

# Home Beyond the House: Transformation of Life, Place, and Tradition in Rural China

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## Introduction

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# Introduction

A story that I came across on the internet in 2012 deeply touched my heart. It was the story of Mr. Zhang, a farmer living in Bajiao village, Chuangliu County, Sichuan Province, China.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Zhang and his wife until recently had lived in a traditional house that had more than 2,000 sq. ft. of floor space and a courtyard. Supported by this space, Mr. Zhang and his wife raised about 40 sheep, a few pigs, and many chickens. In addition, they cultivated vegetables on a small piece of land, which was about one-third of an acre. In July 2009, this peaceful and comfortable lifestyle, as they thought of it, was put to an end when the county government relocated the entire village of 320 families to a newly constructed settlement area about two kilometers away. As compensation for the loss of his home, Mr. Zhang was given a new 750 sq. ft. apartment, which was inside a six-story building surrounded by a dozen other apartment buildings. However, as of November 2010, when Mr. Zhang was interviewed, he had not spent a single night in this new apartment; instead, he had been sleeping with his sheep inside a rented space for all those months. Mr. Zhang told the reporter that if he moved to his new apartment, he would not be able to keep his sheep or hogs, nor have a place to dry the crops upon harvest. So, he preferred to sleep with his sheep every night. In addition, he had to store the grain and his agricultural tools and machinery at his nephew's house, which was closer to his farm land. During the day, Mr. Zhang worked on his land and took care of the sheep as usual; at night, he went to the rented space and slept with the sheep. Mr. Zhang's wife, though she occasionally spent the night at their new apartment, usually slept in her nephew's house so she could help Mr. Zhang during the day. As for their new apartment, Mr. Zhang only went there to have a family dinner when his daughter, who was working in a city, came for a visit.

Mr. Zhang's case is not unique in China. It is the result of a political movement started on February 21st, 2006, when China's central authority released its 11th Five-Year Plan, which called for "Building a New Socialist Countryside." This document identified five areas of focus that were essential to building the new socialist countryside: Agricultural development, comfortable life, civil society, clean and orderly built environment, and

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regulated democracy. Even though this policy does not place any emphasis on a need to reconstruct the built environment, newly planned settlements with rows of nearly identical houses have rapidly emerged in rural China since 2006. This transformation of the rural landscape became particularly dominant after 2008, when the overall political context in China started to focus on housing, land transfers, and urbanization (Looney 2015, 914). As a result, historical and vernacular homes were demolished and social relations among residents were broken down due to the relocation. More importantly, cultural traditions were forgotten as the result of their detachment from associated cultural landscapes (R. Wang 2014). The reason behind this demolition and relocation is a common belief embraced by scholars and local government officials that improving the living condition of the farmers is the foundation for creating a new socialist countryside, and the only way to achieve this goal is to replace the “old and backward houses” with newly constructed modern settlements (Chou 2006).

This policy has broad and profound implications for Chinese society. According to the 2020 China Statistical Yearbook, there were 732 million people living in rural China in 2006, which was about 56 percent of the Chinese population. However, this number dropped to less than 551 million, or 39.4 percent of the Chinese population, in 2019.<sup>2</sup> In other words, an average of 38,145 rural residents became urbanized every single day in this 13-year period. Meanwhile, for the remaining rural residents, many of them are still living in traditional vernacular built settlements that retain rich cultural traditions. Relocating rural residents to new settlements that are far from the existing built environment detaches residents from their cultural landscapes, which have supported their rural lifestyle and nurtured local cultural traditions for generations. More importantly, the modern settlements, which were designed similar to apartment buildings in urban suburbs, do not support the rural lifestyle and therefore fail to become satisfactory home environments for rural residents, as demonstrated in Mr. Zhang’s story. It was stories like his and the reasons behind such realities in rural China that inspired this book.

Bearing witness to this reality, I wanted to answer a series of questions in this book starting from a simple one: What constitutes the meaning of *home* for people living in traditional settlements in rural China? If the new apartment buildings that were built with indoor plumbing, modern kitchens, showers and toilets, aluminum window frames with glass, and bright open bedrooms fail to serve as new homes for rural residents, what kinds of buildings or built environments can? Have architects and planners been asking the wrong set of questions? Can home be *solely* supported and framed by its physical existence, the residential space? Is a modern house a sufficient condition of a better home environment and a better life, and ultimately the foundation of a new socialist countryside? In Mr. Zhang’s story, what is missing in his new apartment building and its surrounding environment is the kind of cultural landscape that can support his lifestyle. If the lifestyle

Mr. Zhang cherished can be understood as a cultural tradition handed down from the past, what is the relationship between traditions recognized by individuals and their understandings of *home*? Finally, the ultimate question is: How have different forms of traditions affected the physical, psychological, and social constructions of home for people living in vernacular settlements in rural China?

As a trained architect, I believe that we cannot answer these seemingly fundamental architectural questions by simply examining the built environment as objects. Because in doing so, we simplify the built environment into technocratic entities, which starts to lose its sociocultural meanings. We should, instead, consider the built environment as a medium that support a system of relationships that connect people and their sociocultural context. Therefore, the focus of this book is on the residents of rural China – a social group that is underrepresented in scholarship and underserved in modern China – on their social context and cultural tradition, and on their understanding of and relationship with the built environment. In other words, this study aims to answer a fundamental architectural question – what is home – with a humanistic approach by adopting theories and research methods from anthropology, sociology, and other subjects of humanity and social science.

This book is based on my work in Yanxia and the new settlement for residents of Yanxia between 2007 and 2019, as well as my additional research on various issues in rural China. Dedicated to the remaining 510 million rural residents of China as of 2020, this book, using Yanxia as a case study, examines its sociocultural context in rural China, its cultural traditions, its built environment, and the ways in which traditions have affected the physical, psychological, and social constructions of home for people living in such vernacular settlements in rural China.<sup>3</sup> From another perspective, this book raises a critical question: How have the processes of globalization and modernization impacted the built environment, cultural diversity, and social sustainability for people living in rural China, who struggle to preserve their rural identity and cultural traditions in the context of rapid urbanization and urban-rural inequality?

More importantly, this book challenges the underlying belief that a modern house not only provides a better home, but also serves as the foundation for the new socialist countryside. Through analysis, this book aims to provide a deeper understanding of the tradition, the vernacular built environment, and the lifestyles of the underserved social groups living in rural China. This understanding will, I hope, enable local government officials and design professionals to have a new perspective in their vision and planning for other renovation, revitalization, and modernization projects, where cultural traditions can be preserved and promoted, social relations can be sustained, and the meanings of home can be supported and enriched. In a broader context, I believe that the outcome of this study can be a beneficial reference for architects and planners around the world who are working on similar renovation and modernization projects.

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### Place, home, and tradition

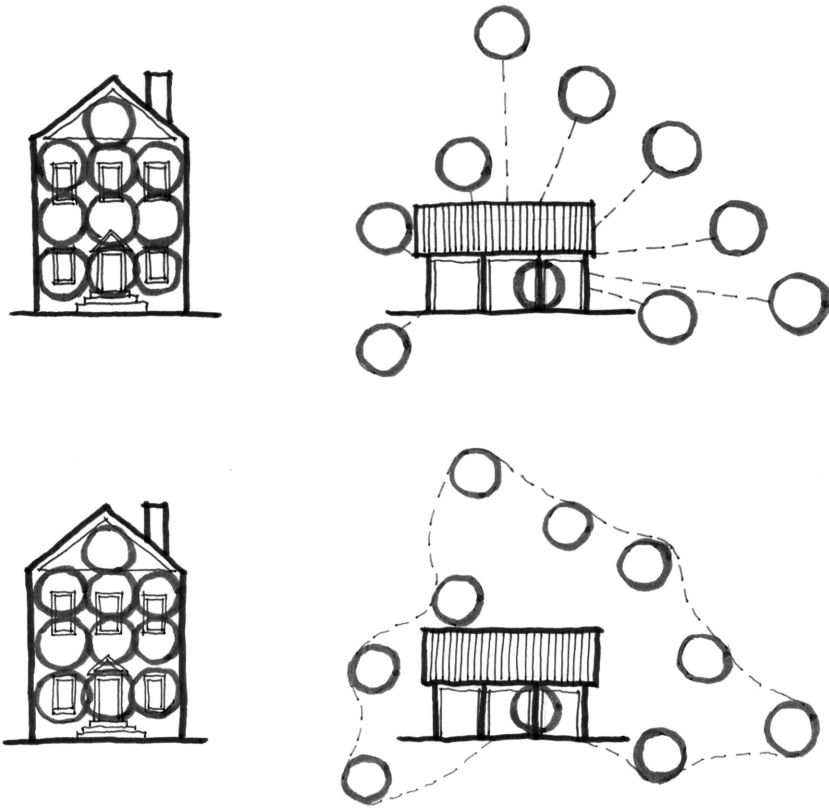
According to Merriam-Webster, the fundamental meaning of the English word home is one's place of residence. Therefore, an analysis of the meaning of home has to start from examining its physical existence, the residential space, yet with the understanding that the residential space might not be the only factor that frames the meaning of home. When conceptualizing residential space, Amos Rapoport (2005, 20–21) compares dwelling type A with dwelling type B, where the residents of dwelling type A can carry out all the essential daily activities within the physical boundary of the house, while the residents of dwelling type B have to go beyond the physical boundary of the house to complete their daily activities, such as getting water and using the toilet. Rapoport (20) argues that, when studying dwellings, “the system of settings within which particular systems of activities take place” must be taken into consideration (Figure 0.1). The concept of the “system of settings” suggests that the discussion of the meaning of home needs to incorporate the concept of *place* where the systems of activities occur. As Time Cresswell (2004, 24) states, “[h]ome is an exemplary kind of place where people feel a sense of attachment and rootedness.”

