

# **Houses and religious buildings in the vicinity of Maung Chiang Rung**

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A lack of flat terrain, lots of rain and high relative humidity, are the normal geographical and climatic conditions in Sipsongpanna, where the Tai-Lue live. Only 50% of the terrain in the overall area is flat, (Tida Saraya 1989:43), and this flat ground is located between the hills and slopes of the region. Tai-Lue settlements are of two main types: those on flat terrain at the bottom of a valley, and those, on sloping terrain. The picturesque scene of the stepped rice fields can easily be seen from the latter.

As with other agricultural societies, the physical location of the settlement depends on the availability of water resources. This applies to both the Linear village alongside water ways and to settlements located on sloping terrain (to take advantage of water run-off from the mountain-side).

Maung Chiang Rung, Sipsongpanna is popular and well known. However, the most impressive examples of 'cultural ecology' are not found in Maung Chiang Rung itself, but in places close by such as; Maung Hai, Maung Hum, Ban Tin, Maung Chiang Lan, etc. The case studies in this paper focus on houses and religious buildings in the villages of Maung Hai and Maung Hum respectively, the first of which is located on flat terrain and the other, on sloping terrain.

## **The village and it's Environment**

The normal sized Tai-Lue village in Sipsongpanna comprises about 40-50 houses (Ornsiri Panin 1996:50). Every village has the same elements: village gates, houses, a public square, a village temple, a public water-well, and the spirit house. The clustering of these elements seems to be very tight and the village itself is surrounded by agricultural fields. The size of each house is usually about 600-1000 sq.m. The traditional fences there are quite similar to those found surrounding Tai-Yuan houses in Northern Thailand. The typical components of the homes themselves are: the main house itself, a rice storage area, an animal shed, a vegetable garden, a fruit garden, a court-yard, and a spirit-house.

Within the main grouping of 40-50 houses, subdivision into smaller groups of houses is common. Subgroups of 3-5 houses - with a central courtyard - can easily be seen. The village symbol of origin is located within the village public

courtyard. This public courtyard is used as a multi-purpose area by the villagers. Besides this multi-purpose public courtyard, other important public elements are: the village water-well, the spirit house, and the temple.

### **The temples**

Almost eighty percent (Zhu Liangwen 1992:36) of Tai-Lue villages in Sipsongpanna have their own village temple. The other twenty percent tend to use the temple of a neighbouring village. The village temple (or religious quarter) plays a central role in Tai-Lue life, because the Tai-Lue strongly believe that good spirits (or Buddha Spirit) reside in the temple - and that only their family spirits will live in their individual houses. So, the temple is the only place for giving offerings to Buddha. There are lots of religious ceremonies at the temple throughout the year.

The village temple (usually located on the highest section of land within the village), is easily visible from a distance and is also easily approachable from every house in the village.

Normally, the religious quarter of a village will consist of: Viharn, Ubosoth, monks' living quarters, a temple water-well, a pagoda (but not always), and a central court-yard, which is a very important space for the staging of out-door religious ceremonies. The landscape element that helps define the identity of the Tai-Lue religious quarter is the garden surrounding the temple.

The three case studies of religious quarters (which can help us identify the cultural presence of the Tai-Lue in Sipsongpanna) in this paper deal with the following locations: Wat Ban-Tin, Ban Chiang-Lan; Wat-Chiang-Jeng, Maung-Hai; and Wat Saun-Mon, Maung-Hum.

