically, the Chinese family is the same everywhere: all that varies are the conditions that make large families more or less advantageous. If the families of the wealthy are larger than those of the poor, this is not because they are governed by different ideals. It is only because wealth encourages diversification and thereby makes cooperation mutually advantageous. (1981, 343)

For the most part, large multigenerational families have

a sign of respectability but an essential factor in maintaining public morality" (1997, 128). Yet even within a system of idealized separate spheres, such domains were neither neatly confined nor strictly dichotomous. In reality, there was always significant fluidity between the realms, with at least some women in the Jiangnan region functioning "in a series of nested circles originating in the private domain of the inner chambers and extending to the social realms of kinship, neighborhood, and to the heart of the so-called public spheres" (Ko 1994, 13). Men and women nonetheless experienced domestic space in different ways:

> A man was born, grew up and died within the same walls, and with the same male kin around him. He never had to leave his parents or his home, he knew which lineage and which landscape he belonged to from the time he began to understand the world. His house was home for life, and yet he could walk outside the family compound whenever he pleased. He lived in a kind of commune of shared patrimonial goods, in which his first loyalty was supposedly to the group. A girl grew up on borrowed time. When she married she had to leave the house of her birth, her mother and her sisters whom she loved and depended on, to move into an unknown house and a new group of women, many of whom might regard her with hostility. She would have to be self-reliant until she built up alliances and, as a mother, became an acknowledged member of her new family. The structures of incorporation were such that few women questioned the actual system, because as time passed they gained power and authority. (Bray 1997, 149–150)

Domestic Ritual

Regular family rituals, according to tradition, are performed routinely within many Chinese dwellings on a daily, semimonthly, and seasonal basis. Such rituals reinforce filial piety, linking the living and the dead and underscoring the fact that each family, according to the Chinese-American anthropologist Francis L. K. Hsu, lives "under the ancestors' shadow." Many Chinese still believe today that their ancestors live much as they once lived but now frequent another world. Ancestors must not be neglected and need to be cared for with food and other material items through offerings by their descendants: "Enriched by Confucian, Buddhist, and Religious Daoist ideas, ancestor worship buttressed the Chinese family system not only by cementing social relationships and reinforcing status obligations but also by fostering a profoundly conservative precedent-mindedness at all levels of society" (Smith 1994, 88).

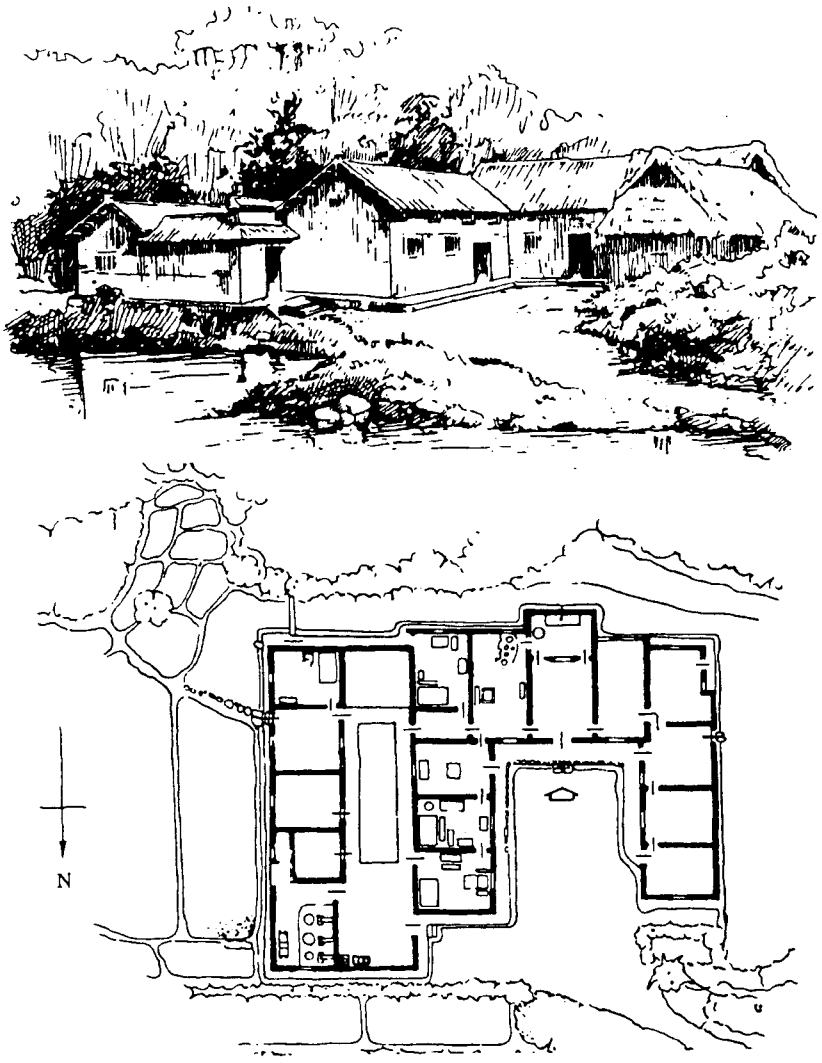

Figure 2.18 Mao Zedong's boyhood home includes an ancestral hall *(zutang)* just inside the doorway, in the middle bay of the five-*jian*-wide main U-shaped structure. Wider and deeper than the adjacent bays, this central *jian* provides ample room for a long altar table and other furniture. [Source: Liu 1957, 91.]

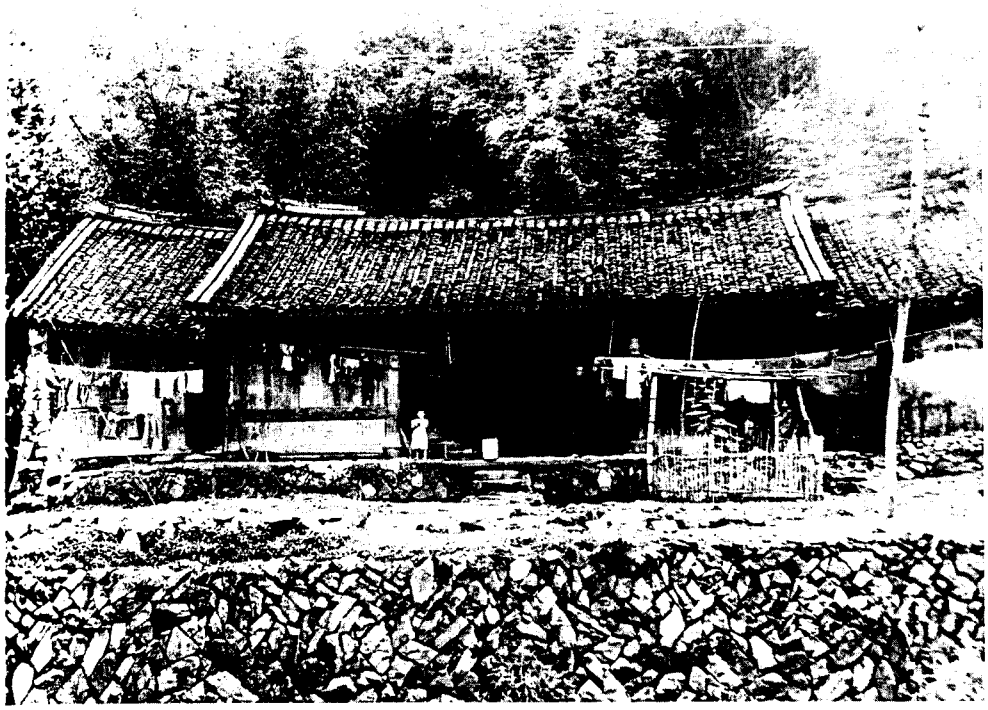

Figure 2.19 The central bay of this southern dwelling is an open ancestral hall. While the area under the front eaves provides space for eating and washing clothes, the high altar table holding the ancestral tablets, shown in Figure 2.24, is placed against the back wall in the recessed dark interior. Shuitou *xiang*, Cangnan *xian*, Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]

Ancestral offerings, as well as life-cycle and annual domestic rituals, traditionally have been carried out before altars in a central room or main hall that can be described as the core of a Chinese house. Whether the dwelling is a simple rectangular unit or is elaborated in a U-shaped or enclosed courtyard style, this room for domestic ritual normally occupies a full bay [*jian* 间] and is usually wider than either of the flanking *jian* (Figures 2.18 and 2.19). Although such a room is central to the performance of periodic ceremonies, or the spatial focus of domestic ritual, it is not a sacred space. For most Chinese families, it is a multipurpose room in which meals are taken, guests are entertained, children play, farm equipment, tools, and crops are stored, and work is carried out. Such functions vary from one part of the country to another and often reflect the education and resources of the household. In rural Taiwan in the late 1950s, the pivotal ancestral hall was described by Bernard Gallin as "untidy and cluttered . . . seldom cleaned or dusted" (1966, 240). In many areas of the mainland, however, such rooms are usually orderly and well appointed.

