WEN FONG

# *Foreword*

## *Looking Back on Chinese Art, Architecture, and History*

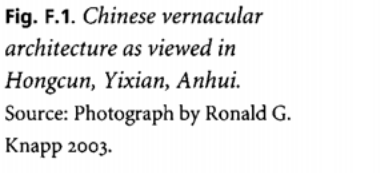

**Fig. F.1.** *Chinese vernacular architecture as viewed in Hongcun, Yixian, Anhui.* Source: Photograph by Ronald G. Knapp 2003.

This volume on *House Home Family: Living and Being Chinese,* as well as the preceding symposium (held at China Institute in New York in April 2001), gives us the chance to reflect on issues of identity in traditional and contemporary Chinese culture, as well as to consider the meaning of "living and being Chinese." It is clear that there is a wide range of compelling new interests in traditional Chinese domestic architecture—as evidence of China's rich and complex material culture and social life; as a part of Chinese cultural heritage in urgent need of preservation; and, finally, as a source of what Kai-Yin Lo calls "the chic of Chinese taste."

According to the anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu quoting Friedrich Nietzsche, all scholarly discourse on art suffers from "unconsciously introduc[ing] the 'spectator' into the concept 'beautiful.'" For Bourdieu, works of art become "beautiful" to us spectators only after they are "dead" (1990, 34). In China today, where economic development leads to wholesale displacement of traditional-style dwellings by modern brick and concrete constructions, beautiful structures and furnishings—such as were seen in the China Institute's exhibition "Living Heritage: Vernacular Environment in China" (January–June 2001), and presented throughout this book—are fast disappearing but are, in fact, *not* "dead" (Figure F.1).This is true even as the Chinese people, according to one observation, "seem to be unsentimental about the loss of traditional architecture, viewing demolition—perhaps even the disintegration of traditional culture in general—as the necessary, if unfortunate, accompaniment of modernization" (Knapp 2000, 332). The issue, of course, is to what degree such statements are relevant to China's reality.

Indeed, this is the topic that concerns most of the authors of the essays that follow in *House Home Family.* The destruction of artworks and monuments vital to human history, unfortunately, has gone on continuously throughout the ages in many parts of the world. Some of the most recent shocking reminders of this are the loss of the colossal Buddha statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan, one 175 feet in height and another 120 feet, as well as the widespread depredation of material culture that has accompanied warfare in Iraq. Bernard Lewis (1996), the leading historian of the Middle East, has written about how the ancient Middle Eastern

civilizations were "lost, forgotten and literally buried" as their lands underwent a series of cataclysmic changes from Hellenization, Romanization, and Christianization to Islamization. By contrast, it is said, Far Eastern civilizations have maintained a cultural self-awareness throughout the millennia of their existence. Over the broad sweep of Chinese history and especially over the past two hundred years, however, overlapping cycles of war and national turbulence have brought with them the devastation of China's architectural heritage, including the destruction of grand as well as common residences, temples, ancestral halls, city walls, and pagodas, among many other buildings. Losses during the scorched earth campaigns of the Taiping Rebellion in the middle of the nineteenth century and the more recent senseless depredation during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976 are but two major and prolonged examples of such destruction of China's material culture.

When we consider the colossal Buddha statues of North China at Yungang (Figure F.2, second half of fifth century) or Longmen, which stylistically recall the Bamiyan colossi, we know that they are more than just relics of a lost civilization. The carved inscriptions at Longmen of the sixth century (Figure F.3), for example, are models of the epigraphic style of calligraphy that became the basis of an artistic renaissance in modern China. The story of this artistic revival, which began in the nineteenth century and continues today, has to do with "living and being Chinese." It also raises the question of Which Chinese?

In the late nineteenth century, the decline of the empire under the Qing dynasty in the face of the advancing Western military and industrial powers finally alerted the Chinese to the need for modernization. It was the southern Chinese, especially those whose mental horizons had been broadened by their introduction to Western learning in Treaty Ports in South China, who found in the monumental inscriptions of the Longmen cave temples the source for journeying back to the roots of ancient Chinese civilization in the Yellow River basin. Kang Youwei (1858–1927), a native of Canton and leading adviser to the reform emperor Guangxu, for example, concluded that the unification of ancient Chinese scripts was central to the creation of a cultural identity and the stabilization of political institutions (Kang 1936, 1–4). He noted, in particular, the art-historical importance of the monumental epigraphic inscriptions of the Northern Wei period during the sixth century in the development of Chinese calligraphy from the ancient clerical script to the modern standard script. For Kang, who saw modern China's malaise as a spiritual and cultural crisis as well as a political one, the reform of calligraphy was as crucial as governmental and social reforms.