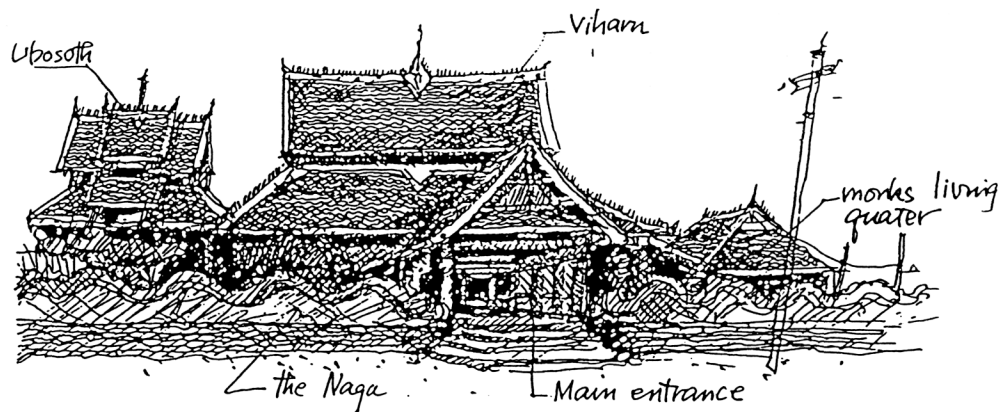
### **Wat Ban-Tin, Ban-Chiang-Lan**

At present, Wat-Ban-Tin is the most important Buddhist Religious Quarter in Sipsongpanna (Ornsiri Panin 1990:43). It is the centre for religious ceremonies and as such is the focus of a joint development project on the part of the Buddhist Association of China and The Buddhist Association of Yunnan.

Wat-Ban-Tin can be easily approached from the main road of Ban-Chiang-Lan. The covered walkway main entrance is connected to the continuous Naga wall, which leads to the longitudinal elevation of the Viharn, facing East-West. The Buddha Image in the Viharn faces East. The small Ubosoth is located to the East,

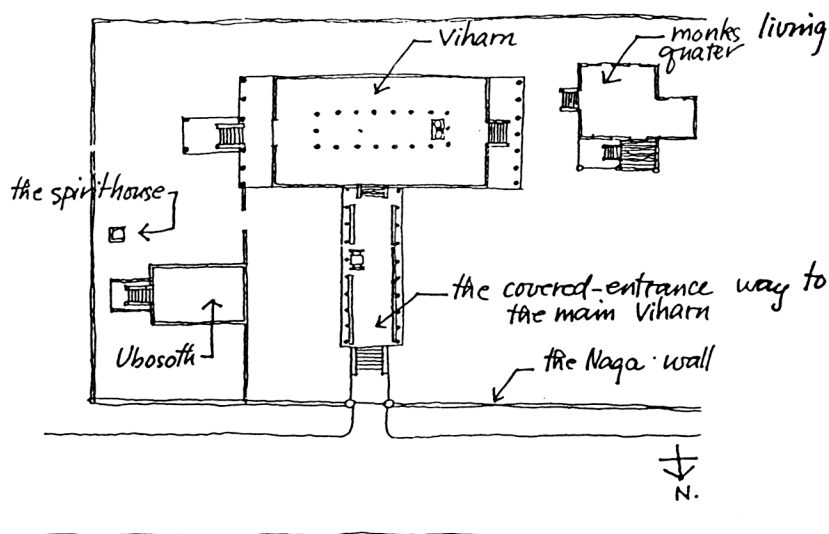
near the tiny spirit house in the South. The monks' living quarters are located to the West - close to the site's boundary. The outdoor open courtyard is to the West of the entrance walk-way.