Considering that both place and home are complex concepts with layers of meaning, this section “Place, home, and tradition” first examines existing understandings of both concepts from multiple perspectives established in the fields of architecture, anthropology, cultural geography, sociology, and psychology. The last subsection, “Residential space, home, and place,” identifies the issues that arise when applying the existing scholarship of place and home to examinations of the meaning of home in vernacular settlements in rural China.

### *Place*

Place is not only a defined physical space in the world, but also a way of seeing and understanding the world. In the following two paragraphs, I will briefly introduce the phenomenological and social constructionist approaches to analyzing place, since these two approaches have influenced my understandings of place and therefore the approach this study takes. The phenomenological approach is used to interpret individual resident's perception and experience of their home, as an exemplary kind of place. In comparison, the social constructionist approach governs the overall framework of this study, which is based on the understanding that place and home are both socially constructed, and which focuses on the processes, agencies, and power relations that define the meaning of place and home.

Humanistic geographers first developed the phenomenological approach to place in the 1970s in response to the scientific approach to space in spatial science. For some scholars, the concept of place can be defined by its subjective and experiential quality; place is realized through our repeated



*Figure 0.1* Top: Comparing dwelling types and activities: Dwelling Type A and Activities (left) and Dwelling Type B and Activities (right). Bottom: Comparing dwellings as defined by their systems of settings. In dwelling Type A (left), the system of settings falls within the boundary of a house, while in dwelling Type B (right), the system of settings extends beyond the boundary of a house. Based on Rapoport (2005, p. 21).

and complex interactions with space, which form our memories and affections (Relph 1976, 1985; Tuan 1974, 1977). In addition, many scholars also emphasize the significance of place in defining the essence of human existence and identity (Malpas 1999; Sack 1997; Casey 1996, 2001). As Edward Casey (2001, 684) argues, “there is no place without self; and no self without place.” In addition, according to Jeff Malpas (1999, 36), “the social does not exist prior to place... It is within the structure of place that the very possibility of the social arises.” In other words, Malpas argues that “the social (and the cultural) is geographically constructed” (Cresswell 2004, 31). Meanwhile, many architectural historians and theorists offer their phenomenological explanation of place as a critique to modernism (Frampton

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1996; Pallasmaa 1996; Norberg-Schulz 1980, 1996). Specifically, Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980, 11–18) applies the Roman concept of *genius loci*, the spirit of the place, to express how humans connect to the physical world—a place, which, he argues, is denoted by two interdependent concepts: Space and character. Emphasizing the “character” or the “essence” of a place, Norberg-Schulz views place as a total phenomenon and an integral part of existence that refers to real things as opposed to abstract conceptions.

In recent decades, the new global social context, which is characterized by globalization, flexible accumulation, time-space compression, increased mobility, displacement, and environmental issues, has inspired scholars to redefine our relationship with place (Harvey 1989; Cresswell 2004). Informed with theories of Marxism, feminism, and post-structuralism, scholars such as Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992), Doreen Massey (1994), and Arjun Appadurai (1995, 2003) challenge the idealistic and imaginary places, and the universal and transhistorical sense of place related to human existence. These scholars believe that place, as well as its materiality, is socially constructed, the process of which is charged with meaning and influenced by power relations. Based on this understanding, these scholars are interested in such issues as representation, gender, race, class, power relation, territoriality, political action, and local identity, and they focus on uncovering questions of “by what social process(es) is place constructed” (Harvey 1996, 261), who has the power to make places out of spaces, what is their interest, who has the right to contest the spatial meaning, and what is at stake. In their work, they emphasize the contextual and relational nature of place, or even the fragility of its locality, because they believe that place identity is constructed through its interaction with other places within the open and porous networks of social relations, which are charged with political and ideological agendas. In addition, these scholars believe that the way to empower the meaning of place is to give voice to the local producers, and to attend to their interpretations of the multiple layers of meanings of the place (Hayden 1995; Rodman 2003).

### *Home*

As a kind of place, home can act as a shelter and provide a place to eat, relax, sleep, and work. The psychological aspect of home, thus, can elicit one’s feelings of involvement, belonging, comfort, ease, and security. In addition, home, as a social construct, is a place for family life and self-expression, as well a representation of one’s social status. Therefore, as a multi-dimensional concept, home has different layers of meaning. Judith A. Sixsmith (1986), based on empirical study, identifies these three layers of meaning of home: personal home, physical home, and social home. Similarly, Roderick J. Lawrence (1995) recognizes that the meaning of home has three dimensions: Experiential, spatio-temporal, and societal. In addition, Peter Somerville (1997) concludes that the concept of home is a psychological,

physical, and social construct. Therefore, home has three layers of meaning. The first one is personal, also including experiential and psychological; the second one is physical, or spatial-temporal; the last one is social.

The existing discourse on home provides the basis and guidelines for this study by providing a frame of reference of identifying areas of focus. This book's analysis from chapters 4 through 7 on individual's understanding of the home focuses on a synthesis understanding of all three layers. It examines the personal experiences and perceptions, and individual emotional and psychological needs rooted in their understandings of home. This analysis also investigates the second layer, the physical, to understand the individual's relationship with the built environment. Finally, analysis also scrutinizes the social context and social processes that contribute to the meaning of home. However, the existing literature also raises concerns when being used to examine the meaning of home in vernacular settlements in rural China, which are discussed in the section of "Residential Space, Home, and Place."

Home as a personal and experiential construct, part of the first layer of meaning, is the emphasis of the phenomenological approach to the meaning of home. This approach is established on the concept of dwelling defined by Martin Heidegger ([1971] 1997, 102), which, tracing the linguistic root of the word dwelling in his essay, links the concept of dwelling with human situatedness in the world, in other words, *being*. Therefore, a phenomenological approach to investigating home focuses on the essential qualities and relations between dweller and their dwelling experience, which are embedded with images and memories, desires and fears, and the past and the present (Dovey 1985; Korosec-Serfaty 1985; Pallasmaa 1995). Viewing home as the center of the universe, these scholars consider home as the center of meaning and the field of care, and as the exemplar of a universe which frames our understanding of the world outside (Seamon 1979; Bachelard and Jolas 1994). In a similar way, Thomas Barrie (2017) emphasizes the ontological and symbolic functions of architecture when examining home, as a vehicle to articulate human's position in the world.

Another approach to the personal layer of the meaning home is the psycho-analytical one of Clare Cooper Marcus (1974; 1995), who anchors her study from the perspective of individuals: Their self, their soul, and their uniqueness. By stating that the house is a symbol or mirror of the self, she argues for a reciprocal relationship between the objective symbol of the self, the house, and the self: The house can be viewed as both an avowal of the self and a revelation of the nature of the self. Therefore, individuals' ideas and values, as a subconscious expression of the self, are manifested through desires and actions applied to modifying the residential space. Another model of the psychological study of residential space focuses on residents' psychological needs, which mainly include security, privacy, and social recognition. The individual psychological need for social recognition can also be fulfilled by the home, particularly the exterior character of the home, which helps to define self-identity, including personality, life style,



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social status, and cultural affiliation, in relation to a broader social context (Duncan 1985; Després 1991).

The second layer of the meaning of home, the physical or spatio-temporal layer, focuses on the human-environment interactions and the meaning of the built environment, as represented by Lawrence and Moore (Lawrence 1985, 1987, 1995; Moore 2007, 2000). For example, when trying to understand the meaning of home, Lawrence (1987) first sets out to examine the spatial characteristics of a house, not only as a whole, but also as individual rooms and spaces; he also examines the spatial organizations and usages of these rooms and space. Home, as a domestic space and a place, not only has psychological resonance but is also a setting for the manifestation of social meanings and cultural values. Home is “part of the experience of dwelling – something we do, a way of weaving up a life in particular geographical spaces” (Saegert 1985, 287). In other words, home environment can be understood as both an artifact and a warehouse of sociocultural memory and personal experience (Stea 1987). The meanings embedded in the home environment are parts of the attribute that turns a house into a home. This added attribute, whether being part of the built environment or not tangible at all, is “a set of relationships between people and important systems of settings of which the house may be the primary setting or anchoring point” (Rapoport 1995, 45).

Finally, the third layer of the meaning of home, the social dimension, is the focus of sociological studies on home, which examine the social variability of the meaning of home and explore home’s social and cultural meaning in society. Viewing the societal dimension as a context rather than as a process that contributes to the construction of home, most of such studies are macro-sociological studies that involve a large amount of data or even a national survey. Treating issues of class, gender, tenure, and age as variables, these studies try to interpret and compare the meaning of home between sociological groups, such as for middle class or working class residents, between men and women, for different forms of home-ownership, and between people in different age groups (Chapman 1999; Saunders 1990; A.J. Sixsmith and Sixsmith 1991). As a result, Somerville (1997) criticizes these sociological studies as a whole for lacking a coherent or unifying theory and remaining at the level of analysis.