The central *jian* can be called the *zhengwu* 正屋 or *zhengting* 正厅 (middle hall), *tangwu* 堂屋 (main hall), *gongting* 公厅 (common hall), *zutang* 祖堂 (ancestral hall), or simply *tingtang* 厅堂 (hall), depending on the part of the country. But whatever it is called, this core room is always symbolic of unity and continuity if it contains the ancestral tablets of the family. Usually located at an interior location along the main north-south axis of the dwelling, central ritual rooms epitomize balance, axiality, and hierarchy. It is the fixing of the location of this central room that is the primary concern of practioners of *fengshui* (see Chapter 3), because the good fortune of a family depends so much upon it.

In main halls that are grand and elaborate, altars enshrining ancestral spirits are placed atop high tables or on a shelf reachable only by a short ladder; in more modest dwellings, such shrines are often tucked into the corner of a room generally serving some other purpose. The neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, writing in his twelfth-century liturgical manual *Family Rituals*, called for a separate, three-*jian*-wide ritual building for "a man of virtue," the dimensions and scale of which could hardly

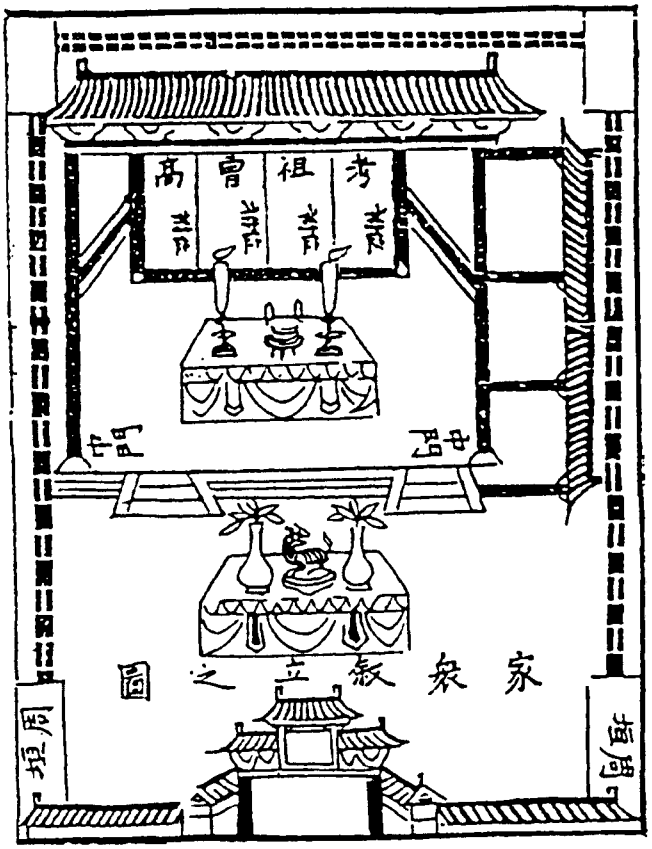

Figure 2.20 One representation of Zhu Xi's *citang*, or offering hall, this ceremonial structure includes two different tables on which offerings are placed, as well as tablets at the rear that represent the ancestors according to specific genealogical conventions. [Source: Ebrey 1991b, 9.]

be realized by most Chinese (Figure 2.20). Flexibility was conceded in terms of orientation of the offering hall: "In organizing the room, no matter which direction it actually faces, treat the front as south, the rear as north, the left as east, and the right as west" (Ebrey 1991b, 8). A seventeenth-century revision acknowledged that "those whose resources were inadequate could simply sweep a room and set out the ancestral tablets there" (Ebrey 1991a, 7). Even in a dirt-floored home, there is often a heightened formality to the room that holds ancestral tablets and religious images.

In rural Hong Kong and other areas of southeastern China, a central ancestral hall [*citang* 祠堂] serves as the focus for acknowledging a common ancestor. These ancestral halls are often the largest and most impressive structures in large single-surname villages, constructed only after a long period of growth of the lineage itself. The facades of some resemble the simple three-bay type discussed earlier (e.g., in Figures 2.18 and 2.19), although the halls themselves recede to greater depth in order to accommodate courtyards and side halls (Figures 2.21 and 2.22). As lineage halls memorializing remote ancestors who are no longer worshiped as near ancestors within the central halls of individual dwellings, *citang* continue even today, in some areas, to serve as community centers and schools. Variations in the form, content, and ritual associated with ancestral halls within homes, as well as with those that are centralized, are discussed for Hong Kong by Faure (1986) and for Taiwan by Ahern (1973, 91 ff.).

Throughout the nineteenth century, western observers in many areas of China wrote of the distinct activities and ornamentation associated with domestic shrines, sometimes likening them to temples of worship. Most such shrines have common elements in terms of furniture and its placement, although they differ in terms of their level of grandeur (Figure 2.23). Placed along the back wall, the family altar is usually an elongated high, narrow table called a *shenlong anzhuo* 神龙案桌 that faces the entryway. On this table ancestral tablets, images of gods and goddesses, and ritual paraphernalia are all arranged in a prescribed order. Ancestral tablets are usually placed on stage right of the tall table, and the gods on stage left (Figure 2.24). However, within grand dwellings whose commemorated ancestors go back many generations, the tablets traditionally were arranged chronologically and held in an ornate, wooden, tiered wall case or shrine that was either elevated behind the table or placed on it. Elaborate family shrines of this type sometimes look like three-*jian* buildings themselves, complete with pivoting lattice doors and substantial ornamental detail similar to those in Zhu Xi's ideal offering hall (see Figure 2.20) and evocative of shrines found in grand ancestral halls. Positioned among these critical elements are other ritual items such as incense pots, wax or electric candles, flower vases, packages of incense and firecrackers, divination blocks, wine cups, statues, souvenirs from temples visited, and perhaps

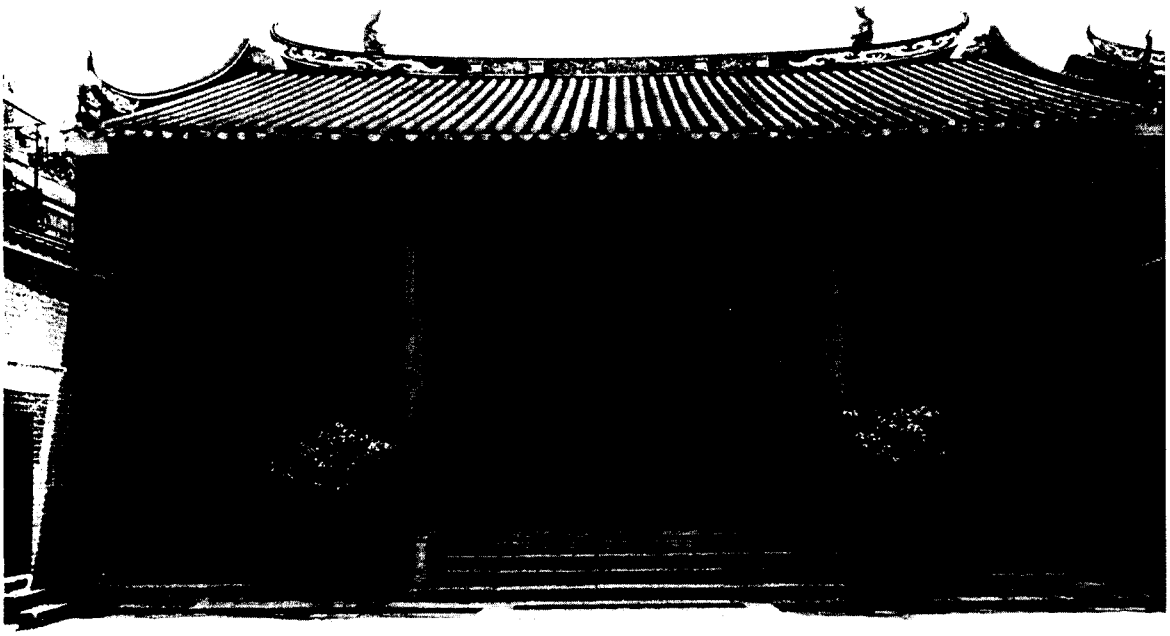

Figure 2.21 Some of the wealthy lineages in the rural areas of Hong Kong constructed magnificent freestanding ancestral halls. The impressive three-bay structure above, with its two open courtyards, was built in the early fourteenth century. Even today this *citang* serves as the site for weddings and funerals, periodic feasts, and as a meeting place for elders of the lineage. Pingshan, New Territories, Hong Kong. [RGK photograph 1997.]