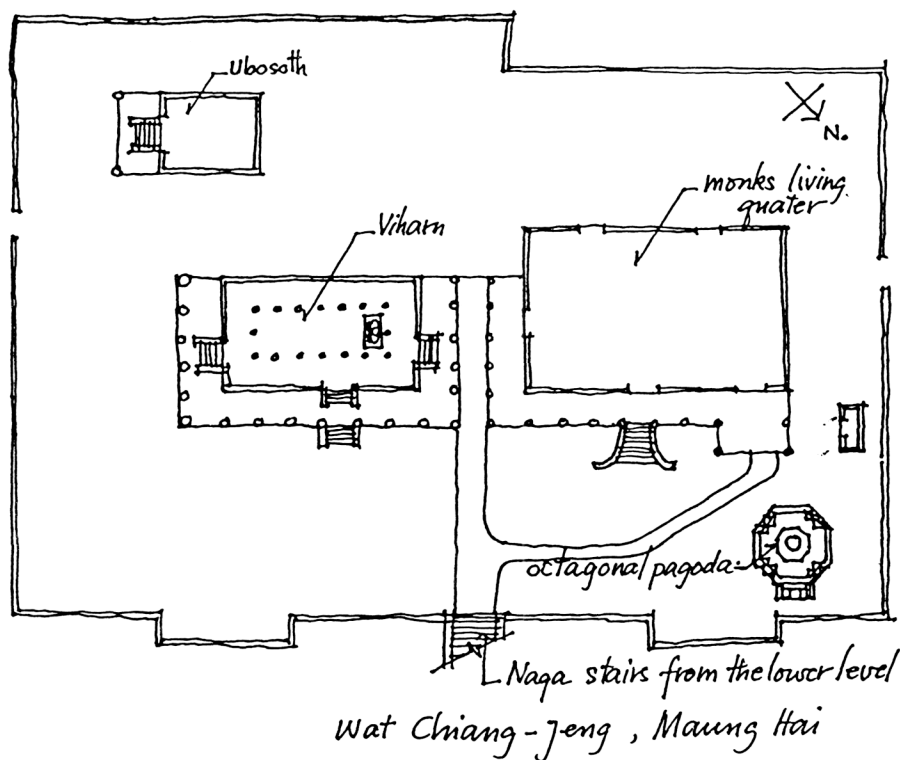
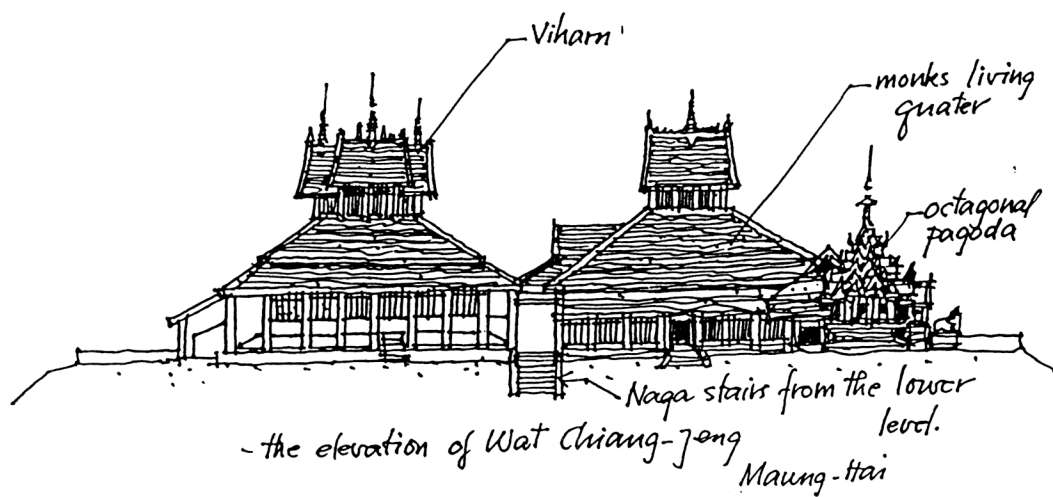
With this simple rectangular plan, the architectural appearance of the Viharn is both simple and humble - with a high pitch gabled roof connecting to the surrounding hip-overhanging roof and adding to the double lean-to overhanging roof on the East and West sides. The decorative elements seem very simple but they are neat and possess many aesthetic qualities. Similar to the Viharn, is the small and simple rectangular plan of the Ubosoth - with its double layered, decorated pitch roof and terra cotta roofing materials. The monks' living quarters are of an L-Shape plan with an L-shape hip-gable roof.