### *Residential space, home, and place*

With the understanding of the existing scholarship and the diagrams shown in Figure 0.1, the relationship between residential space, home, and place can be abstracted into a simple illustration (Figure 0.2). This diagram has multiple layers of meanings. First, it suggests that the meaning of home rests on the understanding of the concept of place. Second, the array of vertical strokes with different length and orientation indicates the ways in which home, a multi-layered concept with different meanings, is defined.

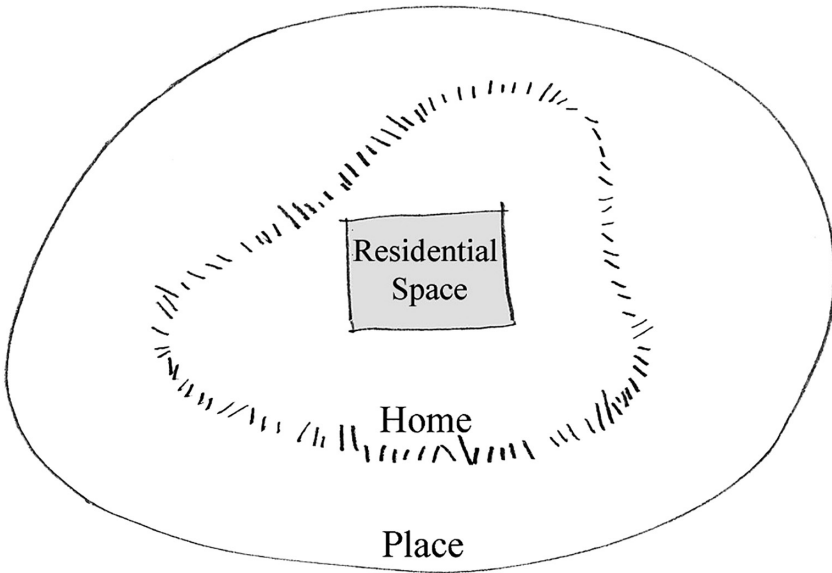


Figure 0.2 Relationship between the residential space, home, and place. Drawing by the author.

This undulating and perforated outline suggests that the meaning of home is both complicated and fluid, and requires a comprehensive analysis and understanding. Third, it is important to note that this diagram should be understood as a two-dimensional projection of a three-dimensional configuration, in which the perforated outline that defines home can stretch in multiple dimensions that extend beyond the shape defining place. For example, home in rural China might be more than a kind of place, since it can be subject to other social and cultural factors that are beyond the “system of settings” and are specific and unique in the context of rural China. The three-dimensional aspect of the perforated outline that helps define and understand the multi-dimensionality of home and yet falls beyond the boundary of place leads to the final reading of this diagram: The diagram does not yet represent (or consider) the relationship between home, place, and their context, the white space beyond the circular form delineates place.

For this study, the context is rural China, where ideological beliefs and cultural practices that are handed down from past generations persist in daily practice, and buildings that were constructed using traditional materials and methods dominate the cultural landscape. Both the tangible and intangible aspects of vernacular rural China touch upon the concept of *tradition*, which shapes the way that place, as the context of home, is seen and understood. In other words, to contextualize the diagram of residential

space, home, and place in rural China, the concept of tradition and the practices of local traditions need to be carefully examined in order to define the context of this diagram.

Therefore, this book has two goals in relation to the ideas behind this diagram. One is to examine the social context of rural China, specifically the understanding of tradition and the practice of traditions by local residents, which will complete this diagram by articulating its context. The second goal, the main one, is to identify the underlying framework that helps structure the undulating and perforated outline of home in rural China, both as a kind of place and as part of the larger context that is shaped and defined by tradition.

In the existing literature on home, most are based on understandings of such ideological and sociological issues as personal identity, privacy, gender relations, and family structures, which were first studied in Europe and the United States. The findings of these studies cannot be applied to the meaning of home in vernacular settlements in rural without considering that China is a different kind of place than historical towns in Europe or suburban America and is supported by a different set of traditions. Specifically, the existing studies present three points of concern when we consider the relationship between tradition, place, and home as shown in Figure 0.2. First, some of the ideological concepts that are used to understand the meaning of home are subjects of culture. For example, the concept of “the house as symbol of the self” is an ideology that is only present in what James Duncan (1985) refers to as individualistic societies. It is not productive, therefore, to examine self-identity and self-esteem when studying the meaning of home in cultures that are characterized as collectivistic societies, i.e., mainly groups outside European and North American cultures, where individual identity is tied up with group identity and the private house is not used for display of status (Duncan 1985; Rapoport 1981). Another example of an ideological concept related to home is that of privacy, which Rapoport (2005, 81) characterizes as “avoidance of unwanted interaction.” Although the desire for a certain degree of privacy is a cross-cultural concern, the definitions of “interaction” and “unwanted” can be very different between cultures.

Secondly, studies of class, gender, and family issues that are related to the meaning of home are largely based in European and American conceptions of domestic space, as a conceptual counterpart to “public space” that evolved in Europe in the seventeenth century (Coontz 1988; Cieraad 1999). However, different cultures have different understandings of space, spatial boundaries, and spatial quality based on their cultural traditions and social structures. In establishing the field of proxemics, Edward Hall (1966) argued that cultural differences result in distinct spatial perception and behavior between people, which affects the organization of space in residential space and the built environment at large. Therefore, one can argue that there is no chaotic landscape or placelessness but only landscape with different orders and different kinds of places (Rapoport 1992). In other

words, one person's place might be another's non-place, and one person's home might not be recognized as home by others. For example, when I first visited the American Southwest, I felt that I was on a different planet characterized by a vast, open landscape with endless red rock formations and mountains. However, in the eyes of indigenous people, many of these rocks and mountains are sacred and have names and associated stories. In another case, for home owners who live in a single-family house in America, the tent set up by nomads might not qualify as a home at all. Yet for the nomads, the meaning of home is neither subject to the size of the space, nor is it tied to a specific location. Thus, even if the understanding of "domestic space" as the foundation of issues of class, gender, and family, exists across cultures, people's perception and use of "domestic space" may be different between cultures.

Lastly, and more importantly, since most studies of the meaning of home situate home within its larger built environment, existing scholarship often has the tendency to consider the term "home" as a synonym for "house" and to use it to refer both to an object or an artifact, as well as to people's relationship with that object or artifact (Rapoport 1995). Even when scholars try to articulate the differences between house and home, there is often a presumption that house and home are merely different aspects of the same entity. As Barrie (2017, ix) states: "*House* is the place that shelters one's *home* within which the events of their lives take place." This assumed link between house and home has become an obstacle in advancing the research on home, because most scholars limit their fieldwork to the physical or legal boundary of the individual homestead (Saegert 1985; Moore 2000). In the limited number of studies on the sense of home and place attachment that were based on fieldwork extending beyond the property of homesteads, the researchers often define a clear spatial hierarchy between homes and the larger places in which they were situated by classifying the subjects of their study into categories of dwelling (or house), community (or neighborhood), and region (or city) (Cuba and Hummon 1993; Hidalgo and Hernandez 2001). In so doing, the relationships between homes and their context can be simplified, and embedded social and cultural issues can be overlooked.

Therefore, existing scholarship on home cannot simply be applied to the meaning of home in rural China, because these understandings are established upon certain ideological, spatial, and social concepts that are subject to culture. In other words, in order to analyze the meaning of home in rural China, the context of the relationship between dwelling structure, home, and place, as represented in Figure 0.2, needs to be examined. The following section examines "The Context of Home in Rural China." Chapter 1 further examines rural China as a social context through analyzing selected issues, including land ownership, the Three Rural Issues, the policy of "Building a New Socialist Countryside," traditional family structure and changes in recent decades, and changing attitude towards cultural tradition.

## **The context of home in rural China**

Rural China was, and still largely is, populated by millions of small vernacular settlements, which exist in different forms and have diverse histories.<sup>4</sup> Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of such settlements has decreased rapidly under the influence of globalization and rapid urbanization.<sup>5</sup> These vernacular settlements, as stated earlier, are places where 1) ideological beliefs and cultural practices that are handed down from the past generations persist in daily practice and 2) buildings that were constructed using traditional materials and methods dominate the cultural landscape. The first aspect of the tradition, ideological beliefs and cultural practices, is examined in two subsections: “Characteristics of Vernacular Place in Rural China” and “Attributes of Chinese Cultural Traditions.” The subsection “Tradition” analyzes the idea of tradition and, in particular, one aspect of Chinese building tradition, which is critical to understanding the built environment in rural China.

It is important to note that China is a vast country and considerable cultural differences exist between regions and ethnic groups. As Ronald Knapp (2005a, 4) reminds us, “‘China’ and ‘Chinese’ are indeed capacious umbrellas to wrap any generalization.” With this in mind, the following discussions only touch upon a few fundamental characteristics of vernacular place and key attributes of Chinese cultural traditions that are pertinent to this study, which mainly involves Han Chinese living in rural south China. In addition, rural China has undergone significant changes since 1949, the founding of the People’s Republic of China, particularly for areas that are closer to larger cities. Both vernacular place and cultural traditions have slowly evolved and will continue to evolve in the future. As Rapoport (1969, 78–79) asserts, there are both constant and changeable elements in a culture. Certain constant factors do not change or change very slowly, such as certain aspects of behavior and the way of life, but the specific forms that these constant factors need to take are changeable. Therefore, as constant factors, these characteristics and attributes still influence many aspects of rural lives and, therefore, form critical context for this study.