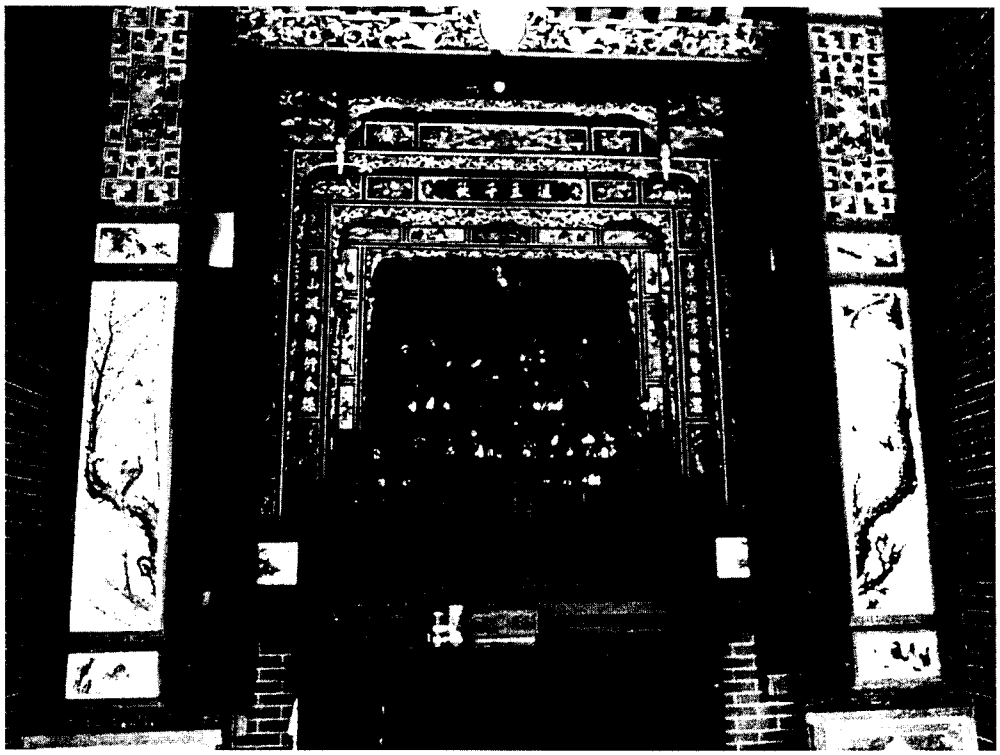

Figure 2.22 As the center of lineage life for a branch of the Tang clan, the ancestral hall shown in Figure 2.21 has at its core an elaborately carved ancestral altar. Encased at the top are tablets commemorating the founding ancestors, while those of more recent generations are displayed in a series of descending rows beneath. Pingshan, New Territories, Hong Kong. [RGK photograph 1997.]

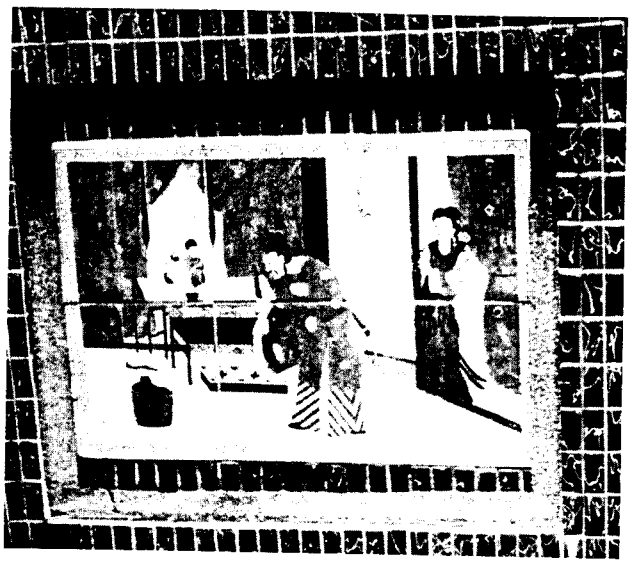

Figure 2.23 A long-legged high table and an accompanying lower square table are basic furniture elements for domestic ritual. This reminder of filial devotion to ancestors is one of several didactic illustrations placed around a grave site. While the wife looks on, the husband offers incense to images of his mother and father placed on the high table. Cangpo *cun*, Gangtou *xiang*, Yongjia *xian*, Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]

some wax fruit. Although high tables sometimes hold only the barest of ritual essentials, they are cluttered more often than not.

On a Taiwanese altar described by David K. Jordan, "the ancestors receive far less than half of the family altar for their sacrifices, the rest being given over to worshiping the gods, so also the ancestors receive much less attention than the gods" (1972, 96). This is because the gods are viewed as supernatural protectors, guardians and allies against malignant forces. Whereas each recent ancestor is represented by a tall, narrow wooden tablet on which the full name is written, either in black brush strokes or carved into its face, gods are embodied in lifelike porcelain statues recognizable to all. Sometimes an orange sheet of paper substitutes for a wooden tablet. In many areas of southern China, although incense is still lit twice a day and offerings of food made twice each month, on the first and fifteenth, and on festival days, the scope of ritual is a pale imitation of that of late imperial times. It was to the *zhengting* (middle hall) that male members of the family who were near death would be brought as an expression of articulation

Figure 2.24 Ancestral tablets, shown here, as well as portraits are sometimes found on the family's altar table along the back wall of the central room. As a ritual space, this long table also holds containers of various shapes into which incense sticks and candles are placed. Some incense is lit daily, but more is normally burned on the first and fifteenth days of the month and at the New Year. Shuitou *xiang*, Cangnan *xian*, Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]

within the descent group. Here also, a betrothal would be announced and a new groom and his bride come to make a report to the ancestors and pay solemn obeisance to the groom's parents. Zhu Xi's twelfth-century *Family Rituals* manual and its many subsequent revisions explicitly spelled out the nature of rites to be conducted in this room, few of which are observed widely today, even though the room remains the spatial focal point of many dwellings (Ebrey 1991a, 1991b).

At least one and sometimes two sturdy tables are usually placed in front of the altar, differing in quality according to the circumstances of the household (Figures 2.25, 2.26, and 2.27). Lower than the long altar behind them, these include rectangular sidetables [*changji* 长几] and square Eight Immortals tables [*baxian zhuo* 八仙桌]. (The significance of the "Eight Immortals table"

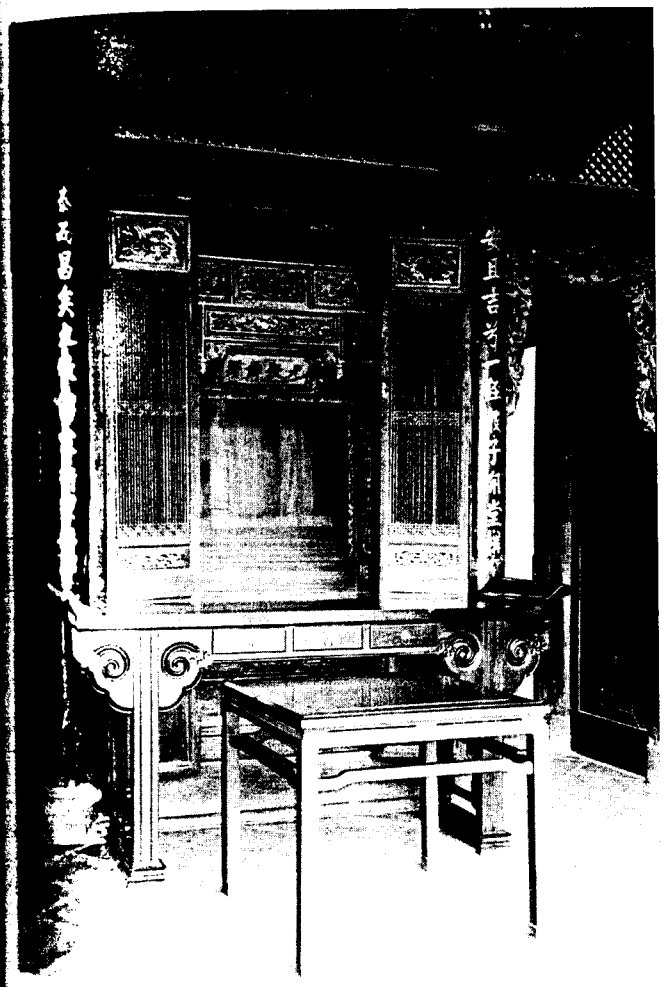

Figure 2.25 Even without the ancestral tablets and ritual paraphernalia that brought the space to life, this family altar is imposing and a witness to the wealth and standing of the family. Lin Antai dwelling, Taipei, Taiwan. [RGK photograph 1997.]

Figure 2.26 Although no ancestral tablets line the wall behind the altar or are displayed on it, this location at the back of the central room is the focus of family rituals. A censer in the shape of a longevity character and a pair of candlesticks are placed on the low square table, while the altar table holds two flower vases. The painting behind is of He He, the celestial twins (see Chapter 9). One carries a lotus and the other a box—both visual and aural elements that share the sound *he*, for "harmony" and "union," and indicate a wish for family unity. [Source: Wu Youru 1983 vol. 3, set 10, no. 3.]