Wat-Bam-Tin - Maung Hai

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### **Wat Chiang-Jeng, Maung-Hai**

Wat Chiang-Jeng is located at the top of sloping terrain which can be approached from the main road of Ban-Kong-Laung, Maung Hai. The most impressive architectural feature of Wat Chiang-Jeng is the octagonal pagoda standing as an aesthetically pleasing landmark at the northern most part of the site. The site elements of Wat-Chiang-Jeng consist of: a Viharn, an Ubosoth, the octagonal pagoda and the monks' living quarters.

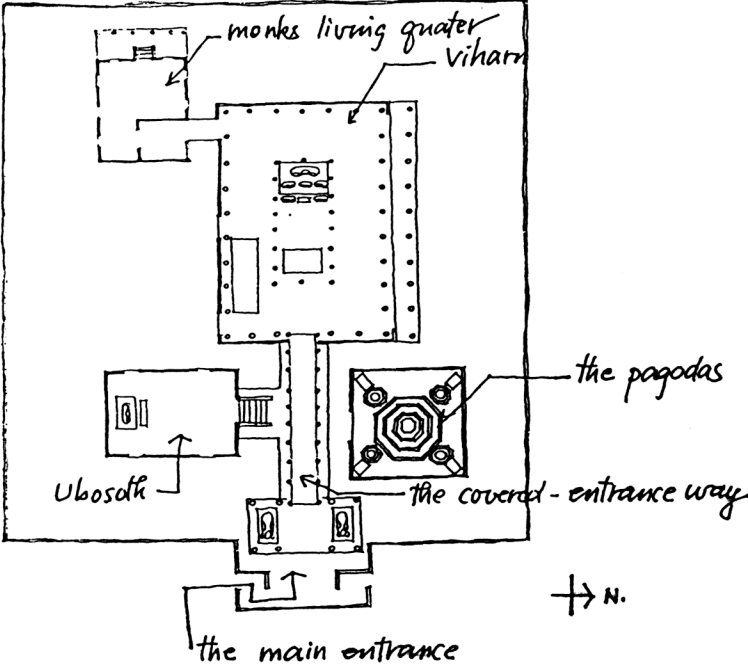
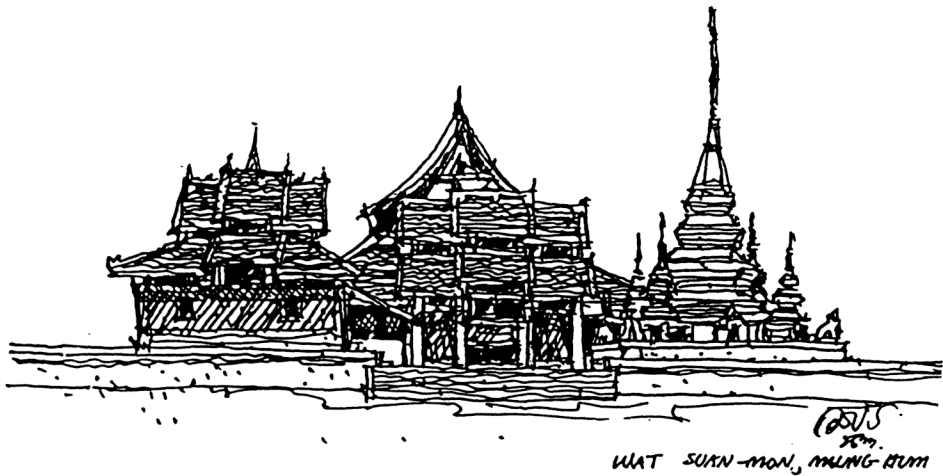
The typical type of ground plan is also simple and rectangular - similar to Wat Ban-tin. However, the roof form of the Viharn of Wat Chiang-Jeng is much more complex - with a double-layer, decorated high pitch roof. For covering the very large area of the plan, the Viharn needed a double overhanging hip roof and also a higher clear-story between the connection of the main gable roof and auxiliary overhanging roofs, which makes the overall roof-form seem to be more complicated.

The Ubosoth seems to be less important than the Viharn because of its smaller scale and simple roof form. The monks' living quarters are rather specious but simple in planning and form.