As a youngster growing up in Shanghai in the 1940s, I studied under Master Li Jian (1881–1956), the leading epigraphic-style calligrapher at that time. I came to the United States as a student in 1948 and returned to China for the first time twenty-nine years later in 1977 as a member of the U.S. delegation on Chinese painting under the auspices of the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China. My life during the intervening years had totally separated me from my ancestral land, which, as a youth growing up in wartime Shanghai, I had never really known or seen. I shall never forget my first, thrilling view of the Forbidden City from the Taihemen. The Imperial City (Figure F.4) is laid out along strict north-south and east-west axes, symbolic of the universe and a pattern that is mirrored in the layout of many Chinese dwellings, as can be noted throughout this book. Looking out on this grand architectural space, I recalled the image of a Han brick design (Figure F.5) from about 200 B.C. that appears in Professor Nelson Wu's book, *Chinese and Indian Architecture.* I realized that here, at last, I had returned to the heart of imperial China, which represented a cyclical worldview in which time and space fed a totally different dimension and meaning from those in our modern way of life. To quote Professor Wu:

> In the Han image, the world of man is a clearing marked off from the unknown on all four sides by symbols in animal forms [the Blue Dragon in the East, Red Phoenix in the South, White Tiger in the West, and Black

**Fig. F.2.** *Yungang, colossal Buddha at Cave 20.* Source: China Architecture and Building Press.

**Fig. F.3.** *Epigraphic inscription in a cave at Longmen.* Source: Fong 2001, 22, Fig. 16.

> Tortoise in the North]. [Here], time is immeasurable and elastic. . . . Facing south, [with] his feet firmly on the fifth element, the earth, is man. Via a negative approach—not knowing how high is up, how deep is down, and how far away is the end of the earth in each direction—man fixes his position as equidistant from the end of the universe on all sides, and places himself squarely in the middle. He is not represented by any picture, but his desire is expressed clearly in the abstract form of writing. Scattered inside the square world of man are these words: "One thousand autumns and ten thousand years, enduring happiness, never to end!" (1968, 11–12)

Standing in front of Taihemen on that morning in 1977, I understood instantly what it meant for Kang Youwei—and for a part of me—to be "living and being Chinese." Here was the China admired by Voltaire, one of the enlightened thinkers of eighteenth-century Europe. Voltaire thought of China as the model state, led by scholarly mandarins and based on Confucian virtue ethics, bound by reason, not religious dogmas. Only today can we understand how the concept of virtue-ethic can tread a thin line between controlled thought or dogma and spontaneous fanaticism and how it can stand in the way of a modern, pluralistic society in which different ways of thought can coexist.

After coming to this country in 1948, I received an education that prepared me to work on classical Chinese art and art history. My most recent book, a study of modern Chinese painting entitled *Between Two Cultures* (2002), is written with the knowledge that the story of Chinese painting, unlike that of the Egyptian pyramids or the now lost Bamiyan statues, is not over. To be sure, China's struggle for modernization under the impact of Western culture has threatened the very continuity of traditional Chinese culture. Modern Chinese artists, who inherited the traditional Chinese art historiography shaped by a cyclical worldview and based on the rise and fall of dynastic histories, seem to have difficulty in finding meaning and inspiration in traditional art forms. In other words, the traditional representational system does not appear to fit modern Chinese discourse, which sees Western history as a universal model. If they have lost their traditional narrative, how are modern Chinese artists to express themselves?

I believe that Chinese art and architecture, as the China Institute's exhibition called them, are "a living heritage," and it is fair to ask, "Why do we study Chinese art and architectural history?" The lasting achievement of the great Renaissance art historian Erwin Panofsky was his ability to link art with ideas, specifically the

