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The Village House

A typical village house is made of brick and stucco. From a distance, its red-dish brown color blends into the landscape. In earlier times village homes were made of adobe and thatch, but only a handful of old-style houses remain.

A village house generally has four rooms: a living room, two bedrooms, and a kitchen. The front door is made of wood and opens onto the living room, which is the most lived-in part of the house.

The villagers often attach long strips of red paper printed with large black Chinese characters to the exterior walls of their homes. Placed either above the door or on either side of it, these scroll-shaped writings are called New Year's couplets and express the family's hopes for the coming year. Every New Year, the villagers replace last year's couplets with new ones. These short sayings express the villagers' hope for wealth and health - especially for children - in the coming year.

Often attached to the exterior of the front door is a picture of Guang Gong, a famous Chinese general who lived about 1,000 years ago. Guang Gong is a symbol of strength and virtue. The villagers attach his image to the front door to protect the house from evil intruders.

The living room is perhaps the most important room of the house. Members of the family rest and receive visitors, eat and watch television in the living room.

In 1990, only about 20 families in Long Wan were able to afford the 2,000 yuan needed to purchase a television. Two thousand yuan is more than many villagers earn in a year.

The television is a cherished possession for villagers lucky enough to have one. It is placed in a highly visible position in the room and is usually protected by a cloth cover when it's not being used. The villagers put much effort into effectively displaying their televisions, almost turning them into shrines.

The living rooms of many village houses are disorderly, crowded with tables, chairs, bicycles, cabinets, loose vegetables, and bins of rice.

The walls are covered with pictures clipped from old calendars, usually pictures of stylish women or Chinese opera performers dressed in brightly colored costumes. There are also landscapes and pictures of soldiers and animals. A collection of family snapshots is often placed in a picture frame hung on the wall.

One of the most popular wall decorations in the living rooms of village homes is a portrait of Mao Zedong. Many villagers believe that Mao's presence on the wall will bring them good luck. Like Guang Gong's picture on the front door, Mao's god-like image will protect the family from evil influences.

Many villagers also attach small octagonal mirrors with brightly colored frames above the front door. Like the pictures of the heroic figures attached to the door and walls, the mirrors are meant to ward off evil influences.

If a family lives close to a family that has recently experienced bad luck or if the feng shui conditions around the house are considered inauspicious, the mirror will help keep unwholesome influences out of the house.

The bedrooms are on either side of the living room and always feel dark and

a little disorderly; clothing is often piled on the beds or hanging from the walls and doors.

The villagers sleep on wooden beds with rattan mats instead of mattresses. Mattresses are expensive and uncomfortable on warm Lei Zhou nights.

Small children often sleep with their parents until they are six or seven years old, sometimes into their teens. Where the children sleep often depends on how much room the family has in the house. Brothers often share beds with brothers, sisters with sisters.

The kitchen is usually a small room attached at a 90-degree angle to the house; some of the kitchens are detached from the main body of the house. Like the bedrooms, kitchens tend to be dark and a little disorderly. Soot and mildew cover the walls.

Cooking is done on a simple stove, usually a concrete platform that holds a wok or cooking pan. Cooking fuel is positioned at the base of the concrete platform. The fuel is dry leaves and the stalks of sugarcane and other crops. Hanging from the kitchen walls are large pan-covers woven from plant leaves that are used to steam food.

The villagers don't expend much effort trying to keep the kitchens clean because they don't spend much time in them. The villagers wash themselves in the kitchen but they don't eat in them.

Some houses have a separate dining room, but most do not; people generally eat at a table in the living room.

The courtyard - the open space at the front of the house - is one of the most heavily used parts of a village house.

New houses sometimes have a wall enclosing the house and courtyard but older houses do not.

The courtyard is often the center of family activities. In the courtyard, children play with their friends, parents sit on small stools and chairs to chat with their neighbors, and mothers and grandmothers wash clothes and vegetables.

Although some villagers still use a rope and pail to draw water from a village well, most get their water from a faucet in the courtyard. Long Wan's running water is drawn from a well in nearby Mao village.

Village houses do not have bathrooms. To use the toilet the villagers walk to public lavatories in a building along the lane. Villagers take turns cleaning these outhouses and use the waste as fertilizer in village fields.













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