

Performing Domesticity: Ma Qingyun's *Father's House*¹

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Abstract

*To build a house for himself (or parents, being the closest kinship) is dangerously euphoric for an architect. In this position, an architect's interior and exterior are forced to collide. It is either a fairy tale where no conflict is allowed, or a hide-out where antagonism is consciously avoided. But the process of designing is not quiet, nor romantic. It is developed with a mute violence.*²

In his statement for Father's House, an edifice originally designed and built for his father, Ma Qingyun, one of China's most prolific young architects, hints at how domesticity, often considered peripheral to the public domain but conversely central to the individual's development, may resurface as a complex site for self-definition. Here, where 'interior and exterior are forced to collide', the house is a space where different, and sometimes conflicting, notions of 'home' are played out. In Father's House, the concepts of origin, Ma's 'Chineseness', the authorial father figure and a domestic scene influenced by sentiments of filiality become key. These aspects highlight contemporary architectural questions of 'home', couched in an East Asian architectural context, albeit one that has become much more global in the last two decades.

The paper attempts to unpick, connect and offer a critical iteration of such questions. In doing so, it explores a kind of domesticity, which may be described as strategically ambivalent in terms of its aesthetics and possible interpretations – neither global-capitalist nor local-vernacular; neither patriarchal nor non-patriarchal; neither Chinese nor non-Chinese.

A similar ambivalence is strikingly reflected in the architect's trajectory. Ma (b. 1965, Xi'an) now resides in Pasadena, California and has been Dean of the University of Southern California School of Architecture since 2006. As much as he has collaborated with Rem Koolhaas on several occasions (most recently for Beijing's CCTV project), the independent output of Ma's provocatively named practice - MADA s.p.a.m. ('strategy, planning, architecture, media') - has been equally lauded. Thus, Ma himself exemplifies the shape-shifting, transnational, cross-cultural architectural figure gliding effortlessly between 'East' and 'West'.

Father's House is key towards understanding the performative nature of a kind of Chinese domesticity, one which I argue, is operationally and semantically ambivalent. It works through a series of contradictions yet prevailing above these; being at once a recognizable sculptural box yet emphasizing locality in its craft and materials, exalting a father-son relationship yet remaining conspicuously unoccupied (Ma's father abandoned the countryside to become an urbanite), sentimentally evoking the bucolic Chinese plains of Jade Valley while strongly reminiscent of Dutch architectural aesthetics. Following this, what can one make of the relationship between this house and its possible claims to identity, memory and origin? Is Father's House an empty signifier that further mystifies 'China'?

In attempting to address these questions, the paper draws on ideas of domesticity, juxtaposing these arguments against Rey Chow's proposition of filiality as a performative strategy for East Asian self-definition. Filiality is sustained when it is enacted through ritualized practice. Father's House enacts filiality by revisiting native building traditions, materials and hierarchical relationships between self, family and state, but crucially subjecting such traditions and relationships to acts of 'mute violence' in its subtle re-appropriation and transformation of canonical architectural forms and meanings. This 'violence' or radicalism is routed towards individual self-expression and visibility, a quality alien to Chinese Confucian tradition, which is 'traditionally inclusive, not insular, and strongly hierarchical'.³

While it may be convenient to categorize Ma's house as a return to Chinese vernacularism, there is compelling evidence based on the architect's public perspectives, training and his conscious use of Western imagery and influences, which inform otherwise. Hence, any urge to uncover an authentic form of modern Chinese domesticity within this architecture is superceded by a more urgent need to understand where domesticity may be positioned within China's diasporic elite, and how it could be expressed, specifically through this house.

Ultimately, through an examination of the aesthetics, tectonics and politics of Father's House, the intention is to argue for a notion of 'home' that is performed, that is, a provisional site with tenuous meanings, which are continually structured and re-structured in relation to changing ideas of family, lineage, and a transnational imagination.

Bearings: Conceptual and Cultural

Father's House is located in the architect's hometown of Jade Valley, Lantian, Xi'an. The house sits on an open, expansive site, which is part of the transitional strip between the steep slopes of the Qinling Mountain Ranges and the vast flat fields of the Guanzhong Plain. It is a double storey building with a courtyard in front, a lap pool on one side, and is particularly distinguishable for its high stone walls. The design is exceptionally compact, even urbanized in its scale. Spaces are concentrated in a box structure which has bedrooms on the upper level, and living, dining and kitchen spaces occupying the lower level. At first glance, the architectural typology is reminiscent of a traditional Chinese urban courtyard house with its walled compound and transitional courtyard. However, its open plan form and clean geometric lines recall a more recent Modernist architectural tradition, and begin to make this architecture more curious, or less authentic, in possible claims towards straightforward vernacularism.