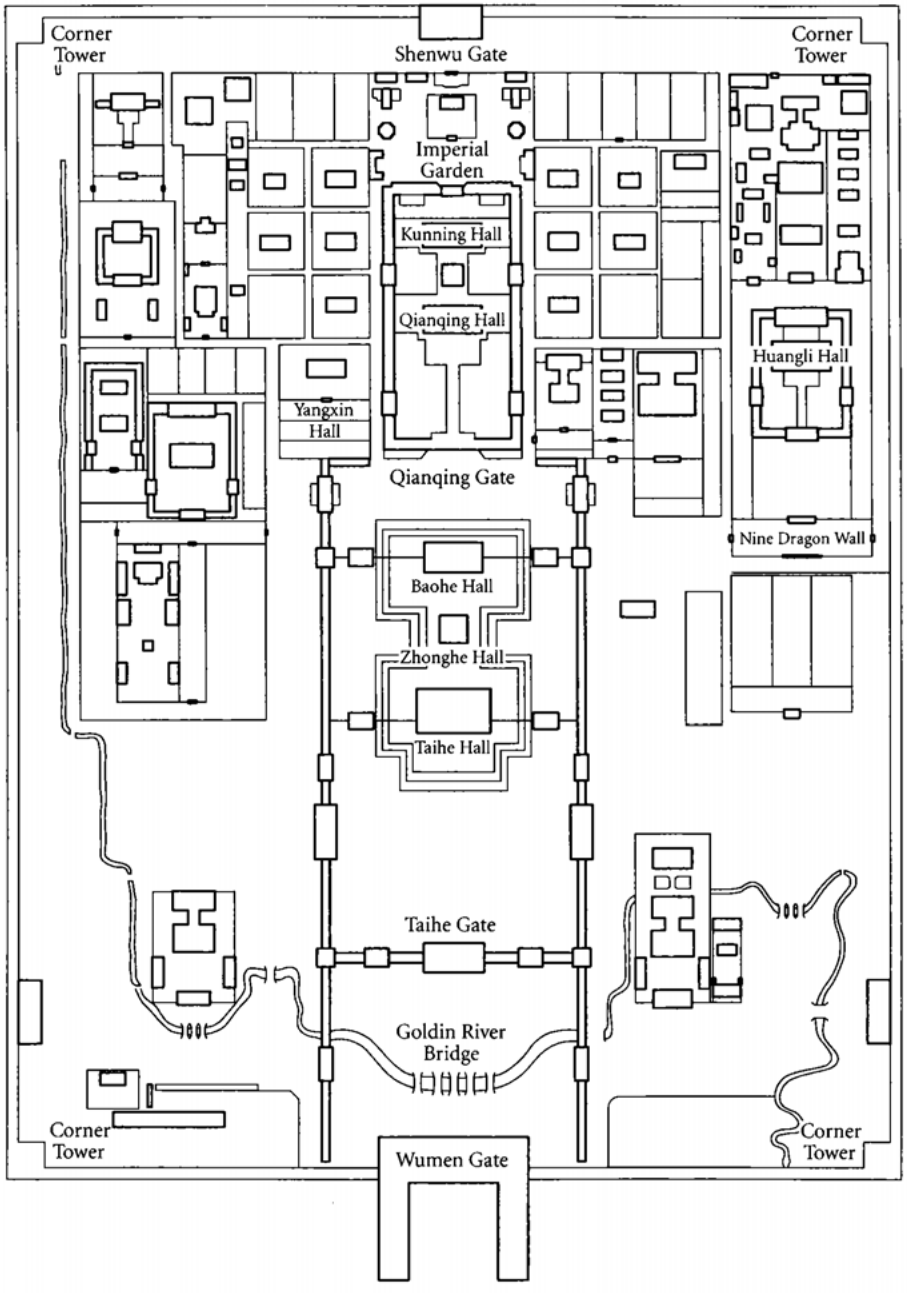


**Fig. F.4.** *The plan of the Imperial City is laid out along strict north-south and east-west axes, symbolic of the universe.* Source: China Architecture and Building Press.

**Fig. F.5.** *A Han brick design from about 200 B.C. that shows the* si shen, *or "four deities," representing the four directions.* Source: Wu 1967, Plate 1.

Renaissance belief that man is at the center of the universe (Panofsky 1962). By advancing our knowledge of Renaissance art, Panofsky's interpretive strategy also opens up a whole way of thinking about Western art and history. What can Chinese art and architecture tell us about Chinese history? If European Renaissance art shows that man is the measure of all things, Chinese art, architecture, and related social developments epitomize the equivocal relationship between man and the state. The underpinnings of Chinese art and architectural history—the cyclical rise and fall of dynasties, the polarities between political legitimacy and individual expression, loyalty and dissent, and conservatism and innovation—project a larger pattern of meaning: man's struggle to integrate himself with the ideals of a moral and ethical universe while maintaining a deep respect for history.

I am fully aware of the limitations of my own chosen profession—art history—which Pierre Bourdieu (1990) considers as merely a "pretext for a hagiographic hermeneutics." But I am also a firm believer in the proposition that art comes from art, and I support Kai-Yin Lo's dedication to reviving Chinese decorative arts and Ronald G. Knapp's appreciation of China's traditional domestic buildings and way of life. I have no doubt that the richness of classical Chinese art and architecture over the broad sweep of history is a profound cultural legacy worth exploring and reintegrating into modern Chinese life and culture.