### *Characteristics of vernacular place in rural China*

Each of the vernacular settlements in rural China can be considered as a kind of vernacular place, which has four interconnected characteristics: 1) Collectively shared social spaces that are outside individual homesteads and are part of the “system of settings” (Rapoport 2005, 20), 2) locality shaped by social life and local knowledge, 3) consanguineous relationship within a lineage-based settlement, and 4) attachment to place as the result of consanguinity and farming.

As with many vernacular settlements in different parts of the world, the vernacular place in rural China is also subject to the concept of the “system

of settings,” within which daily activities take place. In other words, rural residents carry out many of their daily activities outside the physical boundary of a house and at locations collectively shared by all the residents, including places to get water, to use the toilet, to wash clothes, and to socialize. In addition, many special family and cultural events, such as birthday celebrations, weddings, funerals, and holiday celebrations can also take place in collectively shared spaces, such as ancestral halls and open plazas within the village. As a result, when examining the meaning of home in vernacular settlements in rural China, the spatial boundary of the homestead yields to the contextual and relational concept of the *place* where the house stands. In other words, such collectively shared spaces are often used by local residents as an extension of their home environment.

The Chinese vernacular place is also characterized by its locality, which is a property of social life. Locality is built upon the material production of space by local subjects using local knowledge acquired over time (Appadurai 1995). For example, different regions in rural China have developed their own unique building traditions. Even when the same vernacular architecture style prevails throughout a region, people from different villages have developed their own adjustments and interpretations of various aspects of the building tradition over time, including the ways spaces are allocated and used, the use of materials, and the decorative motifs and details. These changes, handed down as part of local knowledge, contribute to the establishment of locality for each vernacular settlement.

As a kind of place, Chinese vernacular landscape also represents intersecting social relations that have been constructed over time (Massey 1994). In particular, since vernacular settlements in rural China, especially the ones in rural south China, are mostly patrilineal lineage-based settlements, they present a specific set of social relations. Based on fieldwork conducted in the early twentieth century, Fei Xiaotong (Fei 1939, 1992) asserted that vernacular settlements in rural China were highly socialized spaces as a result of the extended consanguineous relationship within each village.<sup>6</sup> Fei further concluded that rural Chinese societies are consanguineous, within which individuals' rights, obligations, social position, and social relations are “fixed by the fact of procreation.” Consanguinity, then, means that “people's rights and obligations are determined by kinship” (Fei 1992, 120). Therefore, vernacular settlements in rural south China were, and still largely are, the kind of place that rests on social relations established upon consanguineous coordinates. In particular, Fei (1992) used a linguistic example to support his argument that consanguinity affects one's social position. The Chinese word *diwei* literally means physical location in space, where *di* means place or earth and *wei* means position. However, the word *diwei* is used to describe a person's social status. Based on this analysis, Fei asserted that for Chinese, one's social status is often tied to one's spatial position or residing space. In rural China, since consanguinity often determines one's residing space, it, therefore, affects one's social status. In summary, when

considering consanguineous relationships within a vernacular place in rural China, one can start to understand a settlement in reference to its residents' social relations and positions.

From another perspective, consanguinity is a social force that not only isolates, but also stabilizes and sustains rural societies (Fei, 1939, 1992). A person is less likely to leave the village where he was born and raised and where his extended family were born and raised. This lack of population mobility not only increases social stability and resilience, but also results in isolation between different settlements and regions. Therefore, consanguinity, together with the nature of agriculture that ties farmers to the land, enables and results in an attachment to place. In rural Chinese societies, an individual's tie to a specific place – a vernacular settlement – is an extension of consanguinity and, therefore, cannot be separated from it. In his writing, Fei used the word *soil*, or *xiang-tu*, where *xiang* means rural and *tu* means soil, to materialize the abstracted concept of place. He names his book *Xiang-tu Zhongguo* (Rural Soil China) in Chinese and *From the soil: The foundation of Chinese society* in English. In his book, Fei (1992) argued that the attachment to the soil not only shapes rural societies in China, but also influences many aspects of Chinese rural societies, as well as Chinese society more generally, from spatial relations to social relations, from morality to custom, from ritual to rules, from desire to necessity, and from family to lineage.

### *Attributes of Chinese cultural traditions*

In addition to the four characteristics that define vernacular place in rural China, four attributes of Chinese cultural traditions also help to contextualize the meaning of home in rural China. These traditions include: 1) The conception of self, 2) the definition and meaning of the word “home” in Chinese, 3) family structure, and 4) ritual practices. These characteristics of Chinese cultural traditions are closely interconnected. On one hand, the way an individual is identified is subject to family structure and ritual practices. On the other hand, the construction of self affects the formation of home and family, as well as the practice and sustainability of rituals.

The conception of self in Chinese culture is established on the Confucian ideology of *kejifuli*, which means to subdue the self and follow the rites (Fei 1992). Based on this principle, an individual embracing Chinese culture not only loses its autonomy, in contrast to the autonomous self in most European societies, but also becomes subject to his own social relationships and prescribed ritual behaviors. For example, a man who embraces traditional Chinese culture is defined by social relationships and prescribed ritual behaviors of how to be a father, husband, brother, son, employee, and friend. Extending from this understanding, different social roles between males and females not only define men and women, but also greatly determine gender differences. These differences are particularly evident between

a husband and wife who manage different aspects of family activities following prescribed rules and rituals. Meanwhile, these differences also weaken the bond between a husband and a wife, which then strengthens, as well as requires, the lineage development, which is dominated by male-male associations (Fei 1981, 1992).

The Chinese translation for home is 家, *jia*, which means “the family members who live together and their residential space.” In other words, *jia* means both home and family.<sup>7</sup> This duality makes the discussions of home inseparable from the understanding of Chinese family structure. As the basic unit of society, the structure of a family rests on the organizational principles of the society as a whole, which, as defined by Fei (1992), is *chaxugeju* (差序格局 differential mode of association) in the case of Chinese society. Fei explains *chaxugeju* by using a metaphor of a series of ripples flowing out as the result of a rock being thrown into the water. An individual is at the center of the ripples, and the ripples represent the social relations of such an individual, ranging from a close and strong relationship to a remote and weak relationship. Chinese society consists of overlapping networks of people who are linked together through different kinds of social relationships; each network is like a series of ripples which do not have a fix and explicit boundary. In comparison, the “Western” societies described by Fei (1992, 62) are represented by “distinct bundles of straws” that have not only clear boundaries but also autonomous individuals.

Chinese family structure is another important dimension of Chinese cultural tradition that helps to contextualize the meaning of home in rural China. Based on *chaxugeju*, a Chinese family, established on overlapping networks of people, does not have a fixed organizational boundary as does a nuclear family, which is limited to the relationship between parents and their children (Fei 1981, 1992). For Han Chinese, a family generally only extends through the male side, except in rare situations, and an ideal family should include five generations according to Confucian ideology.

The size of this “extended family,” in practice, depends on the activities in which the family engages. A family in China can be as small as a nuclear family when procreation is the only function, while it can also extend and eventually become a patrilineal lineage to manage political, economic, and religious activities (Cohen 2005; Freedman 1965; Fei 1992). Therefore, an extended Chinese family’s home can exceed the boundary of a physical house and include multiple residential spaces (Figure 0.3). In other words, the concept of *jia* has dual spatial limits; the conceptual *jia* can exceed the physical *jia*. In addition, the Chinese character of *jia*, 家, pictographically depicts a pig underneath a roof. This suggests that the original concept of *jia* represents an economic entity for both production (pig-making) and consumption (pig-eating) (Jervis 2005) (Figure 0.4). Thus, shared household budgets and collaborative social activities can help to define a house or a cluster of houses occupied by people claiming a common ancestor as a *jia* (Faure 2005; Shiga 1978). In the same way, a financial conflict can lead to



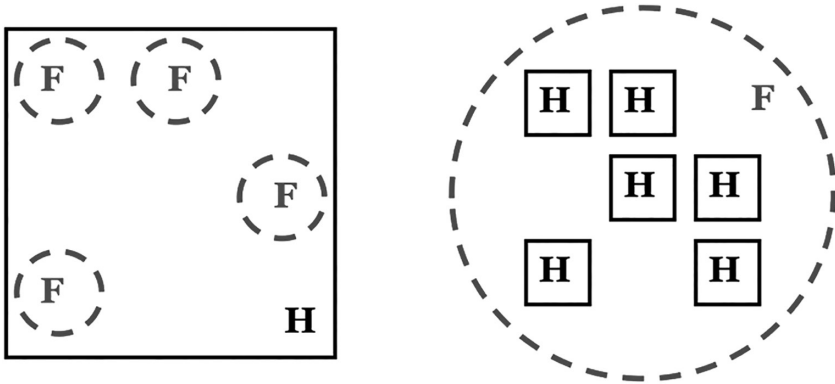


Figure 0.3 Different spatial meanings of *jia*. Left: Multiple families (F) living in the same house (H). Right: A family (F) includes multiple houses (H). Black rectangles represent the physical boundary of the house, while red circles represent conceptual boundary of home. Drawing by the author.