The architect singles out this house as important to his repertoire. The project was self-funded, with Ma taking on dual roles of architect and client. As he was solely responsible for the fruition of the house, the architectural ambition was precise, with Ma declaring that he wished to provide a solid foundation (立足之地) as a springboard for his architectural theories, and also wanting to use the house as a gesture of returning to his origins (归根之感).⁴ Thus, although being of a relatively modest scale, the house is symbolic of an architectural breakthrough.⁵ It provided the architect with an opportunity to rethink the relationship between him and his public, as well as the relationship between site, tradition and function.⁶

Since the house's completion in 2003, it has been widely featured in the Chinese press as well as in the foreign architectural media. Primarily circulated are photographs of the house. (Fig.1) To this writer's knowledge, no architectural drawings of the house have been published. Thus, while the image of the house has become iconic, it remains paradoxically private insofar as its interior life is concerned. Shortly after its completion, in 2005, this property was sold with Ma's other nearby building (Well Hall). Both buildings are now part of the Jade Valley Wine and Resort complex.

Given the house's unusual circumstance in terms of its occupancy, a few explicatory notes on the paper's method are essential. Since it was never used as a private residence in the conventional sense, a critique of this house must necessarily engage its potentiality as an imagined domestic space, as well as address its influences in constructing (or deconstructing) the notion of 'home', in the context of what is generally regarded as modern

Chinese architecture. Further, the critique stems from this writer's encounter with an aesthetic image, that seems at least on initial inspection, to rely heavily and unusually so, on non-Chinese references. Finally, rather than firsthand experience, it should be emphasized that the paper has worked through primarily published sources on the house. In doing so, this represents a critique of mediated domesticity, that is, how a specific notion of 'home' is invested through an orchestrated currency of images and texts. In this sense, the critique aligns with Beatriz Colomina's claim that modern architecture is produced through the mass media, where an external mediated perspective may lead the spectator deeper into the private interior:

The modern transformation of the house produces a space defined by walls of (moving) images. This is the space of the media, of publicity. To be 'inside' this space is only to see. To be 'outside' is to be *in* the image, to be seen, whether in the press photograph, a magazine, a movie, on television, or at your window. ... The private is, in this sense, now more public than the public.⁷

With the introduction of 'mass media as architecture', or 'architecture as mass media', the ease of visibility becomes a problem in itself which needs to be theoretically probed: What does it mean to become visible, as in the case of Father's House, to be automatically interpellated as a form of 'Chinese' domesticity in the 21st century? Does this entry mark an imaginative shift in thinking about racial and gendered categories for domestic architecture? Or must a reading of Father's House remain entrenched in cultural categories reserved for the non-Western Other which have conventionally resided in 'realpolitical' terms and thus, 'deprived of fantasy, desires, and contradictory emotions'?⁸

As much as global visibility is an opportunity for non-Western architectural projects to gain a foothold in the international scene, it presents its own challenges, namely that such visibility carries with it the burden of ethnic representation. As Chow argues, 'minorities are allowed to speak only on the implicit expectation that they will speak in the documentary mode, "reflecting" the group from which they come'.⁹ The visibility of Father's House relies in part on the premise that 'Chineseness' is the *de facto* descriptor of its architecture and of its architect, while the other term 'domestic' remains secondary. Yet visibility, as Chow, Colomina and Joan W. Scott have argued, is not simply about being 'seen' but also denotes how knowledge of the visible subject will ultimately be structured.¹⁰ The limitations of reading Father's House in an insular regionalist mode, or as culturally representative of Chinese architectural specificity, is that it may lock 'individuals and groups a priori into a genealogy, into a determination that is immutable and intangible in origin.'¹¹

In this sense, Ma's iconoclastic position towards the preservation of traditional Chinese architecture is interesting – can a subversion of tradition overturn such cultural insularity? Further, MADA's explicit embrace of popular mass media as an essential socio-economic component of the architectural practice indicates that it is conscious of 'Asia' as, what Chow fluently describes:

... a commodified and reproducible value, made tantalizingly visible and accessible ... through an entire network of contemporary media discourses – economic rivalry, exotic cuisine, herbal medicine, spiritual and physical exercise, sex trade, female child adoption, model minority politics, illegal immigration and so on – that are at once sustained by and contributing to the flows of capital.¹²

The descriptor 'Chinese architecture' bears its own traditions and canons, which the present reading of Father's House must reconsider. However, it would be naïve to simply ascribe Father's House as a cultural reworking of revered ancient Chinese architectural traditions. Given that Ma spent not only his formative years training as an architect in the United States but currently heads one of the leading architecture schools in its West Coast, it would be unsurprising that the architect's use of Western architectural imagery and influences is not unconscious, if not completely strategic. Hence, whatever pretext towards pure vernacularism and indigenous tradition one may harbour when appraising this house must be continually re-contextualized in relation to Ma's complex cosmopolitan frame. If anything, the weight of being Chinese is here, carefully recalibrated against what it means to operate as a non-Western architect amongst international architectural luminaries. The house, being the locus of self-expression and personal growth, becomes an ideal site for declaring one's individualized position, while simultaneously reconsidering questions of familial hierarchy and filiality, qualities which still dominate the realm of Chinese domesticity today.