The octagonal Wat Chiang-Jeng is the most impressive pagoda in Sipsongpanna, because of its difference in form from other Buddhist pagodas. The octagonal shape consists of ten roofs layered into the shape of a pyramid and topped with a silver canopy. (An Chungyang & Liu Bohua 1985:78)

### **Wat Suan-Mon, Maung Hum**

Normally, the villages in Maung Hum are situated on sloping terrain, but Wat Suan-Mon in Maung Hum is located on the small flat terrain between the sloping sides of the village.



Due to lack of flat terrain, the site planning elements of Wat Suan-Mon seem to be more tightly clustered than those of the two temples mentioned previously. The main entrance of Wat Suan-Mon is very interesting - with its complicated narrow entrance walkway. The structures are closer together: the main gate is connected to the covered walkway to the Viharn, a small Ubosoth is located in the small space between the Viharn and main gate, and the octagonal pagodas are located opposite the Ubosoth. The pagodas consist of one main octagonal pagoda and four auxiliary pagodas. The monks' living quarters consist of a small building on the extreme Western edge of the site.

Since all of the buildings are located in a very tight space, this makes them seem to be more imposing than those in the more 'scattered' plan temple complexes.

The Viharn, Ubosoth and Main Gate also have the same characteristics of elegant and complicated roof forms. When we observe the elevated view from the main entrance, we can sense the atmosphere of respect and religious devotion.

Many imaginary animals are used as decorative elements of Tai-Lue temples. They may appear as carved ornaments on roofs, structural decoration, design relief on the temple door, in the painted murals (on both the inside and outside of the temple walls), or even within the main structure of the temple itself (as decoration on columns and beams).

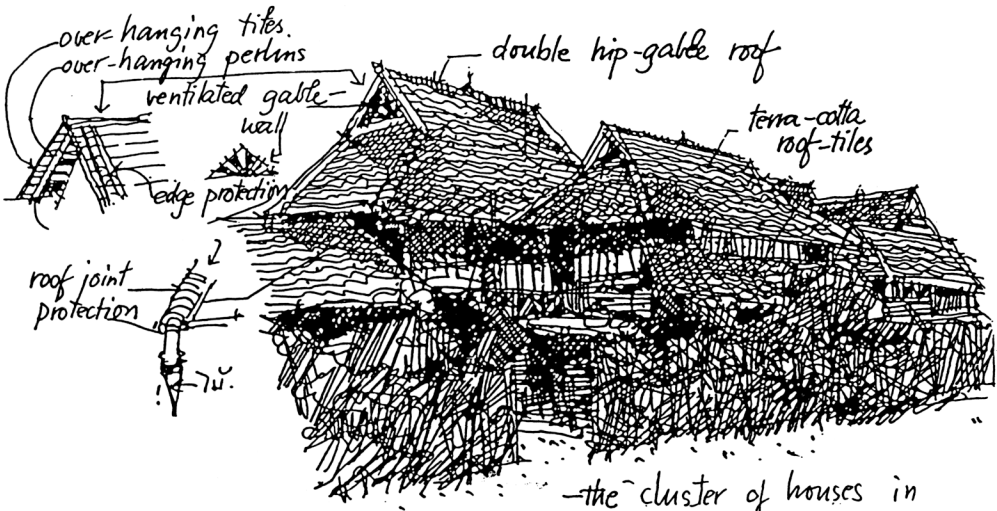
## **Houses**

The micro-climatology of Sipsongpanna effects the form and appearance of both the houses and the overall village. Because of prolonged periods of rainfall, every house has to be well protected. Large roofs with considerable overhang are typical of the houses in Sipsongpanna. Observing from outside, it appears as if every house is made up of nothing more than a very large roof (No walls can be seen from the elevation).