**Implied Meanings**

Production }  
Consumption }



*Jia*

**Literal Meanings**

Home }  
Family }

Figure 0.4 The meaning of *jia*. Drawing by the author.

the division of a *jia* living in the same house (Cohen 1976). In other words, multiple conceptual *jia* can co-exist inside the physical *jia* (Figure 0.3). However, the family members from these divided families are not fully separated. They not only maintain their social relationship to each other, but also cooperate in kinship matters, especially ancestral rituals (Faure 2005; Shiga 1978; Fei 1939).

The fourth cultural tradition that informs the understanding of the meaning of home in rural China is local ritual practices. The English word “ritual” is one translation for the Chinese word *li*, which has a broad range of meanings, including sacrifices to ancestors and deities, institutionalized behaviors, ceremonies and life-cycle rites, and social manners (Chow

1994, 9). *Li*, in Chinese culture, is “a sociopolitical order in the full sense of the term, involving hierarchies, authority and power” (Schwartz 1985, 68). Thus, it is through *li* that Chinese society is governed and maintained (Watson 1988, 4; Fei 1992, 94–100).

In rural China, ancestral halls are the places where *li* is practiced, manifested, and executed. An ancestral hall is the physical and spatial representation of a lineage (Chen 2006; Ho 2005). Respected senior members of a lineage, who represent authority and power in Chinese rural societies endowed by *li*, usually manage the ancestral hall and the associated ritual activities, as well as the estates and assets of the lineage that are used to support kinship matters governed by *li* (Chen 2006; Fei 1992). More importantly, ancestral halls are the places for ritual and social practices governed by *li*, including ancestral veneration, “red” (wedding) and “white” (funeral) events, and Chinese New Year celebrations. Before modern educational and legal systems were established in rural China, ancestral halls were also the place to educate children and resolve social conflicts among residents. In addition, the open space, often including a pond, in front of an ancestral hall is the kind of place that supports not only ritual practices but also mundane daily activities, during which *li* is also infused in the activities and prescribes proper interactions between individuals. The practice, manifestation, and execution of *li* at ancestral halls reinforce the ties between members of the lineage. The process of worshiping a common ancestor constantly reminds generations of residents that they are part of the same family.

### *Tradition*

In addition to understanding the characteristics of vernacular place in rural China and the attributes of Chinese cultural traditions, which are all aspects of Chinese cultural tradition, it is also important to understand the concept of tradition and its particular meaning in Chinese building culture. This section also examines the conception of heritage, as a related concept to tradition, and the differences between the two concepts. Although this book mainly focuses on the ways in which cultural traditions affected the meaning of home, Chapter 3 illustrates how the heritagization process can neglect and even destroy traditions.

### *Tradition and heritage*

Tradition, in its most elementary sense, means “anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present” (Shils 1981, 12). The substance of tradition can, therefore, be everything from human thoughts and beliefs, and social relationships, to technical practices, physical artifacts, and natural objects that have acquired cultural significance. In other

words, “anything can become a tradition by being transmitted over time” (Rapoport 1989, 84). With this understanding, Edward Shils (1981, 12) defines tradition in the following all-embracing terms:

tradition – that which is handed down – includes... all that a society of a given time possesses and which is not solely the product of physical processes in the external world or exclusively the result of ecological and physiological necessity.

The characteristics of the vernacular place and the attributes of Chinese culture are the traditions of the vernacular settlements in rural China. These traditions, permeating all aspects of rural life, include physical artifacts, beliefs, social relationships, and practices that have been handed down from previous generations. The possessors and custodians of these physical artifacts, beliefs, social relationships, and practices inherit and accept these traditions without questioning their validity nor recognizing them as “tradition;” these traditions become vital parts of individuals’ daily lives and constitute their present reality (Pader 1998; Rapoport 1989; Shils 1981). As Shils (1981, P. 13) summarizes:

Those who accept a tradition need not call it a tradition; its acceptability might be self-evident to them. When a tradition is accepted, it is as vivid and as vital to those who accept it as any other part of their action of belief.

In addition, being spontaneous and unconscious, tradition changes and adapts during the process of transmission as a response to changing social contexts, as well as the processors’ integrated personal experiences (AlSayyad 2004, 2014; Upton 1993).

Related to tradition, it is the conception of heritage, which originally refers to property that parents hand down to their children. Although often used interchangeably, the notion of tradition and the concept of heritage are fundamentally different. In 1972, when the General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted the World Heritage Convention, the concept of heritage became institutionalized and was used to refer to features of the global environment with Outstanding Universal Values. Since then, authoritative heritage designations emerged at international, national, and local levels. In other words, heritage became an authoritative recognition from institutions, while tradition remained a spontaneous and unconscious acceptance by the public.

These authoritative heritage designations, such as World Heritage Sites, belong to the Authorized Heritage Discourse as it is defined by Laurajane Smith, which “present heritage as complete, untouchable and ‘in the past’ and embodied with tangible things” (Smith 2006; Harrison 2010, 39).

Smith challenges the inherent and unchanging notion of heritage values and asserts that there is no such thing as heritage, because the *value* of heritage is not intrinsic but inscribed by the professionals during the process of assessing and managing heritage. In other words, the difference between tradition and heritage lies in the way they are understood and recognized. Tradition, including artifacts, practices, and ideas, is accepted, often spontaneously and unconsciously, by the heirs and bearers of the tradition. Heritage is evaluated and designated by professionals and authorities during the process of assessing and managing heritage. A tradition can become a heritage when it has an authoritative designation, while a heritage might not be a tradition accepted or recognized by local stakeholders.

Another difference between tradition and heritage is the framework of reference in time. When discussing tradition, the framework of reference can be in the past or in the present, as a living tradition. However, the framework of reference for heritage should be at the present, or even in the future. Heritage should be understood as a representation of the past to answer a present demand, and the goal for heritage preservation from the future generations' perspective (Davison 2008; Harrison 2010). In other words, heritage can serve as a bond between the past, the present, and the future, between our own earlier selves, our promised successors, and ourselves (Lowenthal 1994).

Finally, heritage is often used for its instrumental value, serving political, social, and economic agendas (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). For example, national heritage is a concept used by new nation-states during the process of fighting for their legitimacy (Davison 2008). By identifying unique heritage that differentiates a nation from others, national heritage places an important role on creating national identity (Lowenthal 1994, 1999). One way to forge national identity is by inventing tradition, because both new and old nations require ancient past, the one that has no experienced memories and, therefore, faces no judgement (Gillis 1994; Hobsbawm 1983). In addition to being used to support political agendas, heritage is also an economic activity that is employed by national and local governments to achieve economic development through tourism (Ashworth 2014). The process of instrumentalization of heritage has lasting consequences, which not only produce and legitimize cultural values but can also greatly influenced the lives of local stakeholders (Zhao 2018, 2013a). Therefore, heritage should be understood as social processes and the instrumental value of heritage should be used in the way to contribute to the production of identity and community, locality, and social value in the present (Appadurai 1995; Byrne 2008; Harvey 2008).

### *Tradition as ideas*

One unique aspect of Chinese building tradition needs to be introduced since it helps the reader to understand the meaning of home in rural China.

Liang Sicheng (1998, 18), a renowned Chinese architect, architectural historian, and educator, argues that one of the characteristics of the Chinese building tradition, which is different from that in many other cultures, is that the owner of a building does not expect the building to last forever, with the exception of tombs.<sup>8</sup> He notes, therefore, that constructing a new building on site to replace an old one is a much more common practice in China than repairing an old building. Liang further explains that, as a result of this tradition, a building could be demolished, rebuilt, and enlarged many times throughout history; in this process, the only aspects of such a building that are considered worth remembering and preserving are the original year of construction and the original building site. From a different perspective, Cary Liu (2005, 142) claims that, being seen as manifestation of “imperishable words and potent patterns,” Chinese built reality is not permanent, while it is remembered through its association with persons, places, or events.

Influenced by the belief that buildings need not be everlasting, many fairly recently reconstructed buildings in China are considered historic landmarks or National Cultural Relics with a long tradition. One example is Tengwang Tower, which was originally built in 653 CE. It was rebuilt 29 times throughout history in different styles and sizes. The most recent reconstruction, using reinforced steel and concrete, was completed in 1989. Despite that, Tengwang Tower is still considered one of the Three Renowned Historic Towers in south China and is recognized as a Cultural Relic at the provincial level. Influenced by historic presentation practices set up by the Venice Charter, which emphasizes the preservation of original parts, China also established its own historic presentation guidelines. However, replacing original parts with new parts has been considered the most popular and most practical method in historic preservation practice, rather than preserving the original parts (Fu 1990; Z. Luo 2006). For example, during the most recent renovation of Yueyang Tower between 1983 and 1984, another one of the Three Renowned Historic Towers in south China, built around 220 CE, 45 percent of the building parts were replaced by new elements, while the other 55 percent of the building parts can only be traced back to the “preservation” work completed in 1934.<sup>9</sup> However, claiming to have about 2,000 years of continuous history and important cultural value, Yueyang Tower became a National Cultural Relic in 1988.