The issue remains as to whether Father's House may be perceived for what it is in a contemporary architectural context as opposed to what it should represent for Chinese architecture. To arrive at this destination, the paper will privilege domesticity as a critique of this neo-racist ideology. It will read against the grain, with a consciousness that 'Chineseness' is neither essentialistic nor stylistic, but emerges as an event of enacting visibility - of becoming visible through inclusive rather than insular difference - within a globalized architectural context. In so doing, the theoretical lens used to navigate through this argument is informed primarily by Western ideas, a mode of thinking familiar to Ma, and also aligned with an international public that the house ultimately addresses.

Domestic References: Local and Exotic

An initial discussion of Father's House needs to be fleshed out on at least two fronts. It would include an understanding of the site's vernacular tradition, as well as other architectural references by which this house may be compared and reinterpreted. Contrary to the vernacularism of its locality, these references may be considered exotic.

Vernacular tradition. An initial impression of Father's House is that it integrates seamlessly with its vernacular context. The house embraces tradition through the selection of site in the historically rich Jade Valley and the choice of vernacular stone walls built by the hands of the villagers. Yet, the architect's relationship with tradition is by no means straightforward:

To begin with, I would like to point out that when I use traditional materials, I am in no way trying to be or appear to be nostalgic, or become the 'saviour' of traditions. These are simply materials that have always been there and in some ways are right for the purpose of each project.¹³

Controversially, Ma sees Chinese architecture as transient, in which every building is a 'temporary decision', and where one's sense of history is not located in 'place' since China ultimately only ever 'resides in time'.¹⁴ The architect has also openly criticized historic preservation as dangerous because it is 'a place where you can hide things', and where decisions may be overdetermined by immovable laws and traditions. Further, Ma is openly critical about a traditional *modus operandi*, which he disparagingly describes as a process of blind 'experimentation and readjustment'.¹⁵ He emphasizes that although Father's House makes use of traditional manpower and materials, the method of construction intentionally deviates from vernacular means, usually by pushing its physical and conceptual limits. Notably, traditional workmanship, for him, does not equate to honesty as these are 'ways of the flesh', and are exemplified by a will towards convenience and self-preservation, thus, lacking genuine cerebral power to innovate.¹⁶ Therefore, moving away from a Ruskinian sense of honesty in materials and craft, Father's House is radical in that it invokes a rural context only to invalidate it with almost brutal capitalistic intention of mass circulation. Hence, building a house for one's father in one's own hometown is not romantic. It becomes a platform where questions of 'home', 'origin' and 'vernacularism' are re-engaged with a 'mute violence'.

Exoticism. It is significant that for a house purporting to enact a kind of homecoming, there is a conspicuous lack of 'Chinese' expression in Father's House. There are, in effect, no obvious Chinese symbols or styles except for a dragon-head water feature, which was installed at the swimming pool. Instead, Father's House may have referenced and/or re-appropriated various architectural strategies, which could be considered exotic in relation to the Xi'an landscape.

The native intellectual ... sooner or later will realize that you do not show proof of your nation from its culture... At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the strangers in his country. He contents himself with stamping these instruments with a hall-mark which he wishes to be national, but which is strangely reminiscent of exoticism. The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner.¹⁷

Father's House is tectonically a solid box structure expressed by openable bamboo board panels and full height glass fenestration (Fig.2). Its rectilinear form and flatness is evocative of modern Dutch architecture, which is typically characterized by minimalist lines and lucid structure. Speaking through a modern Dutch architectural language (perhaps influenced by the architect's experience at OMA), Father's House exudes a sense of detachment from the site. It becomes an unfixed, global entity, which is no longer rooted to the traditions and customs of local land. Ma's strategic assimilation of an exotic culture is demonstrated in his own declaration that Dutch architecture is '...rationalism used in a tasteful manner...it is not only Dutch but also Chinese pragmatism'.¹⁸ Yet, in spite of obvious stylistic similarities between Father's House and modern Dutch architecture, Ma has rejected observations that his work is derivative, 'I don't mind if people associate my work with Dutch architecture (but)...labeling my work as 'Dutch' would be going too far'.¹⁹

Another possible visual reference is Casa de Piedra, also known as the Stonehouse, a residential project by Swiss architects Jacques Herzog & Pierre de Meuron. Located in Tavole, Italy, the house was completed in 1985. The distinctive stonewall which encloses Father's House is reminiscent of Casa de Piedra's stonewalls. In the project, Herzog & de Meuron employed a strikingly similar strategy of packing exposed structural concrete frames with stones that originated from the demolition of neighbouring buildings in order to achieve a form of continuity between the house and the harsh Ligurian landscape.

Finally, just as the name 'Father's House' may suggest a gendered politics, one is tempted to compare it with an obvious corollary - Mother's House or the Vanna Venturi House by Robert Venturi. Completed in 1962 and located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the latter was designed as a residence for Venturi's mother. It also demonstrated Venturi's proposition for a populist and contradictory architectural solution, attuned to the excessive demands of a postmodern culture. Thus, Mother's House is intentionally ambivalent in its constitution, being simultaneously complex and simple in its relationship to vernacularism, and openly declaring the gendered terms on which domesticity is ultimately enacted.²⁰

Like Mother's House, Father's House operates as an architectural manifesto in that it questions, or at least rescinds, conventional possibilities of a 'Chinese home'. The evocation of 'the father' is more metaphorical and strategic. While patently dedicating Father's House to his biological father, the latter's absence immediately erodes any specificity of this paternal reference. The name of the father acts as an empty signifier. Further, this frustrated expectation is shrewdly played out in a global, media-savvy and increasingly politicized East Asian architectural circle.

