

Xing Ruan, *Allegorical Architecture: Living Myth and Architectonics in Southern China*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, pp. 219.

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The author of this very original look at the building traditions of Southern China's minority groups, a Chinese architect graduate of Nanjing's Southeast University, was professor of architecture at the University of New South Wales, Australia, and currently holds the Chair of Architecture Discipline Group at the same university. His research interests include both past and modern architectural developments in China. The latter may be seen in his *New China Architecture*, a book published the same year as *Allegorical Architecture*.

What is interesting about the modern developments studied by the author in *New China Architecture* is that the structures that continue to rise in cities like Shanghai and Beijing are the creations of international stars of architecture. In contrast to them, the book under review examines architectural traditions that are worlds apart from the current concept of architecture and architect. Many of the more attractive wooden lintel and post buildings studied in *Allegorical Architecture* belong to a millennial tradition that for many of us represent the "real" China, with its enduring tradition of enchanting wooden pagodas and temple halls, all covered with gracefully curved roofs. But any such fanciful impressions on the part of the reader are soon dispelled by the author, who explains in the first chapter of his book, significantly entitled "Architectonic Fabrications of Minorities: the Dong and Others", that these are in fact the constructions of non-Han ethnic minorities from the south of China, especially those of the Dong. In five chapters, plus prologue and epilogue, Xing Ruan introduces the reader to these picturesque villages and their architecture. His arguments and descriptions are nicely backed with numerous, clear black-and-white photographs and drawings, as well as ground plans and elevations of many of the buildings discussed.

In his prologue Xing Ruan recalls the romantic vision of Luis Kahn (1901-1974), as expressed in Khan's 1991 design for the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in La Jolla, California, intended as ideal habitat for scientists. As Xing Ruan relates it, the biologists for whom the building was conceived were expected to happily practice their science in their new surroundings, but were apparently unresponsive to its structure. Several other modern visionaries, such as Le Corbusier, are quoted to support the author's contentions. Following World War II as a reaction to the concepts of modernism an interest in vernacular architecture has appeared among practitioners of the art.

In *Allegorical Architecture* Xing Ruan seeks his own answers to this predicament by turning to the vernacular architecture of the mentioned minorities. As explained in the prologue, "The interactive and yet legible relationship between the built world and its inhabitants is the major theme of this book". It is explained at the beginning of the first chapter that, surprisingly, most of China's minorities had no written language. Instead their cultural heritage has been kept alive in oral traditions such as poems, songs and legends, as well as in dance, music and ritual, and above all in architecture. Such practices provide us today with a clear indication that these minority communities erect their traditional buildings according to concepts very different from those practiced in the modern metropolis.

In the book much attention is given to the Dong, whose obscure migratory origins, built structures and their evolution the author has examined through what was evidently

arduous fieldwork. The Dong's culture is described as architecture-based, a culture which nonetheless shares various aspects with others in the region, including those of the Miao minority and Han-derived architectural features, all assimilated by the Dong. The Dong's cultural identity itself has been shaped by their habitats in mountainous river valleys. Dong villages are inserted in panoramic landscapes, with an architecture built from regional fir trees, of which the more evolved structures are those of wind-and-rain bridges, opera stages, village gates and the architecturally remarkable drum towers. In the book these structures are well studied and illustrated through a selection of village architecture in various provinces of southern China.

A criticism that could be leveled at *Allegorical Architecture* is that it could have placed the structures of the Dong more forcefully within the larger picture of Chinese traditional architecture. The vernacular architecture of the Dong may contain lessons for contemporary architects because of the absence of an architect controlling the design of a project. But is that absence not equally a part of traditional Han architecture? Also, to a general reader Xing Ruan's enquiry may seem too specialized; it appears to be mainly addressed to specialists, such as modern architects, art historians of modernism, ethnographers and cultural anthropologists. These few criticisms aside, the author's original arguments and insights, and the very attractive illustrations with which he accompanies them, should equally entertain and instruct readers curious about China's fascinating building traditions.