The Chinese attitude towards “tradition,” as exemplified in the histories of these two towers, echoes the story of the “ancestral family shovel” narrated by Alsayyad (2014, p. 10), in which the owner of the shovel considers it a family tradition even though both the head and the handle of the shovel have been changed many times. Building upon the essence of this story, Alsayyad (2014, p. 10) defines tradition in the following way:

[T]radition rests only partially on the process of transmission, the continuing life of material or physical objects, and on inheritance of

techniques and rituals from one generation to the other. But... tradition more often relies on the continuous “representation” and re-articulation of ideas more than it does with practice. In other words, tradition should not be invoked as an instrument to prevent change since in fact it incorporates change in order to sustain itself through space and time.

In the same way, the vernacular settlements in rural China rely heavily on the *continuous* re-representation and re-articulation of the idea of tradition. Specifically, the conception of continuity can be understood from two perspectives based on Liang’s (1998) assertion on the characteristic of the Chinese building tradition explained earlier. On the one hand, the continuous use of the same building site strengthens the attachment to place; on the other hand, the commemoration of the original year of construction connects the past, present, and future. Thus, if a vernacular house in rural China embodies tradition in the way that it was built using traditional materials and methods handed down from previous generations, home in rural China also embodies tradition in that it relies on continuous re-representation and re-articulation of the ideas of the conception of self, the definition of *jia*, family structure, ritual practices, collectively shared social spaces, locality, consanguineous relationships, and attachment to vernacular place. In addition, the reconstructions of home over time enable residents to strengthen their attachment to their homes; the processes of reconstructions by different generations also connect the past, present, and the future (Figure 0.5).

### Yanxia as a case study

Yanxia village, a small settlement of about 2,000 registered residents, is located in Yongkang county in central Zhejiang Province and is about 220 miles to the south of Shanghai.<sup>10</sup> Yanxia lies inside the north-south oriented Fangyan valley, which is an exemplar of *Danxia* physiognomy that consists of red-colored sandstones with steep cliffs created through erosions (Figure 0.6). As the most distinct mountain, the rocky characteristics of Fangyan Mountain also gave the name for the settlement underneath it; Yanxia literally means “under the rock.”

I became familiar with Yanxia as the result of my one-year research fellowship at Tsinghua University between 2007 and 2008, during which I, with the help from some students and colleagues, examined the local vernacular built environment and cultural traditions. My work was partially sponsored by the local government for their new master planning for Yanxia, which was to result in relocating all residents to a new settlement elsewhere and demolishing part of the built environment. The focus of my work at that time was in the past, specifically before 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded. The final result of the study was a publication in Chinese that focused on the general history of this lineage-based village, the

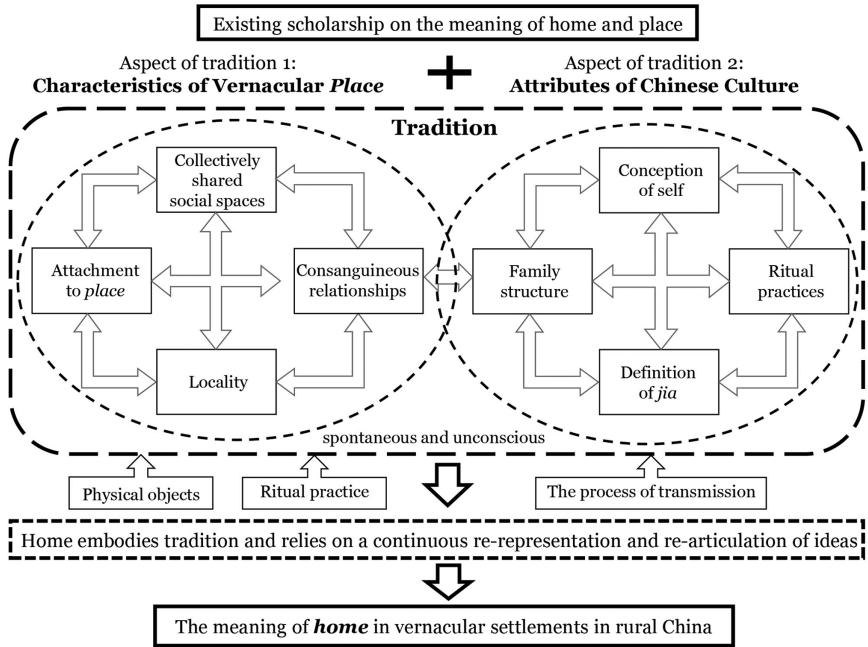


Figure 0.5 The framework and process this study adopted to explicate the meaning of home in vernacular settlement in rural China. This book explicates the meaning of home in vernacular settlements in rural China based on the understanding of existing scholarship on the meaning of home and place and a consideration of Chinese cultural tradition. The meaning of home embodies tradition and relies on a continuous re-representation and re-articulation of ideas. Tradition, being spontaneous and unconscious, includes physical objects and ritual practice and changes during the process of transmission. Drawing by the author.

development of the vernacular buildings within the village before 1949, and the local cultural traditions before 1949 (Zhao 2013b).

During my time at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I started to re-evaluate Yanxia as part of my pursuit of the meaning of the built environment, particularly vernacular settlements. While searching for my dissertation site, I visited Yanxia twice to try to understand the people’s feelings and confusion toward the local government’s plan and their personal and family stories. Inspired by Mr. Zhang’s story, I decided to choose Yanxia as my research site to examine the meaning of home as understood by its residents.

Yanxia was a small multi-family habitat before of the arrival of the Cheng family in the middle of the fourteenth century. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Cheng family had transformed Yanxia into a



*Figure 0.6* Danxia physiognomy in Yanxia. Photo by the author. All the photos in the book were taken by the author unless otherwise noted.

lineage-based settlement by the middle of the eighteenth century. The family record of the Cheng family also documented important local accounts in the past 600 years. As a case study, Yanxia is both representative and unique in its history, settlement type, cultural traditions, and its faith in modern China. Yanxia is a representative case because lineage-based settlements represent the majority of the historic and vernacular built environments in rural China, particularly in rural south China (Cohen 2005; Chen 2006). In addition, certain cultural traditions of Yanxia are also representative and can be found in other rural settlements, particularly in other lineage-base settlements. One representative tradition was the shared public spaces collectively owned by all the residents and the use of these spaces for social interactions and cultural performances. The other common tradition was characterized by its lineage structure and kinship affairs, including all the social, cultural, and economic activities associated with kin, which were established in the fourteenth century. Moreover, Yanxia also had its unique cultural traditions, which included the local religious rituals that started in the eleventh century and the economic practices starting in the 1850s that provided hospitality services to pilgrims, who came afar to worship the local deity enshrined on the top of the adjacent mountain. Since economic practices stimulated and supported by transitory activities, including pilgrims, porters, and traveling businessmen, widely exist in vernacular settlements in China, Yanxia is also a representative case in the way that economic practices not only become a form of cultural tradition, but also influence the rural landscape (Figure 0.7).<sup>11</sup>

The reason for selecting Yanxia as a case study also lies in the broader social context. Yanxia was a small-size settlement with relatively well-preserved historic and vernacular architecture. However, during the years when





Figure 0.7 The historic pilgrim path of Yanxia, which was defined by hotels and stores on both sides.

most of the study was conducted, the lives of residents living in Yanxia were about to be profoundly changed under the influence of the social and political movement launched in 2006, the “Building a New Socialist Countryside,” as well as the desire from the local government to promote Fangyan Mountain as a World Heritage Natural Site named China *Danxia*.

Specifically, the local residents were facing a government-planned relocation to a new settlement away from the cultural landscape of Yanxia that had nurtured its unique set of traditions. The local government that was in charge of this relocation announced in 2008, claimed that this relocation plan would provide a better living environment for the residents, as well as a way to “clean up” the natural landscape for its competition to be a World Heritage Natural Site (Zhao 2013a). In addition to losing their homes and land, most of the residents would also lose their sources of income from hosting pilgrims and visitors after moving to the new settlement. Pondering the consequences of relocation, most residents refused to move. Meanwhile, feeling uncertainty for the future and knowing that they would have to move one day, local residents were hesitant to expend money and effort to take care of their traditional dwellings. As a result, many of the historical houses became dilapidated after 2008. Therefore, this timely study records the physical environment and documents the cultural traditions of Yanxia before they were erased and uprooted from the cultural landscape. More importantly, as a response to the physical and social transformations of the vernacular settlement in rural China, this study is representative because it depicts dominant and critical social and cultural issues that are happening elsewhere in rural China.

Months after I finished my dissertation fieldwork in Yanxia, residents began gradually moving out to temporary places in the later part of 2014, while building their new houses in the new settlement. Mixed with residents relocated from another seven villages in the region, each family from Yanxia was assigned a lot within the new settlement through a lottery system. This allocation method disregarded the existing social structure and family ties established in each village and resulted in a complete mixture of residents from these eight villages, which were all largely lineage-based settlements. For their new houses in the settlement, the residents not only had to manage and pay for the construction themselves, but also follow a uniform design. In the meantime, the local government started to demolish all the buildings constructed in concrete frames after the 1980s, while rebuilding selected historic buildings and turning them into open-air museums.

During my trip to Yanxia in October 2016, I was heartbroken by what I saw. The once crowded pilgrim path was covered by building ruins, while a few families still struggled to live their lives. Although one historic house was in the process of being rebuilt, the rest of them had become dilapidated from lack of maintenance. The worst part was the deadly emptiness that hovered over the entire valley: No more children laughing and running around, no more women doing laundry in the ponds, no more business owners trying to bring visitors into their stores, and no more residents socializing in those public and even private spaces.