The domesticity of Father's House, in fact, does not equate to 'a house in that sense of a center of domestication'²¹ but inscribes the architect's creative spatial re-occupation of the past, by paying homage yet deconstructing a tradition which he no longer has access to. Despite having his roots in the rustic Jade Valley, Ma has expressed an attachment to a nomadic lifestyle in which he advocates not owning a 'house in the traditional sense, where one grows and raises children and animals'.²² Instead, the architect finds himself pleasurably 'houseless' but not 'homeless',²³ as he instinctively creates a mobile and elastic concept of home wherever he travels. The description of his nomadic lifestyle is congruous with the modern individual who is 'in a permanent state of transition',²⁴ and whose dwelling also has to comply with and accommodate this mutable state.

Hilde Heynen notes that an extreme example of this completely anonymous and flexible space would be the temporary hotel room. Therefore, it seems significant that Father's House was built as a flexible modernist space and now, re-appropriated as a resort. Its changing occupancy is satiated with interiors that 'do not determine them (the occupant), but rather allow for the greatest possible flexibility'.²⁵ This description begins to align with Ma's own radical proposition that architecture be non-monumental but reconsidered as a temporary phenomenon open to immanent expiration and regeneration after it has exhausted its purpose.²⁶

Like Mother's House which uses popular 'low' vernacularism to promote what is essentially a 'high' (that is, designed and theorized) architectural response, Father's House's simultaneous

appropriation of 'exotic' modernist references and 'authentic' vernacular materials, exposes how outwardly opposing categories such as 'modern' versus 'ancient' are in fact entangled binaries. Moreover, as Chow and Etienne Balibar have pointed out, such binary terms are political since the history of the non-West is habitually divided into the 'classical/primitive and the modern stages'²⁷ whereby the modern non-Western subject is locked into an '*a priori* ... genealogy' marked by an 'immutable and intangible origin'.²⁸ As such, one may further argue that in Father's House, the common notion by which 'antiquity (is)... privileged as the site of the essence of Chineseness'²⁹ is threatened since there is a patent subversion of an authentic 'Chinese' architectural form while the traditional idea of the Chinese house as a site for the maintenance and reproduction of the patriarchal family unit appears to be all but fractured.

Yet, as Venturi and others like Le Corbusier and Adolf Loos were quick to grasp, the domestic is not merely a trivial appendage to the more vital public realm. The domestic is a spatial arrangement where time-honoured norms, practices and values, are initiated. The domestic arrangement involves, at its heart, the notion of family. Thus, what does the namesake of Father's House allude to, and what values are nourished by this domestic arrangement?

Performing Chinese Domesticity: Fetishism and the Performative

'The domestic', Rosemary Marangoly George tells us:

... implies spatial arrangements in which certain practices of reproduction (children as well as certain modes of production) are situated. As a primary site at which modernity is manufactured and made manifest, the domestic serves as a regulative norm that refigures conceptions of the family from a largely temporal organization of kinship into a spatially manifest entity.³⁰

The ancestral home constitutes the locus of the patriarchal Chinese family. Significantly, the Chinese character 家 (jiā) both denotes a 'family' and its 'house'. Through the architectural hierarchy of its layered courtyards and rooms separating private from public and served from service spaces, 'regulative norms' marked by social patterns which are often also gendered, are played out. These norms include the importance of the male heir, a generational hierarchy headed by a father figure, strict observance of rituals and traditions, and the subservience of women taking on the passive roles of mother, wife, daughter or servant. Rather than see this familial arrangement as essentially Chinese and therefore to de-historicize it, this kind of domesticity is in fact an affirmation, or 'manifestation of larger national and imperial projects'.³¹

The classic novel 'Jia' or 'The Family', a melodramatic saga from 1930 based on the Chinese author Ba Jin's life experiences, explores the feudal moralities surrounding a tyrannical patriarch's (Master Gao) family.³² Tracing the lives of Gao's three grandsons, it juxtaposes two sites – one, the new cultural milieu marked by the Chinese *avant garde's* leaning towards Westernization, and two, the bedrock of tradition founded on the Gao ancestral home. As the three brothers struggle for self-definition in a changing socio-political landscape, Ba Jin's novel subtly impresses upon the reader that such feudalism was still consensual on a national scale whereby filial obligations towards the family mirrored responsibilities towards the nation. Significantly, the untraditional exploits of the three brothers (whose achievements include a brother turning down an arranged marriage and another one leaving the oppressive home for the city) are played out against numerous detailed narratives structured alongside familiar domestic commitments, for example, family meals, birthday and New Year celebrations, *mahjong* parties, household gossip and the patriarch's funeral. In this juxtaposition, the structured nature of family-countryside-nation are conflated, and then posed against the unpredictability of foreigner-city-other. Here in Ba Jin's novel, the point is still to seek out an originary Chinese culture.