Figure 2.27 Here the high long-legged table in the rear has lost its function as a ritual altar, holding instead a television set and clock. In front of it, in traditional fashion, are two square *baxian,* or "Eight Immortals" tables. These tables are clearly the focus of family activity. The photographs of deceased parents are flanked by colorful calendars and a picture of Shou Xing, the stellar god of longevity. The hanging couplets mix the traditional with the contemporary: "Green pines and white crane enrich the spring sights of the earth" and "Man's longevity and harvests contribute to the Four Modernizations." Lingshan *cun,* Zhoupu *xiang,* Xihu *qu,* Hangzhou *shi,* Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]

is discussed in Chapter 8.) Whenever there is a major ritual such as one related to the death or marriage of a family member, the *baxian* table is adorned with an embroidered cover. Cubical in overall shape, *baxian* tables have many mundane uses that go beyond regular ritual uses such as holding sacrificial offerings of food, incense, and lighted candles. Many common *baxian* tables are fitted out with four trestle benches that seat a total of eight people, but it is common to use stools and chairs with them as well. In the homes of the wealthy, an elaborate hardwood *baxian* table is normally flanked by a pair of backed chairs [*kaobei yi* 靠背椅]. *Baxian* tables often are carried to the middle of the room and used by the family for meals, by children to do their schoolwork on, and for playing games. It is only these square tables, and not the high altar table, that are carried outside and used as temporary altars during local festivals (Figure 2.28). Since the central *jian* is the room where guests are received, the convention is for other furniture to be rather formally and austerely arranged

Figure 2.28 Only a *baxian* table, and not the high altar table, can be carried outside as a temporary altar. Taoyuan *xian,* Taiwan. [RGK photograph 1966.]

along the side walls, but the specifics of each pattern vary from place to place.

The wall space behind these tables is usually covered with backdrop hangings of various types—paintings or prints of popular deities, auspicious birthday prints, calligraphic couplets, and, in some areas of the southeast, brilliantly colored paintings on glass (Figures 2.29 and 2.30). Sometimes charms on yellow paper are affixed to unadorned spaces to ward off misfortune. Variations in the array of basic elements and miscellanea are a matter of budget and taste as well as ritual requirements. Because the front doors of Chinese dwellings in rural and urban areas are usually open, domestic

Figure 2.29 The walls encircling the family's antique ritual furniture are hung with overlapping scroll prints, all of which were given to the family when it moved into its new house. Aside from a pair of brass candlesticks and a vase of plastic flowers, the tables only hold an electric fan, clock, and radio/tape deck. The lower *baxian* table is flanked by a matching pair of ornate chairs. Zhiyan *xiang,* Lanxi *shi,* Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]

Figure 2.30 Although lacking a high altar table, the symmetrical arrangement of furniture and wall hangings in this room is quite traditional. On each side of the *baxian* table is a matching chair. The table itself holds a clock, two tubular vases, and a tea set. Auspicious themes abound on the hangings on the back and side walls. Southern suburbs of Beijing. [RGK photograph 1991.]

altars are visible to passersby. To the world beyond the family, this visible altar publicly attests to its unity even in the face of a family's slow disintegration: "The physical presence of the altar also represents the family as a well-knit, integrated unit. A house with two altars contains two families; a household with no altar usually considers itself part of another family, and will return there for important rituals" (Weller 1987, 26).

Throughout the mainland, ancestral shrines, tablets, and even serviceable furniture from common dwellings, as well as from the larger homes of landlords and the urban bourgeoisie, were destroyed during the Land Reform of the early 1950s and again during the period of the Four Cleanups in the 1960s. Few ritual objects of wood or paper survived the vicissitudes of these tumultuous times because they were, of course, vulnerable to fire and weather. Furthermore, most rooms that had once held ritual furniture and objects were transformed to serve more mundane, secular purposes in an effort by Communist authorities to stamp out "superstitious practices." Still, the grandeur of many of these center halls has not diminished completely, even in the absence of the ritual paraphernalia necessary to bring them to life. Throughout much of the mainland today, there is a revival of the domestic cult centered on ancestral worship, but rarely does it attain the intensity either of past practices or of those still being observed in Taiwan and Hong Kong.

CHAPTER 3

Fengshui: Siting and Mystical Ecology

BUILDING SITES for structures of all types—houses, temples, palaces, even graves—have traditionally been selected based on an organic view of the cosmos that binds individuals, families, and society at large to the past and future via the medium of *fengshui*. *Fengshui* 风水, literally "wind and water," continues to be a popular yet abstruse set of spatial beliefs and practices concerning the fact that human modifications of landscapes do not simply bring about surface changes but create conditions that influence, and even control, the fortunes of those who occupy the sites thus modified. According to general *fengshui* axioms, certain building locations are more favorable than others for a family; these must therefore be determined in order for benefits to redound both to those discerning them and to their descendants. Ancient classics reaching back to the Zhou period (1100–770 B.C.), such as the *Shijing* [Book of songs] and the *Shujing* [Book of documents], reveal the cosmo-symbolic conventions relevant to the siting of imperial capitals and palaces. Yet it is the application of *fengshui* practices by common people in determining auspicious sites for new or renovated houses that reveals most clearly the deeply rooted nature of this quest for spatial harmony.

Fengshui is practiced throughout China but has flourished especially in the southern provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, Taiwan, Guangdong, and Jiangxi, as well as in Hong Kong. Those most able to avail themselves of the diagnostic potential of *fengshui* must possess at least a modicum of wealth to afford its application, yet it is not only the wealthy who pursue it. Although the use of *fengshui* by common Chinese peasants in the past cannot be well documented, it is clear that they often gave up even their meager resources to gain the benefits that it might provide. Observations of simple dwellings throughout China, in remote as well as cosmopolitan areas, confirm the fact that countless illiterate peasants sited their dwellings in broad conformity with *fengshui* esoterica as they sought the benefits of its application. Common people, in the past and even today, clearly are no less concerned than others with worldly benefits and the avoidance of misfortune. Indeed, "locating a good site is more than an exercise in cosmological abstraction and the manipulation of theoretical constructs; it is the successful application of cosmology to everyday life" (Bennett 1978, 21). Chinese of all economic levels continue to employ *fengshui* in order to accommodate their lives within the totality of time and space, as well as to pursue worldly benefit and avoid misfortune. Basic to these beliefs is the conviction that one must not wait passively for one's share of good fortune but must actively strive to determine optimal spatial and temporal relations.

Popular notions of *fengshui*, however fuzzy, abound and enjoy a remarkably enduring credibility, perhaps due to the insistence on striving to maintain equilibrium and harmony in a world of constant flux. The term *"fengshui"* is a modern colloquial expression of elaborated general ideas that encapsulates the more abstruse principles associated with esoteric terms such as *"kanyu," "dili," "xing fa," "xiangzhai,"* and *"qingwu,"* used centuries earlier in classical texts (Shi 1992, 11 ff). *Kanyu* 堪輿, "the canopy of heaven and the chariot of earth," expresses broad issues of Chinese cosmology that link heaven and earth, while *dili* 地理, "earth truth" denotes

the scrutinizing of the surface features of our planet with the intent of correlating them with cosmological elements (today *dili* is the term used for the discipline of geography). The word "geomancy" has often been used to translate *fengshui*, but many have found this inadequate, suggesting instead "topomancy" (Feuchtwang 1974, 2); "astro-ecology," "topographical siting," and "siting" (Bennett 1978, 2; Smith 1991, 131); "mystical ecology" (Knapp 1986, 108–109); and "natural science of the landscape" (Berglund 1990, 240). Rather than any of these terms, however, *fengshui* will be used here in untranslated form to embrace various meanings relating to purposeful attempts to harmonize structures within their immediate physical environments.

The essence of *fengshui* is a universe animated by the interaction of *yin* 阴 and *yang* 阳 in which an ethereal property known as *qi* 气 ("life breath" or "cosmic energy") gives character and meaning to a place. Places may be spoken of at an elementary level as exemplifying either *yin* or *yang* characteristics, although sites usually exhibit both traits simultaneously. *Yin* sites express the female aspect, representing passivity and darkness, the Earth and moon, and frequently fall away from the sun to the north or northwest. They are optimal for burial, providing "conductors of a power that originates in nature itself" (Watson 1988, 206). The divination of these "*yin* abodes" [*yinzhai* 阴宅], the graves of the dead, in a quest for benefits has always been a primary focus of *fengshui* (Ahern 1973; Freedman 1966). The complementary male or *yang* characteristic expresses brightness and activity, the Heavens and the sun; *yang* sites thus serve the living as suitable places for family dwellings. Determining the sites for "*yang* abodes" [*yangzhai* 阳宅], the residences of the living, also in a quest for benefits has similarly been defined in great detail in popular lore and in books. Following the principles of *fengshui*, dwellings generally face south or southeast throughout China, but proper siting goes well beyond mere considerations of compass direction, or *xiang* 向.

