Introduction

At the twenty-fourth session of UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee in 2000, the ancient villages of Xidi and Hongcun, located in Anhui Province, China, were formally approved to appear on the UNESCO World Heritage List. In early spring of that year, the Japanese expert assigned by UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee, Dr. Naomi Okawa, stated, “It is really a unique village scene at Hongcun. Xidi still retains its picturesque ancient streets and alleys, which is seldom seen in the world.” In 1997, the old town of Lijiang in Yunnan Province and ancient city of Pingyao in Shanxi Province were inscribed on the World Heritage List; today, the famous river town Zhouzhuang in Jiangsu Province has been put up for consideration for the list. At the turn of the century, Chinese traditional vernacular dwelling is unveiling itself to the world, enabling the international community to have a better understanding of Chinese culture.

China is a country with vast territory, varied topography, and diversified climate. This, together with its many diverse nationalities and cultures, has created a rich variety of settlements.
CHINESE VERNACULAR DWELLINGS

The screen wall of a quadrangle courtyard.

and buildings. The vernacular dwellings can generally be divided into three categories: courtyard, storied, and cave-dwellings.

Courtyard dwelling is the most popular kind of vernacular dwelling in China and it is also the one with most advanced material and structural technology, the most complicated arrangements of traditional ethical codes, and the most diversified decorations. In a sense, it
is the most advanced dwelling in farming society. The *Si He Yuan* quadrangle courtyards in Beijing are typical of this pattern. The fundamental character of the courtyard dwellings is as follows: enclosed features, symmetry along the middle axis, and a clear distinction between the primary and the secondary, outside and inside. These kinds of dwellings are mainly seen in Northern China, the Central Plains, the Shandong Peninsula, and Southern China’s plains and coastal areas. They also can be found in some basins and plains of Southwest China, in areas of Chengdu in Sichuan Province, Kunming, and Dali in Yunnan Province, and areas of Taiwan. The courtyard dwelling is common to many areas related to the Han-Chinese,
including the areas where they have settled and areas in close exchange with Han culture.

As Beijing advances as one of the world’s metropolises, laws have been formulated to protect its twenty-five lanes and quadrangle courtyards in ancient areas, ranging from Prince Gong’s Residential Mansion to ordinary houses that have kept the most complete forms of courtyard dwellings. There are also historically important gates including the Naizi Fang gate, the golden-column gate, the Ruyi gate, the Manzi gate, and so on. These gates show the real history of the courtyards. During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, businessmen from Shanxi Province were the leaders in building private residential homes. Indeed, the courtyard group of the Wang family in Lingshi County, known as the No. 1 Residence
of Shanxi Province, is composed of over one hundred courtyards.

Despite variations in scale, material composition, decoration, and ornamentation, all the courtyard-style dwellings have similar underlying characteristics. This style is most popular in the northern plain areas, but can be seen in the famous Confucian Residence in Qufu, Shandong Province; the Qing painter Zheng Banqiao’s residence in Weifang, Shandong Province; and the numerous old-style banking houses in the ancient city of Pingyao in Shanxi Province. The dwellings in the countryside are not as complete as the typical quadrangle courtyards in urban settings; some dwellings only have two or three houses around a courtyard, such as the Manchu’s sun-facing rural dwellings in Liaoning and Jilin provinces, and the Tu Wei Zi in Shaanxi and Shanxi Provinces, all of which are simplified courtyard

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**Building ornaments**

Mini edifices were constructed around buildings to beautify the environment, emphasize the features of the area, divide space, and decorate the principal building supports. These decorations are found on pavilions, bridges, corridors, lattice walls, fences, screen walls, archways, stone lions, and even tables and chairs.