In Father's House the triadic family-countryside-nation relationship is creatively, if not irreverently, altered. The strategic imaging and imagination of 'home' staged by bucolic photographs of Father's House is key because it simultaneously mystifies and encourages slippage of an already tenuous concept. The house is frequently shown isolated in a picturesque countryside amidst rolling hills, livestock and local peasants. Its distinctive yet neutral walls become a backdrop for the vivid colours of spring as surrounding fields of flowers burst into full bloom.

In these images (Figs.3 & 4), the house publicly declares its visibility, or in other words, architecture is instrumental, to borrow Chow's argument, as a means of 'becoming visible', that is, it enters the fray where its discursive identity on the world stage becomes possible, if not also problematic.³³ By positioning itself deep within a vernacular context and adopting an unequivocal masculinist description, even if its effect is only meant to be superficial or provocative, the house immediately opens itself to alliance with Chinese traditions, history, and patriarchal family lineage. Thus, in becoming visible, Father's House generates certain problematic expectations, in which it inevitably becomes a fetish for a mode of Chineseness, which is either already lost, or else, non-existent. To complicate matters, the typology of a house, and one's common access to domestic space, makes this fetish ever more compelling.

For example, contrary to such images, Father's House is actually sited on the outskirts of the village instead of within it. The notion of the village or the countryside, which here conveniently stand in for an originary source of tradition, is a naïve one, as Frederic Jameson argues:

... we have to deal with the conceptual difficulties in which we are plunged by the disappearance of one of the terms of a formerly functioning binary opposition. The disappearance of Nature – the commodification of the countryside and the capitalization of agriculture itself all over the world – now begins to sap its other term, formerly the urban.³⁴

The commodification of the countryside suggests that a consideration for how an image of 'home' which pays respect to a father figure, may be consumed, is critical. Such a perspective may already be central to MADA as images of Father's House ostensibly promote a mode of representation that self-consciously engages the problematics of becoming-visible in a world increasingly overdetermined by strategy and media. These components – strategy and media – also constitute, not coincidentally, the two arms of Ma's provocatively named practice s.p.a.m. In an interview, Ma explains in deadpan fashion, that s.p.a.m. takes after that infamous sandwich filling which is a 'great post-modern idea' since it is 'nutritious' and has even 'already been chewed for you' but still remains mysterious because we cannot figure out 'its original form'.³⁵ The description befits this writer's encounter with Father's House. Seductively packaged as a series of consistent images, it is possible to know the house without ever figuring out 'its original form', that is, without ever encountering it for what it 'is'. Under these circumstances, Father's House remains enigmatic - as a house for an absent father, as a house which has never been a home, as a Chinese house in a verdant landscape, and now as a resort where privacy is only ever exchanged for money. Hence, Father's House may be said to exist as a fetish.

'Fetishism', Chow reiterates, 'is the process of a belated consciousness, a consciousness that comes into itself through memory substitution, and representation', and is concerned with the 'identification that is at play in the formation of a subject'.³⁶ She argues that an 'obsession with China' among Chinese people must be understood not simply in essentialist terms, for instance, as a primordial yearning for the vernacular or naively interpreted as 'pre-psychoanalytic' nativism.³⁷ This "object" with which Chinese people are obsessed – "China" or "Chineseness" – cannot be seen as an emotional simplism'.³⁸ The object is, in fact, a consequence of 'a collective identity' strung together by 'subjective processes ... desires, fantasies and sentimentalisms' which are modes of imagination that restore, if only by means of a fetish, a longing for, and 'a protest against that inevitable "dismemberment" brought about

by imperialistic violence of Westernization'.³⁹ Nevertheless, this resistance is complicated in that the ethnic community is complicit with the processes of Westernization and Western culture, which are embedded within, rather than peripheral to, modern Chinese culture. Chow's reading of such resistance is interesting especially in the context of Father's House since it positions fetishism not merely as loss but conversely as a productive site in which a new consciousness and new structures of imagination may be installed.

While a cursory reading of Father's House almost always perpetuates a fetishism for the father, the Chinese family home, the countryside and a native origin, Ma's vague intentions further confounds this fetishism. For example, the architect declares that the building of Father's House was to 'satisfy the long-cherished wishes of a Northerner, or perhaps a Northern villager',⁴⁰ and also to resolve a kind of tension that his father had been harbouring. This statement is vague. It is unclear if Ma is referring to himself or to his father when he speaks of the 'Northerner'. It is also unclear what kind of tension is at stake – whether it is the desire of the father to build a house of his own, or a desire of the father to see his son's homecoming through this edifice, or that there is an optimism that an existing rift between father and son, may be resolved through this symbolic architectural gesture.

The architect himself has not, to this writer's knowledge, clarified these ambiguous statements. Nevertheless, the point may be that such ambiguity is often strategic, a way of enacting filiality without necessarily conforming to traditional norms, or a means of broaching the vernacular without being necessarily locked into fixed Chinese customs. In fact, this flexibility is akin to Judy Schaaf's interpretation of Confucian tradition which Schaaf advocates as key to understanding the Chinese family and its home. According to Schaaf, contrary to widespread perception of its rigidity, Confucian tradition may be categorized according its three features of ordering, performativity and adaptability.