A "wind and water interpreter" [*fengshui xiansheng* 风水先生, *fengshui shi* 风水师, *kanyu jia* 堪舆家, or *dili xiansheng* 地理先生, among others], sometimes called a geomancer in English, provides access to this mystical ecology. The typical *fengshui* practioner in traditional China armed himself with a geomancer's compass, or *luopan*, several manuals, and often a copy of the *Yijing* [Book of changes] in order to carry out the arcane probing of a building site (see Figure 3.1). "About all their movements there is an air of classic decorum," observed a Westerner at the end of the imperial period, "and it is no wonder, therefore, that the masses regard the geomancers as fountains of wisdom, marvels of learning, capable of fathoming all the mysteries of heaven and earth" (De Groot 1892–1910, III:1010).

Figure 3.1 With an air of cultured decorum, a "wind and water interpreter" and his assistants set out to select a building site. [Source: Cheng 1992, 5.]

Today, however, the *fengshui* practioner "usually dresses in plain working clothes and lives in an unimpressive house which does not display his trade. He has the appearance of a craftsman . . . although his vocabulary contains a large number of terms that commoners do not understand" (Bruun 1996a, 53). Throughout most of China today, one seeks a geomancer on the basis of recommendations from family and friends. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, geomancers can be identified from listings in the Yellow Pages of telephone directories, and some even have web sites on the Internet.

A *fengshui* compass, or *luopan* 罗盘 [also called a *luojing* 罗经], is a saucerlike block of wood that has at its center a magnetized south-pointing compass set within the *yin-yang* symbol and surrounded, usually, by at least a dozen—but ranging from three to almost fifty—concentric rings (Figure 3.2). Each of the rings symbolically represents the ordering of Chinese metaphysics via interrelating celestial and terrestrial relationships. The circular bands include, among a host of cosmic variables, the *taiji* 太极 symbol representing the duality of *yin* and *yang,* the four seasons, the Five Agents (sometimes called Five Phases or Five Elements), the Eight Trigrams, the nine constellations, the ten "heavenly stems," the twelve "earthly branches," the duodenary and sexagenary cycles, and the twenty-eight constellations. By manipulating the cosmological correspondences among these ring complexes, especially their numerical and correlative natures, it is believed to be possible to divine the potentialities of building sites and determine their aesthetic logic. To misconstrue any of the relationships among the configurations is to invite adversity (Feuchtwang 1974, 18–40; Lee Sang Hae 1986, 199–240).

Although a congeries of theories, notions, and conventions that have existed in many forms, *fengshui* by late imperial times was characterized by two basic approaches, one emphasizing cosmic patterns and principles, and the other stressing their manifestations on the surface of the Earth: a Forms and Configurations School [*xingshi zong* 形势宗] that was visually and intu-

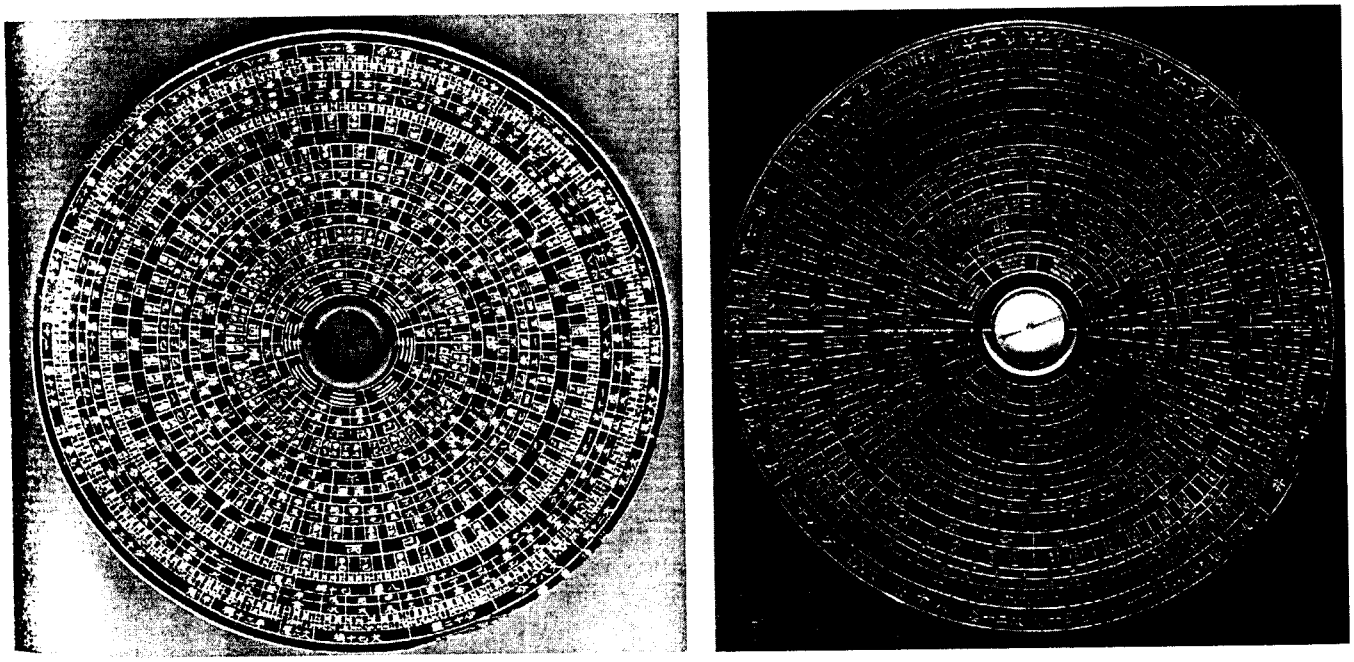

Figure 3.2 Two contemporary *luopan,* or *fengshui* compasses. On the left is a somewhat crude painted block of wood with a printed paper surface showing twenty-one concentric circles. Foshan, Guangdong 1977. On the right is a lacquered and brass *luopan* with seventeen concentric circles. Xinzhu, Taiwan 1993. [RGK collection.]

itively based, and a younger Analytical, also called Compass, School [*liqi zong* 理气宗 or *fangwei zong* 方位宗] that depended on complicated calculations. Both schools are associated with traditions and practices that originated in southern China. Emphasis in Jiangxi province was on the character of terrain, especially the nature of mountains and watercourses, while in Fujian province calculations based on directions that were associated with the rings of the *luopan* dominated. Over time, however, these two distinct approaches became blurred in actual practice, as intuition and theory about celestial and terrestrial phenomena commingled not only in Fujian and Jiangxi but also elsewhere in the country.

Both schools of *fengshui* set out to discover *xue* 穴, an analogous term meaning "lair," "cave," or "hole" and used also for critical acupuncture points, where *qi* 气 (also called *shengqi* 生气, "life force" or "cosmic energy") concentrates. Because vital *qi* flows naturally from above and below, buildings must be placed at a *xue* so as not to obstruct the movement of *qi*. A *xue*, however, is more than a spot where *qi* is concentrated from above and below. It is also a horizontal spatial composition encompassing significant surface features—features that are metaphorical expressions in the case of the Forms School and/or geometrical and metaphorical relationships in the case of the Analytical School. *Xue* exist at different scales to meet the needs of the placement of graves, houses, villages, and, indeed, whole cities. A *xue* must be located at the converging focus of a clearly demarcated serpentine chain of hills or mountains and within the protective embrace of an armchairlike set of lesser topographical features.

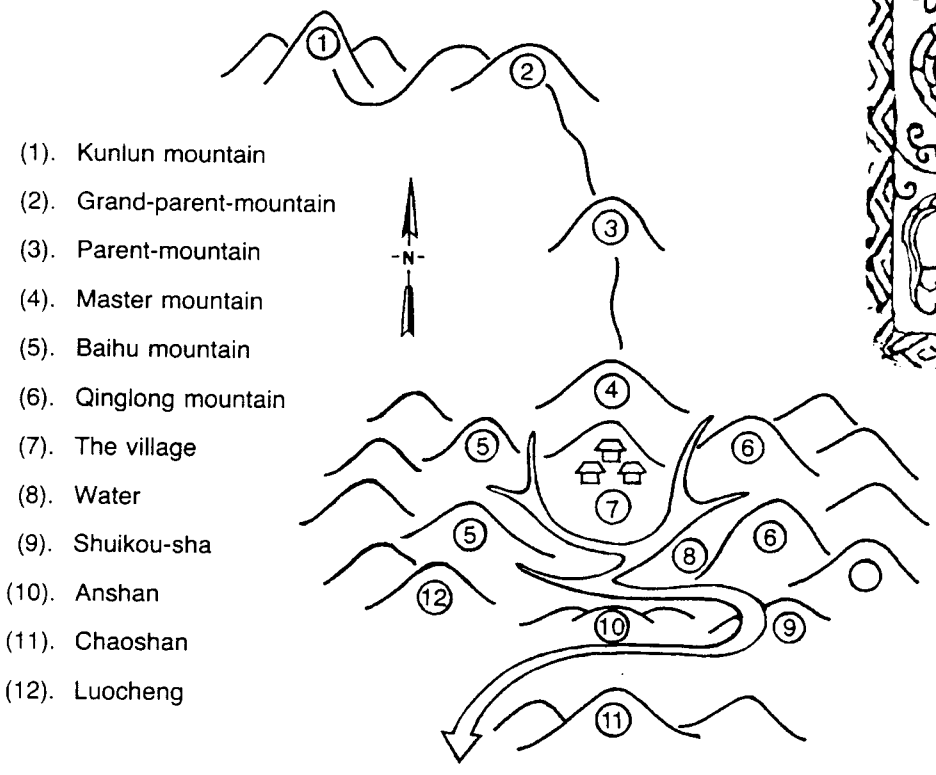

Figure 3.3 Metaphorically described as dragons, serpentine mountains help define an ideal building site. [Source: Fan Wei 1992, 40.]