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The courtyard group of the Wang family in Shanxi Province.
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dwellings. However, they retain the basic structure of a gate, wall, courtyard, central room, and wing-room. There are many variations of such courtyard dwellings: the residential dwellings called Yi Ke Yin in Kunming, Yunnan Province, which developed from clay cave dwelling; Huizhou’s courtyard residential dwellings in Anhui Province, which came from the Ganlan wood structure combined with a courtyard that was a common architectural style in Southern China in the ancient past; and the Yongding’s Hakka residential dwellings in Fujian Province, which were mainly built for self-defense under specific historic and geographical circumstances; and Da Cuo (mansion), a courtyard dwelling composed of red-brick walls, sloping roofs, and slanted fireproof walls, made by immigrants from Guangdong and Fujian to the Taipei area of Taiwan.

Yi Ke Yin
Consisting of a principal room, wing room and opposite building, Yi Ke Yin dwellings use a tile roof and earthen walls. Due to its compact layout and square shape, like a Chinese seal, it acquired the name Yi Ke Yin.

The patio in a Huizhou dwelling.
Introduction

The earliest form of the courtyard dwelling emerged first in the Qin (221–206 BC) and Han (206 BC–220 AD) dynasties. Brick paintings from the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220) give us the complete structure of courtyard domiciles at that time. The widespread use of such dwellings was due to the technological foundation of the Qin’s bricks and the Han’s tiles, the improvement of feudal farming family relationships, and the popularization of etiquette codes. Over a long period of time in an agrarian society, this style of vernacular dwelling pattern proved its vitality.

II

Cave-style and storied dwellings have explicitly regional characteristics resulting from natural local ecosystems, retaining primitive architectural features...
CHINESE VERNACULAR DWELLINGS

among all vernacular dwelling patterns. The desert in the Loess Plateau in Northwest China is the area where these specialized kinds of dwellings are most found.

The most typical cave-style dwelling can be found in the central and western regions of China including, but not limited to, Henan, Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Gansu. This also includes a kind of cave dwelling wholly built under the ground that can be found in the plains of western Henan and southern Shaanxi. Caves are dug with earth steps to the entrance. This kind of dwelling is inhabited by several or a dozen of households and is still in use in Liquan County of Xi’an, Shaanxi Province. The “cliff-along” cave dwelling is another kind of cave dwelling widely adopted in mountainous regions, usually consisting of connecting caves dug on natural hillsides along natural contour lines and a courtyard built outside the cave.
The earth-sheltered habitat is a mixed form of dwelling found in the middle of Shanxi. One or two-storied arched adobe or brick houses are built and attached to the cave to form a courtyard delineated by walls. Also, there is a kind of semi-underground-cave dwelling found in the settlements of the Atayal and Ami nationalities in Taiwan. Its shape is quite natural: generally a rectangular flat floor covered with cobblestones and caved in about 1.5 m with wood framework as the upper structure, using bamboo as a purlin and day lily as a roofing material. The whole settlement is scattered loosely, which is believed to be the result of long periods of typhoons, earthquakes, and other natural disasters. Despite its limited space, there is still reserved space for sacrificial rituals in this kind of dwelling.

These types of cave dwellings, clay dwellings, and the vernacular dwelling made of uncalcined clay or rammed earth, are scattered in drought or desert areas. The Zhuang Kuo in the east of Qinghai Province, the watchtower of Tibetan nationality in areas of
Sichuan, Qinghai, and Tibet, and even the High-platform vernacular dwelling in Kashi (Kashgar) of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, all belong to the category of uncalcined clay dwelling.

### III

The Ganlan post-and-tie wood building is typical among storied dwellings, which are distributed mostly in the mountains of minority Chinese nationalities in the semi-tropical southwest. This style is highly developed, with the form and spatial structure of storied dwellings, the use of supports, suspensions, and staggered floors along the hills, and the techniques of mortise and tenon. They demonstrate rich material and spiritual civilizations in combination with the unique national and folk cultures of the minority nationalities.

The traditional Ganlan wood buildings are completely constructed with wood including wood framework, wood purlin, plank walls, and bark tiles with tenon and mortise at the seams.