In Confucian tradition, the self is defined in relation to ordered sets of social relationships, in which the social experience must be continually enacted or performed in relation to shifting contexts of time and place, and where the principles of this social contract are 'accretive, synthetic, forgiving, absorbing'.⁴¹ Thus, the Confucian tradition is one where rituals evolve according to changing contexts, and must be rethought and performed anew, thus making this ancient tradition 'radically liberating', 'exploratory, and in the root sense of the word, educative'.⁴² This is not very different from the open-ended statements issued by Ma's architectural gesture.

The absent namesake could be read as a kind of decoy, which draws attention to itself only to deflect it to a mythical 'ancient' origin. Here, filiality could be performative, that is, by

operating within a highly hierarchical social structure, it functions strategically as a rite of passage towards individual subjecthood:

... at the heart of Chinese sentimentalism lies the idealization of filiality: as a predominant mode of subjectivization, filial piety is not simply a matter of respecting one's biological or cultural elders but also an age-old moral apparatus for *interpellating individuals* into the hierarchy ... submitting to – whatever pre-exists them – from the ancestral land, the province, the country, and the ethnic community in a foreign nation – as authentic and beyond challenge.⁴³

Thus, the house is creatively interpellated into the existing hierarchy by submitting itself to an origin, furnished in ancient splendour:

'Father's House' (or the 'Jade-Valley-Stone Enclosure' – '*yu shan shi chai*') is a house I have built for my father. I have named it so because the famous Jade Valley in my hometown Lantian is one of China's largest production zones for jade. The 'Stone-Enclosure' is in reference to the Tang Dynasty poet Wang Wei's abode called the 'Deer-Enclosure', and within my sphere of knowledge, this is the first 'home-away-from-home' that existed in China. The word for 'enclosure' is synonymous for '*Chai*' in ancient tongue, and this word means 'to live'; the phrase 'Stone-enclosure' also sounds like 'stone material'. Thus, 'stone-enclosure' connotes a place to live in, made of stone.⁴⁴

The architect used a similar metaphorical technique for naming Well Hall. 'Well Hall' is derived from a Chinese proverb describing a person who has a very narrow view of the world. In this case, Ma turns the proverb on its head - by likening the experience of sitting in the courtyard space of Well Hall (the tallest building in Jade Valley) to the experience of sitting in a well and looking up at the sky. The naming of both projects suggests that ironical position is adopted towards what is revered. For example, Ma clarifies that he used jade for the surfaces of a pool simply because it was 'cheaper than brick' - jade is plentiful in the valley and many sections are customarily discarded to yield a choice selection of ornamental green jade.⁴⁵ In this case, jade was picked for its availability rather than to fulfill a nostalgic loss. Yet, the choice of jade as building material – conventionally expensive, decorative and lavish - is surprising. Consequently, its difference makes it highly performative. In its presence, conventions (for instance, wastage and the relevance of local techniques) are questioned, unexpected visceral pleasure or shock is elicited, and new relationships hitherto unseen or

hidden (for instance, the flow of capital in vernacular construction, the unevenness of wealth amongst the villagers, and the exploitation of natural resources), begin to emerge. In the same way, the name and location of 'Father's House' are highly performative. They give the impression that an ancient propensity for the countryside, patriarch and nation are inherent and upheld. Yet the sum effect is opposed to this impression since these categories are transformed and challenged through the house's tectonics, techniques and programme.

A final performative detail is the house's distinct stonewall. (Fig.5) The stones were collected from the river that flows through the village, where these stones are found in abundance. The structural integrity of this local material has promoted vernacular modes of usage and meaning. For example, the practice of stacking stones to form low walls and to provide the foundation for the open courtyards is a tradition that dates back thousands of years. For the local population, the stacking of stones is not only a convenient and economical building technique but also provides a solid foundation. Traditionally, the courtyard between the house and its stonewalls is used as a space of interaction by the villagers. It is also used for farming preparations and the drying of crops.

Yet, a closer inspection of the stonewall at Father's House induces a sense of dislocation. Its height creates an intensely inward-looking and enclosed courtyard, which eliminates the possibility of a large social gathering. The stones are stacked on top of each other to form the infill of the exposed structural concrete frame. Unlike random stones picked up from the riverbed by the villagers for their low walls, these stones are similar in size, indicating a meticulous selection process. Furthermore, stones of the same hues are stacked together in the same section of the concrete frame to construct a studied composition. The resultant configuration seems random and rugged yet it has been precisely orchestrated. Materially, the stacked stones of even size and colour, transform a structural and basic technique into something decorative and contrived. There is also no suggestion of existing agricultural labour in the pristine courtyard.