Figure 3.4 Correlated with the four directions, the *sishen* (four spiritual animals) shown on this Han-period engraved tile are oriented so that south is on the upper portion. The sequence follows a clockwise movement, beginning on the left with the azure dragon facing east, followed by the vermilion bird south, the white tiger west, and the black tortoise north. [Source: N. Wu 1963, 1.]

Sinuous mountains leading to a *xue* are metaphorically described as a "dragon" [*long* 龙] whose body is an undulating yet interconnected organism (Figure 3.3). The more extensive and complex the dragon's form, the more complete the *fengshui* associations. *Fengshui* interpreters attempt to link *long* from Kunlun Mountain through "grandparent" and "parent" mountains as they diminish in elevation and extent directly to a building site. In addition to the dominating serial *long,* nearby topographical features called "local eminences" [*sha* 砂 or 沙], which include elevated ridges and watercourses, such as the *shuikou-sha* in Figure 3.3, are meticulously analyzed and distinguished. The peculiar use of the term "*sha,*" meaning "sand," is believed to derive from the fact that *fengshui* practitioners transmitted ideas to their students by forming ridges and valleys of sand on the ground to model different paradigmatic configurations (Lee Sang Hae 1986, 182).

An ideal building site is one in which "a watercourse embraces (in a smooth curve) and a mountain ridge protectively runs (around the site)" that concentrates *qi* [*shuibao shanhui* 水抱山迴 or, similarly, *shanhuan shuibao biyou qi* 山环水抱必有气]. Such a configuration is sometimes described as a Chinese-style armchair with a high back, left and right arms, and a low, open front. In the vocabulary of *fengshui,* left, front, right, and back correspond to east, south, west, and north—the Chinese sequence for expressing directional order. Together they mark a microcosmic matrix composed of synonymous compass directions, topographical configurations, and references to Chinese correlative thinking. Each cardinal direction is identified with one of the "four spiritual animals" [*si shen* 四神, also *si shou* 四獸], as shown in Figure 3.4: To the east is the azure dragon [*qinglong* 青龙], representing the element wood and emblemizing spring, the rising sun, and the birth of *yang.* To the south is the vermilion phoenix [*zhuque* 朱雀], representing the element fire and indicating summer and the period of maximum *yang.* To the west is the white tiger [*baihu* 白虎], associated with the element metal and symbolizing autumn, the harvest, and the birth of *yin.* Completing the cycle in the north are the black snake and tortoise [*xuanwu* 玄武], representing the element water and emblemizing winter and maximum *yin.* Man is to be anchored in the soil or earth, the fifth agent/element, found in the center of the cosmic map. The center is considered a fifth "direction," thus resulting in the correlation of five directions with the Five Agents. In addition to four cardinal directions and the center, four corner directions, each intermediate between two cardinal points, are recognized. Together, these nine directions are correlated with the Nine Palaces [*jiugong* 九宫] housing "star spirits," whose positions presage auspicious or inauspicious directions at different times and were thus reported in annual almanacs. The specific cardinal directions were often less important to the siting of a dwelling than were the expressions of front, back, and sides in terms of orientation toward the front [*xiang* 向] and the "seating" of the dwelling at its rear [*zuo* 座].

Fengshui manuals usually emphasize the shape of hills as a key to siting and include diagrams showing the many patterns of terrain that can be encountered. Figure 3.5

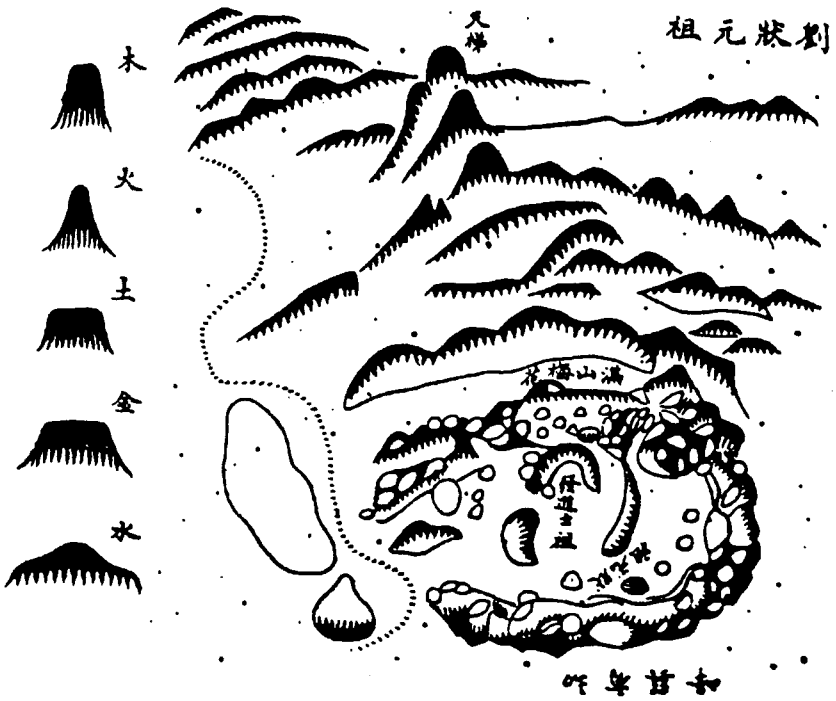

Figure 3.5 In determining a building site, whether for a grave or a dwelling, attention is paid to hill shapes in the immediate vicinity insofar as they relate to *wuxing* (Five Agents) cosmology. From top to bottom on the left side are shapes representing wood, fire, earth, metal, and water. [Source: Adapted from *Dixue tanyuan* 1966, 2, 13.]

shows basic hill and water shapes related to the *wuxing* 五行, or Five Agents (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) recognition of which is a primary step in choosing an auspicious building site. By association, these are related to the five planets so that "the terrestrial configurations are in agreement with the celestial order" [*xingfeng peitian* 星峰配天]. The transmutative Five Agents are capable of producing or destroying each other, and thus any association is assumed to have the same capacities. That this ability waxes and wanes through a twelve-stage cycle, repeating itself five times, produces an extraordinary number of permutations and makes judgments about auspicious building sites even more cryptic than they otherwise are.

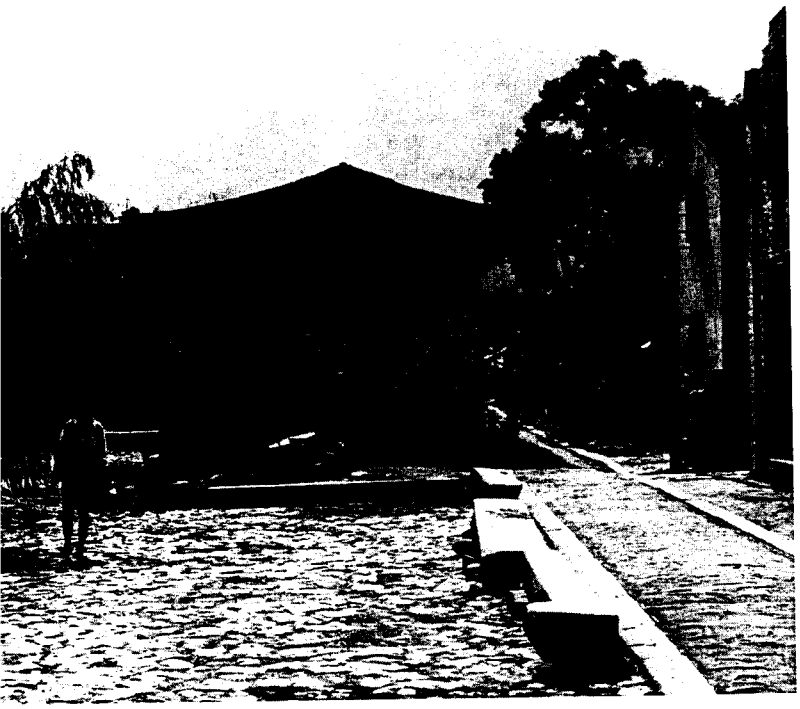

Figure 3.6 The hills to the west of Cangpo village, Gangtou *xiang*, Yongjia *xian*, Zhejiang are pointed peaks signifying fire. As such, they are viewed as capable of destroying metal in the destructive cycle of the Five Agents. To counter this inappropriate form, as well as an abundance of fire in other quarters, two large ponds were dug to alleviate the threat. [RGK photograph 1990.]