I returned to Yanxia again in the summer of 2019 searching for the residents I knew in the new settlement. I wanted to see their new houses and understand their new homes, and I wanted to hear their stories about their

new lives again. I did manage to locate most of them and visited new houses if when they had been constructed. The findings based on this preliminary work to a follow-up study focusing on the new settlement and my reflections are included in the Afterword of this book.

It is obvious that residents' understandings of home presented in this book must have changed after the relocation, even though I have not conducted a systematic study on the meaning of home in the new settlement yet. This change is simply because many place-bound factors that affected their understandings of home in the vernacular settlement have been fundamentally altered or ceased to exist. These changing factors include not only the built environment itself, but also residents' spatial and legal relationships with the land on which their new houses are located and the land where their ancestors had lived for over 600 years. However, this does not mean that the meaning of home outlined in this book lacks its value, because this spatially and socially complex understanding of home is still applicable to many other lineage-based vernacular settlements in rural China. More importantly, the findings of this book can act as a baseline for evaluating new settlements that were constructed elsewhere for rural residents, including the new settlement for the residents of Yanxia. Moreover, this book can serve as a guideline, discussed in Chapter 8, for other projects that aim either to reconstruct a new countryside or to "modernize" the rural.

## **Research approach and method**

This study was interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating theories and methods from the fields of architecture, anthropology, China Studies, and heritage studies. In particular, this study takes an anthropological approach to architecture, since as "the Study of Man," anthropology "may throw light on the ways that he [Man] builds and shapes his settlements, the reasons why they take the forms that they do, and the way in which he uses and values them" (Oliver 1979, 9). In other words, the anthropological approach not only offers the theories, concepts and methods to architectural studies, but also enables scholars to examine the ways in which "buildings (*any* buildings) embody social identities, symbolic messages, cultural values and economic relationship," so "a true understanding of the form, use and meaning of architecture can be arrived at" (Vellinga 2017, 11). Taking this approach, this study aims to understand and present the vernacular built environment of Yanxia from the memories and perspectives of local residents based on oral history collected through the interviews and personal accounts. These accounts, in addition to giving voice to those who were unheard, enabled me to portray figures, events, practices, stories, and objects that are absent from the historical records, which usually only delineate a singular and anthropized story of the built environment. In addition, by rendering residents' experiences with and interactions with the built environment, these accounts "can give a dynamic fourth dimension to (what are generally thought of as) static

three-dimensional structures” (Gosseye, Van der Plaats, and Stead 2019, 26). In the end, I hope that this book not only depicts an inclusive, embodied, and performative history of Yanxia and its vernacular built environment, but also entails life stories of its residents over centuries.

During the research process, I took both social constructionist and phenomenological approaches based on the framework established through analyzing existing scholarship on place, home, and tradition. The social constructionist approach governed the overall framework of the study, which is based on the established understanding that place and home are socially constructed as a result of social interactions that are charged with meaning and power. Under this framework, my role as a researcher was to interpret the meanings of home through residents’ perspectives, which were shaped not only by their personal backgrounds and social relations, but also by the specific social and cultural norms that they embraced (Creswell 2007). A phenomenological approach was taken when an individual resident’s perception and experience of the home environment were evaluated and interpreted to reveal the meanings of home for residents living in rural China. In other words, this study took a social constructionist point of view to examine the meanings of home, yet it is built upon many studies focusing on individual understandings and experiences of home environment.

This study is based on extended ethnographic fieldwork and archival research that were conducted between 2007 and 2019. In particular, in addition to participant observation and interviews, the method of photo-voice (C. Wang and Burries 1997) was incorporated in the ethnographic fieldwork, aiming to reveal the often-unrecognized traditions and meanings of home from residents’ perspectives, to eliminate possible researcher’s bias, and to give voice to the residents. Specifically, 32 single-use cameras were distributed to 23 residents, who were asked to photograph aspects of their *jia* that were meaningful to them (*jia* in this context suggests the physical environment, home). I then followed with semi-structured in-depth interviews that started by having the residents identify the content of each photograph and the reasons for taking such a photograph. Additional questions were embedded into the conversation, including the resident’s life story, family history, lifestyle, social role, residential experience, religious belief, understanding of *jia*, and comprehension of the cultural traditions in Yanxia. These questions were also included in the interviews of an additional 15 residents. To acquire archival information, I visited the local library and archive in the city of Yongkang, as well as the provincial library in Zhejiang and the national library in Beijing. In addition, two local scholars focusing on local cultural history also gracefully shared with me their archival collections. The most valuable archival resources were the different versions of the family record – *Family Record of the Shiyuan Cheng Family* – or sections of it that numerous families of Yanxia kept and shared with me.

The most important dataset, the 610 identifiable photographs taken by residents and the associated interviews, were analyzed using three methods:

1) Content analysis of all the photographs, 2) data-driven inductive coding of the interviews, and 3) contextualizing strategies (Maxwell 1996, 79) that situated each photograph within personal and social backgrounds. Specifically, “thick description” (Geertz 1973) was applied in the data analysis to elucidate embedded meanings. This dataset, including all the photographs and interviews, was triangulated with data obtained from archival research and participant observations that focused on cultural traditions and residents’ lifestyle and sociocultural activities.

Based on the content analysis, which included six main categories and various sub-categories, 49 percent of all identifiable photographs, or 297 photographs, focused either on things outside the physical boundary of the homestead or on traditions that were either treasured by individuals or collectively shared by residents of Yanxia.<sup>12</sup> This result offered significant insight into how cultural traditions shaped residents’ understandings of *home*. These 297 photographs include places or views adjacent to residents’ property, homesteads of extended family, properties that used to belong to the family, ancestral halls and historic buildings, other buildings and spaces in the village, Fangyan Mountain, landscape in the distance, historic books and records, and various scales of sociocultural activities.

Adopting the method of photovoice demonstrated numerous strengths during the research process. First, the camera enabled residents to play a more active and engaging role during the research process.<sup>13</sup> Instead of passively responding to my questions during interviews, the participating residents led the process by photographing meaningful aspects of their homes, thereby creating the first-hand photographs that guided the following semi-structured and in-depth interviews. In particular, the use of camera allowed each participating resident to reveal their own perspectives on personal and private experiences within the social and physical contexts and without my interference. In other words, these photographs documented the reality of residents’ lives (C. Wang and Burries 1997). In some cases, such reality would have been inaccessible to outsiders and therefore would not have been possible to include in the study through conventional ethnographic methods. For example, Ms. Bai Long (73) photographed the family dinner on Chinese New Year’s Eve. My presence at such a private event would certainly result in changes to the family’s established cultural patterns. In addition, the residents had the cameras for six to eight weeks and were therefore able to photograph what they recognized as meaningful aspects of their homes at their own pace, without any bias or reactivities imposed by me. In some cases, the resident might not be willing to have any interactions with me, yet the adoption of photovoice would still allow them to participate in the project by expressing their unique perspectives. For example, Mr. Cheng Ying (37) was not willing to be interviewed for unknown reasons. However, he was willing to use the camera to speak for him. When examining his photographs with the assistance of his wife, it was clear that he had given considerable thought to the 22 identifiable photographs he took, images

which covered a wide range of subjects. These photographs, including close family members, the place he used to live, his residential space at the time, close neighbors, childhood memories, the historic path, meaningful objects, and family cultural events, formed an insightful narrative of his understanding of the meaning of home.

In addition, photographs taken by the residents captured, revealed, and amplified critical information that could be easily omitted and forgotten during observations and typical interviews. The use of photographs not only allowed me to examine intrinsic information and enter the private world of the residents, but also activated and led the conversations during the interviews.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, the intricate meanings embedded within the photographs were not even apparent to the family members of the participant living in the same house. For example, Ms. Luo Yan (63) and Ms. Cheng Jv (77) both included a view of the staircase in their houses. To me, a professionally trained architect, these two wooden staircases had few differences and would not have been included in any pre-structured interviews. However, these two staircases sustained particular, though different, meanings for each person. Ms. Luo Yan believed that a well-built staircase was precious in the old days, as poor families could only afford ladders. Therefore, this staircase, similar to the beautiful wood carvings in her house that she also included in her understanding of home, was a manifestation of the past (Figure 0.8 and Figure 5.24). For her, the staircase represented not



Figure 0.8 Staircase. Photo by Ms. Luo Yan.

only the history of the house, a once-luxurious hotel, but also the identity of her family, who were descendants of the once-richest family in the village. Ms. Cheng Jv, on the other hand, used to live in a room upstairs when she was young. The staircase, therefore, was part of her childhood memories, demonstrated by the perspective from which she photographed the staircase, from the second level looking down (Figure 0.9). In addition, she also



*Figure 0.9* Staircase. Photo by Ms. Cheng Jv.

included the view of the courtyard from her window upstairs. However, the childhood scenery had changed by the time she took the photographs. The courtyard house remained largely empty at the time of this study because most family members had moved to cities or new-style houses nearby. What remained of her childhood house were only memories preserved in the views shown in her photographs.

Most importantly, the cameras empowered residents during the process and subsequent interviews and made them feel that their opinions were being respected and valued. This feeling helped to balance the asymmetrical power relationship between us and enabled me to gain their trust and friendship, which was critical to carrying through the research over years. As a result, this study empowered the sense of place by giving voice to the rightful producers (Rodman 2003; Hayden 1995).