Using stones from the river yet consciously departing from traditional construction methods by arranging the stones within a modernist concrete frame results in a structure which possesses, what Venturi calls, a 'double meaning'.⁴⁶ The stone becomes a 'vestigial element', that is, an ambiguous combination of old meaning (revived from existing associative relationships with the river and the use of stones in vernacular buildings) with new meaning (created by the stone's modified function).⁴⁷ This unconventional use of a conventional material can be seen as a deliberate strategy to enhance 'meaning...by breaking the order',⁴⁸ so that old clichés may be re-worked in new settings and may mutate in reaction to an everchanging present context.⁴⁹ The result is a wall, which is vernacular but also distinctly not so.

The will to re-appropriate tradition is made all the more powerful by the fact that the villagers were involved in the construction process. In adhering to local labour cycles, the house took an amazing 11 years to build. The lengthy period seems ludicrous in the context of contemporary architectural construction. However, this long drawn process is interesting - the house suspends itself in time while the architect consciously fetishizes ancient techniques to the point of absurdity: How long would it take to build a house the 'authentic' way? In attempting to answer this question, one realizes the Morris-ian dilemma, that is, the patron needs wealth in order to sustain such 'authenticity'. It also problematizes the 'authentic' as a fetish which can never be attained, at least not without great cost. Maintaining an ironical position, Ma admits that the house is modern, but argues that if 'the house violated tradition...it was their (the villagers') hands that had done the violating'.⁵⁰ In moves which both fetishize and isolate what is 'traditional' in terms of techniques and material, the stonewalls become one of the house's strongest performative gestures, signalling the constructed nature of 'tradition' as it is manifested today.

Homecoming: Epilogue

That sentiment accompanying the absence of home – homesickness – can cut two ways: it can be a yearning for the authentic home (situated in the past or in the future) or it can be the recognition of the inauthenticity of all homes.⁵¹

In the end, as an unfulfilled homecoming site, Father's House relies on an imagination that fetishizes the domestic realm. When the contemporary architectural reader stumbles upon it in the media, and even through firsthand experience, it is always a belated encounter, thus, only pointing to what it 'could have been'. Nevertheless, this belated encounter allows the reader to make certain creative associations. It enables domesticity to be founded on competing notions such as modernity, globalization, capitalism, filiality, tradition, ancient history, and at the core of it all, Chineseness. Ma insists that Chineseness is a transient phenomenon. It is not about a style or a form, but embedded in specific practices. The Chineseness of the house is derived, according to the architect, by 'working with real Chinese people',⁵² that is, the local villagers, who construct the house. '...Chineseness is not in the building, it's in how we interact, do business and absorb things'.⁵³ This aspect of Chineseness is perhaps reflected in Ma's ability to absorb and digest 'things' from any country.⁵⁴ It is also a demonstration of the non-Western ethnic community's complicity in Westernization, and the former's ability to critically respond to Western imperialism:

The point must be emphasized, especially from the position of those that are feminized and ethnicized: these identificatory acts are the sites of productive relations that should be reread with the appropriate degree of complexity. This complexity lies not only in the identification with the ethnic culture, but also in the strong sense of complicity with the 'dismembering' processes that structure those imaginings in the first place.⁵⁵

Following Chow's argument of productive complicity between the native and his or her perceived ethnic culture, this paper concludes by accentuating the double-edged nature of Father's House, which is poised between allusions to Chineseness and a consciousness towards cultural imperialism. This dichotomy makes Father's House a significant architectural statement by moving away from more familiar indigenous modes of Chinese domesticity, and forwarding instead a new cosmopolitan position which emphasizes the Chinese culture as different in an inclusive rather than insular kind of way. The house is intriguing because Ma has played with the dichotomy, acting complicitly with Western tastes and desires of what China may be, while at the same time, overturning traditional practices and disturbing notions of Chinese authenticity.

In fact at Father's House, coming home to an authentic 'Chinese' culture is already an impossibility. As 'mass media', this house could, however, performatively re-structure new domestic imaginings in the Chinese context. It could begin making visible the entanglements of domestic narratives with class, race, and gender so that 'Chinese domesticity' remains a tentative and open signifier that needs to be constantly fleshed out, re-staged and historicized before it is simply ethnicized.

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Notes:

¹ This paper was developed from a different version presented with Bobby Wong at the session 'Modern Architecture in East Asia: Regionalism/Transnationalism', chaired by Ken Tadashi Oshima and Vimalin Rujivacharakul, for the College Art Association conference in Los Angeles, February 2009.

² <http://www.madaspam.com-architecture> [Accessed 20 December 2008].

³ Judy Schaaf, 'Jia, "Family", and the Chinese House', in Howard Giskin and Bettye S. Walsh (eds.), *An Introduction to Chinese Culture through the Family* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p.165.

⁴ <http://www.china-crb.cn/HTML/2005/people/2006703.html>, Zhigen, Li. China Property Press. [Accessed 28 November 2008].

⁵ 'Using Father's Name to Bid Farewell to Father's Generation'.

⁶ 'Using Father's Name to Bid Farewell to Father's Generation'.

⁷ Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT press, 1996), pp.7-8.

