

**The physical construction, social reform, and  
personal experience that makes a house a home.**

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Survey 4

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What is the difference between a house and a home? It's interesting how the connotation of home is always associated with a place of comfort, while a house is simply a dwelling. There are two places where I call home, while the first home is a product that reflects the supplies shortage in the 1960s during the farmer period, the second home is a product of the political aspect of the housing reform in China during the 90s with the pursuit of "Within the government" mindset that created a social trend in public housing at the time. The modernity and social reform that contribute to the change in way of life between the new house in the city and the old house in countryside, the Chinese geomancy ideologies, and the physical space that associated with my memories is what makes the house a home.

In Chinese, the word home is represented by the character “家”<sup>1</sup> (Jia), with a “宀” on the top, which means caves in oracle bone script; “豕” representing pig on the bottom. During the ancient time, people would raise their pigs inside the house, which forms the character 家. Meanwhile, the word house is represented by the character “屋”<sup>2</sup> (wu), with a “尸” on top representing a dead boy and “至” on the bottom, means finally landed in a place; connecting these two words means a house is a place where people dwell. The difference between the house and home in English must be explained verbally while the Chinese character already defines these differences in the character itself. In other words, the premise of the home must be a house, but a house doesn't necessarily mean it's a home.

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<sup>1</sup> "家", Accessed March 06, 2019. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/家/14321442>.

<sup>2</sup> "屋", Accessed March 06, 2019. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/屋>.

One can't stress enough the importance of family tradition in Chinese culture. Instead of religious belief, the Chinese worship ancestors from the most recent generation that passes away; believing that ancestor in heaven will protect us and wish us luck. For example, every year in the day of Qingming festival, known as tomb sweeping day, on April 5th, my family will express our gratitude by bringing offerings, burning incense, and burning paper money that will be used as currency in another world for my grandfather, in return for my grandfather's blessing and protection. The family tradition in form of worship continues even if members are passed away. The importance of family tradition also demands a house – home is built on the foundation of a house; without a stable place to settle, a family can't be established.

In my life, there are two houses where I consider home, the old house is in a village in the countryside, it's considered the ancestral house while the new house is in the city. The ancestral house is directly associated with Chinese geomancy, it's the origin of my generation, the house influences the energy animating the universe that runs within the families. It was built by my grandfather using green brick that originated from the Qin dynasty. Green brick has better resistance toward oxidation, hydration, and atmospheric pressure compared to traditional red brick. The process of green brick is more troublesome to make, it uses water for anoxic cooling that gives it a green texture while red brick cools naturally.<sup>3</sup> To build the house due to a lack of resources during the 1930s, the foundation was the first laid out using cobblestones and white ash from the river. Then, columns and beams were laid before bricklaying the walls. Interior walls were smoothed using white ashes. I lived in this house from when I was born until I was 5. The most recent visit was

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<sup>3</sup> "Green Brick", Accessed March 06, 2019. <https://baike.baidu.com/item/青砖>.

last year back to China, and the condition of the house is in trouble. Due to the constant rainfall, wet and humid climate in south-east China, the white ash from the wall is constantly coming off no matter how many times paint is applied through the wall. Perhaps it needs to be rebuilt, and since I'm an architecture student now, I asked my parents about the physical set up in the ancestral house, such as bedroom, living room, kitchen...etc. can it be changed? My parent replies: "No, it has to stay that way. Everything regarding the geomancy is already considered, any change without careful consideration will result in terrible events." For example, house A has the kitchen, living room, dining room, entrance, and balcony, and it will have a spirit tablet that represents different domestic gods that protect the family; in the kitchen, it's the stove god that protect health and food for the family. These programs must face a certain direction in relationship to the spirit tablet according to the geomancy.



**Figure 1.** Spirit tablet in kitchen & living room, new house.

**Figure 2.** Spirit tablet in Living Room,

old house.

Also, notice in both plans (Figures 3 and 4) that none of the doorways align with each other, the Chinese geomancy “两门相冲、必有一凶；两门相对、必有一退” means that if two

doors align toward each other, one will be inauspicious and retreat; another saying is that the bad spirit doesn't know how to turn, this prevents them from coming into the room. In my village, house A was built right next to house B, that the door of house A is directly aligned with house B. If you were standing inside the living room of house A, you can see the spirit tablet in the living room of house B without any visual obstacle. As a result, the family members of house B were passed away immediately due to a car accident and diseases after house A was built. Perhaps someone who never studied geomancy will say that the death of family members in house B was just a coincidence. However, in the explanation of geomancy, everyone in the village blames the owner of house A for not following the geomancy at the cost of the life of others. The ideology of geomancy is deeply inherited in the physical planning of the houses.



Figure 3. Plan of the new house.



Figure 4. Plan of the old house.

As for my new home, it's located in the city named Taishan on the street Bai Shi Lu (White Rock Road). It's an apartment built in concrete with load bearing walls, with two units on each floor for a total of 7 floors. Three repetitive apartments clustered together form a single building within the residential district. On the first floor, on the left its entrance to the apartment with a security door and many small garages for motorcycles with few large garages for cars. Above the ground, every window and balcony throughout the residential district uses a security net. It not only prevents thieves from coming in but also kids from falling off the building; it's also used as a hanger to dry clothing. Compare to the United States where the dryer is relatively cheap and hanging clothes on façade are restricted by code, it's a streetscape where clothes are hanging off every single balcony that's unique in China.



**Figure 5.** Streetscape of the new house. Highlighted in red is the balcony of the house, on right is interior view of the balcony.