The most prominent and immediate *sha* morphological markers associated with a building site are those on the left/east (i.e., *qinglong*, the azure dragon) and right/west (*baihu*, the white tiger). Correlated with *yang* and *yin*, the male and female aspects, *qinglong* and *baihu* are not static but vital, interacting and intertwining as well as concentrating *qi* within a protected node. Like elevated ridges, hills, and mountains, water is also of great significance in determining an auspicious site. Especially important is a meandering stream in front of a site that is to be occupied. In cases where ridges or watercourses are absent, roads, ponds, or even structures may serve as *sha*. Naming landmarks in terms of the azure dragon, vermilion bird, white tiger, and black tortoise creates a set of formal and informal reference positions that have clear spatial implications. The use of these names in describing ridges, watercourses, ponds, and groves—as well as bridges, gates, streets, pagodas, temples, gardens, and other cultural and natural features—creates a familiar mental map with distinctive spatial markers for all who use them.

Focusing on affinities as well as oppositions, the intent has always been to locate a "balanced" and rather "symmetrical" site:

> On a rock hill you must take an earthly site; on an earth hill you must take a rocky site. Where it is confined, take an open place; where it is open, take a confined space. On a prominence, take the flat; where it is flat, take the prominent. Where strong comes, take weak; where weak comes, take strong. Where there are many hills, emphasize water; where there is much water, emphasize hills. (Shanghai xingxiang 1957, 63; quoted in A. March 1968, 258)

As characterized in a *fengshui* manual: "Mountain and water are male and female . . . . If the dragon curls left, the water has to curl right; if the dragon curls right, the water has to curl left; the two embrace each other, and only then does the site coalesce" (Ye 1696, *ce* 1.12b; quoted in A. March 1968, 258). Different criteria must be used in analyzing potential building sites on level plains that are open, as compared to those in hilly areas that are contained, but in all cases sites must be relatively "secluded" to ensure that *qi* is not dispersed.

The scripting of any auspicious landscape configuration according to *fengshui* usually reveals many lacunae and imperfections. Because few building locations are ideal, modifications must be made to improve the spatial patterns. Ponds can be dug at the front to mitigate shortages of naturally flowing water, or they can be situated so as to dampen the presence of "fire" peaks where they should not be (Figure 3.6). A phalanx of trees can be planted along the west or north side of a dwelling as a shield to compensate for the weakness of a flawed ridge line. Although the shape of a hill can be modified by chiseling (e.g., to alter a "fire"-shaped peak into a more benign one), care must be taken not to excessively damage the natural feature. As will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, small but significant ornamentation can also be strategically placed about the facade as enhancements that "summon good fortune and keep misfortune at bay" [*qu ji bi xiong* 趋吉避凶]. *Mingtang* 明堂 ["bright or cosmic courts"], for example, were often constructed at the front/south of individual residences or a whole village in southern China, either as an open courtyard, a threshing ground, or a large pond, in order to complete the composition (Figure 3.7). Usually broad and open, *mingtang* never slope toward a building site.

Care is always taken in site selection so that no part of a finished building is shaded by hills on the east, south, or west, thus ensuring early access to sunrise and late exposure to sunset. Such a pattern, it is believed, heightens the appearance of *yang*, the life-giving presence related to the sun. Hills are permitted at the rear, not only because they do not block the sun but because

Figure 3.7 Many *fengshui* considerations were made in the formation of Xiqi village, Taishan *xian*, Guangdong. The village is a tight rectangle, oriented toward the south, that is sited snugly within the embrace of a south-facing slope. A threshing ground and pond were constructed at its front as a *mingtang* (cosmic court). 1989. [Original photo used with the permission of Jonathan Hammond.]

they help guard the rear flank of any structure. The practical benefits of proper siting are succinctly stated in the *Yangzhai shishu* 阳宅十书 [Ten writings on *yang* dwellings]: "To have the front high and the rear low is to be cut off with no family. With the rear high and the front low is to have oxen and horses" (Wang Junrong 1882). Thus practical considerations clearly underlie the ritualized prescriptions of *fengshui*. A south-facing slope protected on the north by a set of interlocking mountain ranges provides a building site open to the sun throughout the year and protected in winter from the cold winds characteristic of eastern Asia's climate. "Sitting north and facing south" [*zuobei chaonan* 座北朝南] was traditionally a fundamental ingredient in properly siting dwellings, and it is employed widely throughout China even today. Such an orientation is a device for obtaining the best advantage of sun and wind. Even without a compass, orientation to the cardinal directions can be determined easily, either by marking the shadow of the sun at noon on successive days or by observing the Polar Star. Because the sun is regular in its path across the sky, the axial arrangement of a house controls the degree to which the sun's heat is seasonally captured or evaded. These natural conditions can be fine-tuned by the addition of overhanging eaves that block the high sun's rays in summer yet permit those of the low winter sun to enter. Working with nature, practical and aware peasants traditionally were able to avoid marshy areas and build on a well-drained site even though water coursed across it. On such sites, water was available for cooking, washing, and irrigation, yet surplus water was carried away.

Fengshui divination is linked not only to particular characteristics of building sites but also to personal aspects of the owner's birth—namely, the "eight characters" [*bazi* 八字] relating to the year, month, day, and time thereof, each of which is expressed in a set of paired characters. Each of these pairs consists of one Heavenly Stem and one Earthly Branch; taken together, these are critically important in determining one's fate. This concatenation of temporal and spatial elements, it has always been believed, makes it possible for a person and his family to isolate and accrue for themselves a fund of good fortune in a world of limited resources.

Once a building site has been selected at a bounded *xue* node in terms of *long* and *sha*, concern turns to the immediate environs of the prospective house, with an eye to features that might influence the lives of those dwelling within. At this scale of an individual dwelling, an especially auspicious traditional pattern has the shape of a human body with two extended or embracing arms (seen in Figure 3.8)—a shape that includes

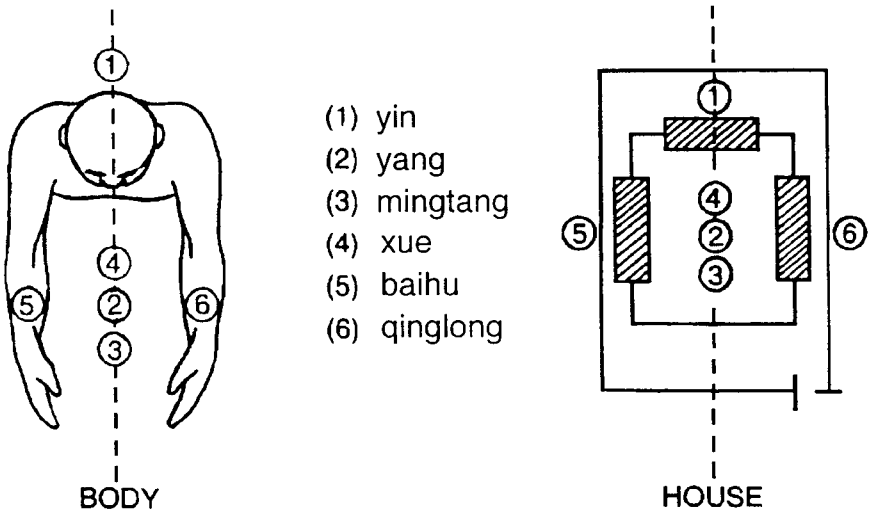

Figure 3.8 *Fengshui* texts sometimes draw an analogy between the composition of the human figure and that of residential compounds. [Fan Wei 1992, 38.]

elements analogous to broader *fengshui* configurations. This spatial plan clearly serves as the template for both *siheyuan*- and *sanheyuan*-type courtyard structures, forms widely recognized as epitomizing a harmonious nucleus of habitation.