- ⁸ Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p.xiii.
- ⁹ Rey Chow, 'On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem', in Peter Osborne and Stella Stanford (eds.), *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity* (London: Continuum, 2002), p.147.
- ¹⁰ See Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', in James Chandler, Arnold I. Davidson, and Harry Harootyan (eds.), *Questions of Evidence: Proof, Practice, and Persuasion across the Disciplines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp.363-87.
- ¹¹ Etienne Balibar, 'Is there a "Neo-Racism"?' trans. Chris Turner, in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991), pp.21-2. Cited in Chow, 'On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem', p.137.
- ¹² Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p.12.
- ¹³ <http://www.madaspam.com-architecture> [Accessed 30 May 2008].
- ¹⁴ Architect's comments during a roundtable event, 'Contemporary Architectural Trajectories in East Asia and the Pacific Rims', chaired by Ken Tadashi Oshima and Vimalin Rujivacharakul at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), 27 February 2009.
- ¹⁵ Philip Jodidio, *Architecture in China* (London: Taschen GmbH, 2007), p.111.
- ¹⁶ <http://www.china-crb.cn/HTML/2005/people/2006703.htm> [Accessed 18 November 2008]
- ¹⁷ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), pp.179-80. Cited in Abbas, *Hong Kong*, p.141.
- ¹⁸ Deng Ming, 'Urban Frequency: Architectural Culture Summit, Architecture Biennial Beijing 2004', in *Time & Architecture*, n.1, 2005, p.86.
- ¹⁹ ForboFlooring ArchIdea Interview #36, <http://www.archidea.com/archidea/interview.html>. [Accessed 18 October 2008].
- ²⁰ Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (London: Architectural Press, 1985), p. 118.
- ²¹ 'Ma Qingyun: Lantian, Xian, China', in *A+U*, n.438, v.3, 2007, p.114.
- ²² 'Ma Qingyun: Lantian, Xian, China', p.114.
- ²³ 'Ma Qingyun: Lantian, Xian, China', p.114.
- ²⁴ Hilde Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity: Tensions and Contradictions', in Hilde Heynen and Gulsum Baydar (eds.), *Negotiating Domesticity: Spatial Productions of Gender in Modern Architecture*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 22.
- ²⁵ Heynen, 'Modernity and Domesticity', p. 22.
- ²⁶ Architect's comments during a roundtable event, 'Contemporary Architectural Trajectories in East Asia and the Pacific Rims', UCLA, 27 February 2009.
- ²⁷ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.26.
- ²⁸ Chow, 'On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem', p.143.
- ²⁹ Chow, 'On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem', p.143.
- ³⁰ Rosemary Marangoly George, 'Recycling: Long Routes to and from Domestic Fixes', in Rosemary Marangoly George (ed.), *Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), p.3.
- ³¹ Marangoly George, 'Recycling: Long Routes to and from Domestic Fixes', p.4.
- ³² Ba Jin, *The Family*, trans. Sidney Shapiro (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1964). I wish to thank Bobby Wong for pointing out this text.
- ³³ Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations*, p.11.
- ³⁴ Frederic Jameson, 'The Antimonies of Postmodernity', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1988* (London: Verso, 1998), p.69.
- ³⁵ Jeevanji Ali, 'Qingyun Ma: Pt 1 The Idea behind s.p.a.m.' http://archinect.com/features/article.php?id=6851_0_23_o_c. [Accessed 10 October 2008]
- ³⁶ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.26.
- ³⁷ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.25, p.27.
- ³⁸ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.27.
- ³⁹ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.27.
- ⁴⁰ ⁴⁰ <http://www.china-crb.cn/HTML/2005/people/2006703.html>, Zhigen, Li. China Property Press. [Accessed 28 November 2008].
- ⁴¹ Schaaf, 'Jia, "Family", and the Chinese House', p.166.
- ⁴² Schaaf, 'Jia, "Family", and the Chinese House', p.166.
- ⁴³ Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*, p.22. Emphasis mine.
- ⁴⁴ <http://www.china-crb.cn/HTML/2005/people/2006703.html>. [Accessed 28 November 2008].
- ⁴⁵ Architect's comments during a roundtable event, 'Contemporary Architectural Trajectories in East Asia and the Pacific Rims', UCLA, 27 February 2009.
- ⁴⁶ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.38.

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- ⁴⁷ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.38.
- ⁴⁸ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.41.
- ⁴⁹ Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, p.44.
- ⁵⁰ Forbo Flooring ArchIdea Interview #36. <http://www.archidea.com/archidea/interview.html> [Accessed 18 October 2008]
- ⁵¹ Rosemary Marangoly George, 'Travelling Light: Immigration and Invisible Suitcases in M.G. Vassanji's the Gunny Sack', in Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrett Jr., Robert E. Hogan (eds.), *Memory, Narrative, and Identity: New Essays in Ethnic American Literature* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1994), p.281.
- ⁵² Forbo Flooring ArchIdea Interview #36. <http://www.archidea.com/archidea/interview.html> [Accessed 18 October 2008].
- ⁵³ Forbo Flooring ArchIdea Interview #36. <http://www.archidea.com/archidea/interview.html> [Accessed 18 October 2008].
- ⁵⁴ Deng Ming, 'Urban Frequency', p.86.
- ⁵⁵ Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, p.27.

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