### **Structure of the book**

To form and present this case study and to answer the simple key question – what is the meaning of home for people living in vernacular settlements in rural China – the remaining chapters of the book have the following focuses. Chapter 1 examines the social and cultural context of this study, rural China, including the national policy on rural China between 2004 and 2021, the policy of Building a New Socialist Countryside, the changing attitude towards cultural heritage in China, issues related to rural-to-urban migration, and changes in family structure that resulted from a series of policies to control birth rate starting in the 1970s. Chapter 2 shifts the focus to Yanxia village. It examines the dialectical relationship between the vernacular built environment and local sociocultural factors before the 1850s, when this relationship was mainly governed and influenced by the development of the Cheng family. Through an examination of selected structures, this chapter demonstrates that the growth of the Cheng family influenced the early development of the vernacular settlement, including the emergence of new housing forms and the construction of ancestral halls. At the same time, the changing built environment promoted the social status and growth of the Cheng family from a small family in a multi-family settlement to the only lineage that populated Yanxia. Chapter 3 examines the dialectical relationship between local sociocultural factors and the vernacular built environment of Yanxia after the 1850s, when the Cheng family opened the first family-based hotel to serve pilgrims coming from afar. Since then, the dominant sociocultural factors have been the cultural traditions associated with the evolving religious activities and the economic gains that drove the hospitality industry, while the corresponding built environment evolved and grew beyond the boundary of the Fangyan valley. However, this relationship changed after 2006 when the local government started to heavily intervene in the management of the local cultural heritage, and eventually relocated the residents to a new settlement outside the Fangyan valley in



2014 under the umbrella of the national policy of “Building a New Socialist Countryside” and with the intention to promote Fangyan Mountain as a World Heritage Natural Site.

Chapters 4 to 7 provide detailed analysis of the meaning of home for residents living in Yanxia from four different perspectives. Chapter 4 examines the multifaceted *place-bound relationship* between people and the land on which they lived for generations. It argues that the place-bound relationship in Yanxia not only supported rural lifestyle and sustained social relationship and cultural performance, but also imparted to local residents a sense of ownership and facilitated the construction of individual and collective identities. Chapter 5 focuses on the residents’ understanding of the meaning of *family* and the way that this understanding affected the meaning of home. This chapter argues that home can extend beyond the boundary of a residential space to include places, buildings, and objects that are associated with the ancestors or the lineage. Chapter 6 analyzes the meanings of home from the perspectives of owners of the family-based hospitality business. It illustrates that, as a result of heated competition between these business owners, the sense of homes for these business owners became detached and distant from its social context, and started to lose their meaning as private places. From a different perspective, Chapter 7 focuses on the meanings of home for younger generations who were born in Yanxia but moved to larger cities later in their lives and who considered Yanxia their *jiexiang* (the place that one’s family has been living for generations), as well as their home. For these individuals, the separation between their everyday residential space and their *jiexiang*, and the detachment of their daily life experience from their past memories, resulted in conflicted feelings and romanticized and abstract views towards their home and *jiexiang*.

Chapter 8 concludes this book by linking the concepts of place, home, and tradition into an overarching argument: The meaning of home rests on ideas of tradition, including identity, consanguinity, collectivity, social relations, land ownership, practice of rural life, which are deeply attached to the place where home is rooted. In other words, home can be independent from the physical house in which people live. This chapter also provides guidelines for renovation, modernization, relocation, and urbanization projects in rural China and elsewhere in the world, so that cultural identity can be promoted and meanings of home can be preserved in the process of rapid urbanization and modernization.

The Afterword chapter examines the new settlement based on some preliminary work, conducted in 2016 and 2019, for a follow-up project focusing on residents’ lives in the new settlement. The preliminary work illustrates that the new settlement, although providing larger and modern residential spaces for the residents, fails to support many fundamental aspects of rural lifestyles, the established hospitality industry, and cultural traditions that are rooted in the vernacular landscape. Finally, I end the book by projecting

into the future and considering the future of the tradition. In the Epilogue, I propose additional research to be conducted in a few years, which aims to reveal the changes in cultural traditions and in residents' understandings of and relationships with the new settlement.

Throughout the book, in order to protect their privacy, I refer to each informant using a pseudonym.

Their age in 2013 is given inside the brackets after their names. In the Afterword, their age in 2019 is given in certain occasions when the interview was conducted in 2019, which is noted inside the brackets.

## Notes

- 1 See article "Sichuan Shuangliu nongmin 'beishanglou' -si nian: Ning shui yangjuan bu zhu loufang" [Farmers in Shuangliu, Sichuan Province were 'forced to go upstairs' for four years: Rather sleep in a sheepfold than an apartment], November 25, 2010, accessed on September 22, 2012, [www.ncjianshe.com/index\\_Article\\_Content.asp?fid\\_ArticleContent=3188](http://www.ncjianshe.com/index_Article_Content.asp?fid_ArticleContent=3188).
- 2 *2020 China Statistical Yearbook*, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2020, accessed on March 3, 2021, [www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2020/indexch.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/ndsj/2020/indexch.htm).
- 3 According to National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, rural population was 737 million in 2006.
- 4 For additional discussion on village landscapes, see Knapp (1992).
- 5 According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China, there were 3.6 million vernacular settlements in rural China in 2000. As of 2010, this number dropped to 2.7 million. This means that, on average, about 247 villages disappeared every single day between 2000 and 2010. See article in China News, August 9, 2013, [www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/08-09/5142018.shtml](http://www.chinanews.com/gn/2013/08-09/5142018.shtml).
- 6 Fei's book *From the soil: The foundation of Chinese society* was based on field research he conducted in the early half of the twentieth century. The content of this book was first published, in Chinese, by chapters in the form of 14 essays in the journal of *Shiji Pinglun* in the late 1940s. It was then published as a book, titled *Xiangtu Zhongguo*, in 1947 (Fei 2008). In 1992, it was translated and published in English.
- 7 Many scholars, such as Ronald G Knapp (2005b, 55) also recognize the relationship between house, home, and family in Chinese culture. In the book *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese*, Knapp (2005a) interprets *jia* as house, home, and family, and the contributors of the book analyze Chinese dwellings from their physical aspects, as a house, and the cultural aspects, as home and family. This book focuses on the duality of *jia*, as home and family, for two reasons. First, house is a sub-concept of home, since home means a place where one lives. In other words, a house, translated as *wu* (屋) or *fangzi* (房子) can be a home, but a home might not be inside a house, especially in the context of China. Therefore, I do not consider house as a parallel concept that can be labeled next to home and family when studying the meaning of home (*jia*) in rural China. Second, the focus of this book is to examine the meaning of home beyond the physical embodiment. Nevertheless, the vernacular built environment of Yanxia, including traditional residential structures, is examined in Chapter 2 and 3, which aim to provide historical, social, and cultural context for the understanding of home.
- 8 According to the Epilogue in Liang (1998), which was written by Liang's wife Lin Huiyin, the manuscript was completed in 1944. A largely revised version of

the manuscript, with the collaboration of other scholars, was published in 1964, titled *History of Ancient Chinese Architecture*.

- 9 For the history of Yueyang Tower, see article on Yueyang government's website, May 31, 2015, [www.yysqw.gov.cn/43332/43333/43369/43494/43933/content\\_1265566.html#:~:text=%E5%9C%A81000%E4%BD%99%E5%B9%B4%E9%97%AE%EF%BC%8C%E7%94%B1%E4%BA%8E,%E6%A5%BC%E8%BA%AB%E7%A0%B4%E6%97%A7%EF%BC%8C%E8%8D%86%E6%A3%98%E4%B8%9B%E7%94%9F%E3%80%82](http://www.yysqw.gov.cn/43332/43333/43369/43494/43933/content_1265566.html#:~:text=%E5%9C%A81000%E4%BD%99%E5%B9%B4%E9%97%AE%EF%BC%8C%E7%94%B1%E4%BA%8E,%E6%A5%BC%E8%BA%AB%E7%A0%B4%E6%97%A7%EF%BC%8C%E8%8D%86%E6%A3%98%E4%B8%9B%E7%94%9F%E3%80%82)
- 10 Yanxia village was the name for a vernacular settlement until 1961. Yanxia was divided into two administrative villages, Yanshang and Yanxia, as the result of a political conflict in 1961. For the purpose of this study, the historical name Yanxia is used to represent both administrative villages. The population of Yanxia (the combined population of both administrative villages) is calculated based on article in Fangyan government's website, [www.fangyan.zj.com/village](http://www.fangyan.zj.com/village).
- 11 For other examples, see D. Luo (2009) and Chen (2004).
- 12 Six main categories include: Inside the homestead, outside the homestead, cultural and social activities, family members and domestic animals, personal vehicles, and un-identifiable photographs. The first four categories also include sub-categories, such as building exterior, interior space, architectural elements, furniture, artwork/décor, courtyard space, landscape/garden, other interior shots, places adjacent to the property, homesteads of extended family, ancestral halls, properties which formerly belonged to the family, other buildings in the village, Fangyan Mountain, landscape in the distance, historic books/records, private sociocultural activities, public sociocultural activities, family members/relatives/neighbors, and pets and domestic animals.
- 13 Also see Clark (1999) and Kolb (2008).
- 14 Also see Luna Hernández (2009).

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