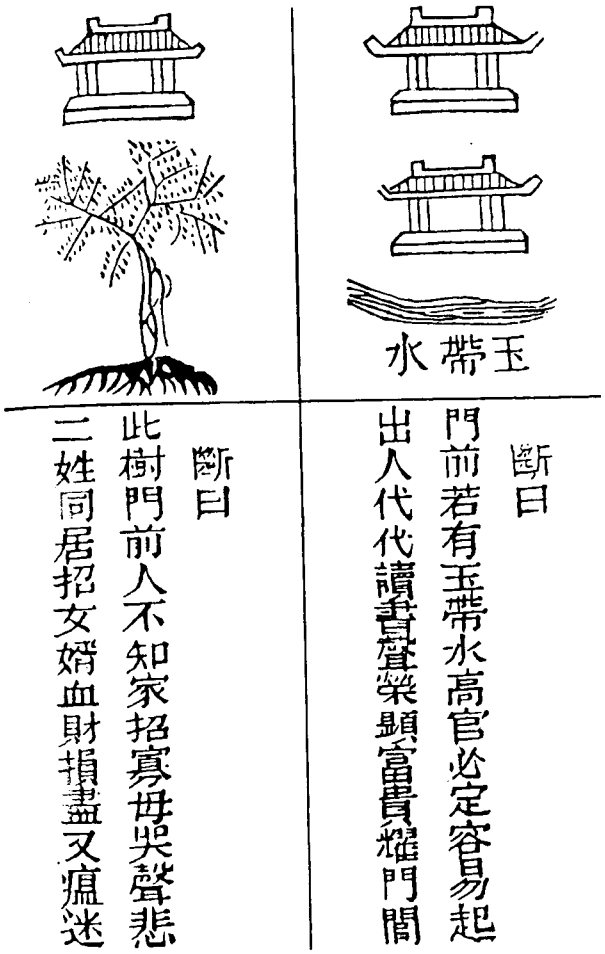

Figure 3.9 Focusing on what appears in front of the main gate, *fengshui* manuals use simple diagrams and inscriptions to point to the likelihood of good or bad fortune. *Left:* "Paying no attention to this tree in front of the gate, this family will have the vicissitude of sad wailing from a widowed mother. Two surnames shall dwell together here through taking in a son-in-law. There is to be a total wasting away of hard-earned wealth as well as pestilence and bedevilment." *Right:* "If there is a 'jade belt stream' in front of the gate, this will easily give rise to high office, begetting generation after generation of scholars who will bring wealth and honor to glorify the house." [Wang Junrong 1982.]

The directional orientation and character of the main gate are deemed especially critical because the placement of the gate ultimately determines the alignment of the ridgepole of the roof of the dwelling's main structure. *Fengshui* manuals and carpenters' handbooks, such as the *Lu Ban jing* (see Chapter 4), describe the circumstances of a dwelling's immediate environs that presage good or bad fortune for the household and also offer injunctions for carrying out the needed work. Among the portentous natural and man-made landscape features demanding consideration in relation to the main gate are the presence of trees, rocks, ditches, pools, wells, watercourses, roads, and other houses (Figure 3.9). A tree in front of the gate, for example, is said to portend early widowhood, the taking in of a son-in-law, loss of wealth, pestilence, and general bedevilment, and thus must be avoided. Neither watercourses nor roads should run directly toward a dwelling because this provides a condition for wealth to drain away, through the division of the family fields due to dissension in the household.

The manuals also give some attention to the benefits of high-quality carpentry work and include exhortations about good maintenance: Owners are encouraged to see to it that door stiles are plumb, that door leaves are not askew, that walls and tie-beams fit closely, and that walls and doors are mended when necessary. A large class of advice focuses on the curvature of paths and how paths either open a home to misfortune or protect it. Seventy-one illustrated sets of such admonitions in four-line rhymes are in a seventeenth-century edition of the *Lu Ban jing*, fifty-two portraying unfavorable situations and nineteen showing favorable ones. (Facsimile reproductions of this and several other rare editions of the *Lu Ban jing*, as well as comparative translations, are found in Ruitenbeck 1993.) A similar set of seventy-two appears in a reprint edition of the *Huitu Lu Ban jing* published in Taiwan, which by 1989 was in its ninth modern printing. Most such advice highlights the need to pay attention to drainage, natural light, ventilation, sanitation, and access, all reasonable ingredients of a pleasant place to live and ones that also contribute to good health.

Over the past decade, *fengshui* "manuals" of all types have been found in the markets throughout rural China, and especially in the south. Many are crudely printed and bound, clear evidence that they are illegal underground publications that have not been approved by the authorities and that are aimed at "unsophisticated" buyers. Some reproduce illustrations from traditional manuals and handbooks, rendering the classical text in simplified characters and colloquial language. Some are obvious reprintings of Taiwan and Hong Kong publications, without proper attribution; others are coarsely produced, with fictitious publishing pedigrees that easily dupe the unwary. Throughout many of them, commonsense admonitions that have stood the test of time are mixed with contemporary concerns and, sometimes, nonsense. References to venereal diseases, clutter under the bed, the placement of television sets, and excessive decoration are de rigueur in current *fengshui* booklets.

One of these recent booklets, which purports to have been published in Beijing and printed in Shandong (as nominal signs of authenticity) points out, as any traditional manual would, that riches and rank come to those who build with flowing water in front of their dwellings (Figure 3.10). It further warns that the presence of stagnant water in front of a home will lead to the birth of girls rather than boys, a precautionary admonition that resonates powerfully in rural China today (Yu Xing n.d., 37). Another handbook, which claims to have been printed in Hebei by the official-sounding "Central People's Institute" in one place and the "Central Nationalities Institute" in another, is replete with eccentric drawings of houses with their roof beams running north to south, among other oddities that suggest its shady provenance (Figure 3.11). Such a ridgeline orientation is relatively uncommon in China; the associated recommendations thus stir a degree of bewilderment in the minds of careful readers, even though the manual maintains that a southern exposure with an east to west ridgepole "is generally not bad." Recommendations about locations to be avoided in the placement of toilets (Figure 3.12) are among the reasonably practical advice given.

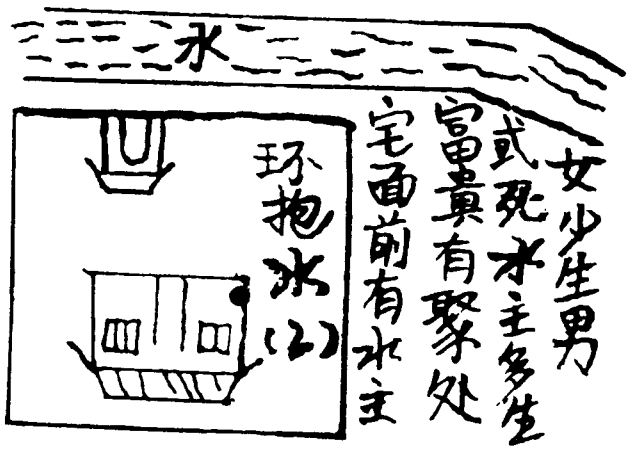

Figure 3.10 Water circulating around a dwelling has several effects. A modern rendition tells us that riches and rank come to those with a flowing stream in front of their dwelling, but that if there is stagnant water, more girls than boys will be born. [Source: Yu Xing n.d., 37.]

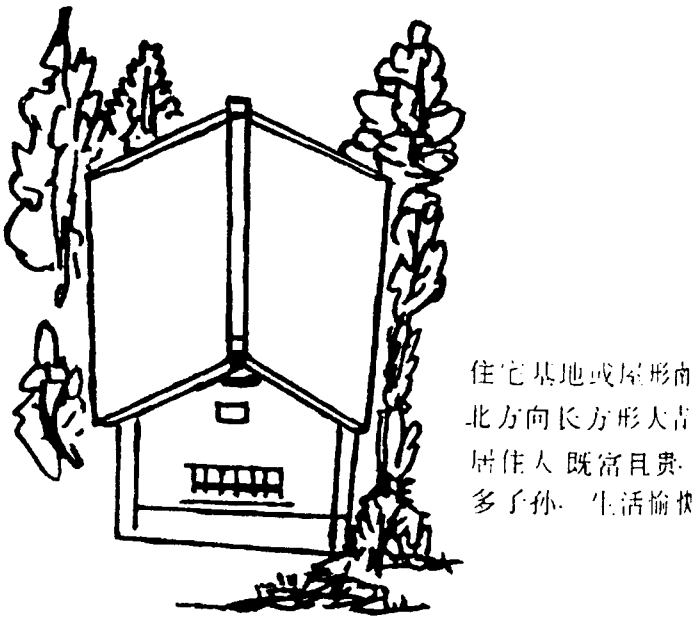

Figure 3.11 Countering conventional wisdom, this contemporary *fengshui* manual tells us that a house oriented north to south will bring good fortune, wealth, and riches to its occupants, many grandsons, and a happy life. [Source: Li Tianlin 1993, 76.]

These manuals, purchased in rural markets of southern Jiangxi in 1993, differ little from others that can be found elsewhere in the country. During the past decade and a half of economic reforms, "*fengshui* specialized households," or *fengshui zhuanyehu* 风水专业户 (*zhuanyehu* being the entrepreneurial, sometimes described as "capitalistic," engines of recent rural economic growth), have even emerged in Hunan and the rural counties of Shanghai, among other areas, according to authoritative reports (Liu Shaoming 1994, 1). Chapter 9 describes and evaluates the reemergence of *fengshui* and other folk practices in recent years and attempts to place them in historical perspective. In the meantime, it is clear that *fengshui* continues to be a deeply rooted belief system that guides the siting of dwellings throughout China.

厕所马桶面朝
北方大凶，祸来难测。

Figure 3.12 According to this prescription, if a toilet is located facing north, misfortune will occur. [Source: Li Tianlin 1993, 96.]