Also, since there is no gas pipe that runs underground nor large boiler in the basement to heat water for every family, purchasing a large gas tank periodically for the electric stove (Figure 1) and installing a heater in the washroom is a must. While this might seem outdated, in the old house we use the traditional method; for meals and hot water for showers, we burn wood sticks that are gathered from the mountain in the brick stove (Figure 6) and the water is drawn from the well using a hand pump. The transition between the old house and new house shows the period where farmers in the 60s begin to move into the city after the industrial and housing reforms that occurred in the 90s improved the quality of life.



**Figure 6.** Brick stove and sink of the old house.

In term of experience, there was a dramatically difference in daily routine between rural life in the old house and the city life in the new house. In the old house located in a small village, there is no private bathroom. Whenever I need to use the restroom, I must go to the public bathroom (Figure 7) that is five minutes away from the house. There is no drainage system that cleans the waste, it accumulates in the waste pool in the back, where everyone uses the waste as fertilizer for their farm field. Therefore, it smells so bad that I must hold my breath every time I use it. What about using the bathroom at night? There is a wooden bucket in the bedroom that stored the waste which is used as fertilizer the next day. For cooking, the fresh vegetable and rice grown from my own farm and cooked by burning wood in the brick stove is the best food I ever had in my life. I can smell the freshness of the food while it's cooking, combined with fire smoke from the strove, there is a sense of belonging back to the nature that I can never experience in the city. Drinking the sweet water from the spring; going into other people's farms, picking a vegetable and eating it raw, there is the taste of the earth that food in the supermarket doesn't have.

Also, I know everyone in the village, they have their front and back door open to allow light into the house. I knew everyone in the village, I always go into their house to stick around, it was an active social environment whereas, in the city, I barely know anyone in my own apartment. My mom always locks me up in the house whenever she goes somewhere as if the house was a cage for social interactions. Foods that were made using the natural gas also doesn't taste as good as the one in the farm. Although city life is more convenient in every aspect of the daily routine, the experience of rural life and the social interaction in the less developed village is far more valuable than in the city.



**Figure 7.** Public bathroom in village.

The new house was built under the influence of the Soviet Union "Khrushchyovka" housing blocks (Figure 8) that developed during the early 1960s. The goal was "to develop the only technology in the world to produce acceptable, low-cost housing on a large scale."<sup>4</sup> Instead of having a diversified plan like the western world, the Khrushchyovka housing block has an identical unit to reduce cost and construction time to fulfill the housing demand in the Soviet Union. "The original Khrushchyovkas had 4 or 5 floors and were divided into 2 to 6 sections. Each section was organized around one staircase and each floor had two, three, or four different apartments connected to one staircase."<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the new house was built under the same circumstances to fulfill the housing demand and population boom during the 1980s. The policy that reflects the housing demand and population boom is the "one-child" policy that was introduced in 1979 is to limit the population growth; if the first child is a daughter, parents can have a second daughter. If the first child is a son, that explains why I'm the only child. Furthermore, notice how the

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<sup>4</sup> Mark Byrnes, Mark Byrnes, and CityLab, "Say Goodbye to the Dreary Mass Housing of the Soviet Union," CityLab, May 12, 2017, , accessed May 02, 2019, <https://www.citylab.com/equity/2017/03/the-disappearing-mass-housing-of-the-soviet-union/518868/>.

<sup>5</sup> Idle.

new house has a similar appearance as the Khrushchyovka; perhaps Khrushchyovka is considered a new typology to solve the housing problem in the Eastern world.



**Figure 8.** New House on the left & Khrushchyovka on the right.

The new house is also in a teacher district; a product of industrial and housing reform took place during the 80s-90s. Before the 90s, the “governments at the local level are responsible for implementation and distribution via various housing provision programs based on local features.”<sup>6</sup> However, due to the low rent and availability of the public housing towards government worker, it created a drawback where government and enterprise are investing without returns. As a result, the real estate development slowed down and there is a housing shortage for public in the cities. By 1994, “Chinese central government issued ‘The Decision on Deepening the Urban Housing Reform,’ which established a comprehensive framework for housing reform in the next stage.”<sup>7</sup> While supply-side offers various public housing for different income group, the demand side also gave options for a mortgage to purchase the house, which allow the continuation of housing development. Furthermore, during the industrial reforms in the 80s, the social status of a

<sup>6</sup> Xiang, C. A. I. "Determinants Of Affordable Housing Allocation: Common Perspectives From Local Officials.", *Regional Science Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (2018): 227-237.

<sup>7</sup> Deng, Lan, Qingyun Shen, and Lin Wang. "The emerging housing policy framework in China.", *Journal of Planning Literature* 26, no. 2 (2011): 168-183.

teacher was much lower than a factory worker. However, the situation changed during the 90s where teacher officially became part of the public institution and received many benefits, one of them is affordable housing. Coincidentally, my grandfather knows a relative who was a teacher at the time and helped us to buy the house for 200,000 yuan, approximately 30,000 us dollar under my father's name. Today the pricing for public housing is 6 times than the price in the 90s. This also shows another aspect of the Chinese tradition in political and career aspect, if one is "within the government" system with a stabilize governmental job and social benefit, they are set for life.

In conclusion, through the analysis of my house in the countryside and in the city through memories, geomancy, social, and political aspects of the house that went through the transition of modernity, this creates a foundation that turns the house into a home. Although there are no official physical records of both houses, the record is already presented itself through the memories of the people, the context of material, and the historical background from farmers to industrialists in China. Now piecing the analysis of my house together, it creates a deeper meaning that strengthens the relationship between me and my home knowing its origin.

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