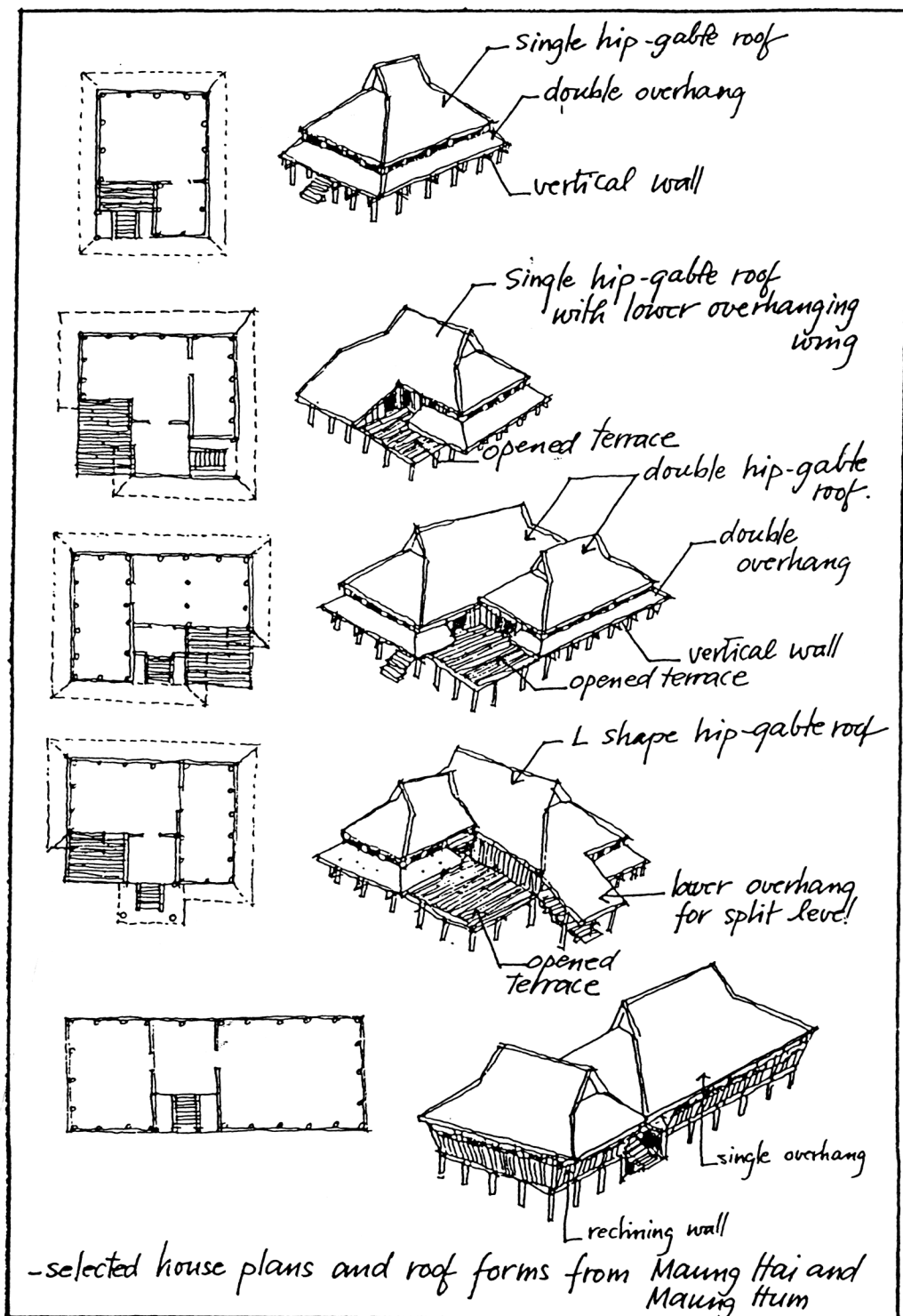
- the atmosphere of Tai-lue village in Maung-Hum, Sipsongpanna : the village settlement on slope-site.

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-the cluster of houses in Maung-Hai Sipsongpanna

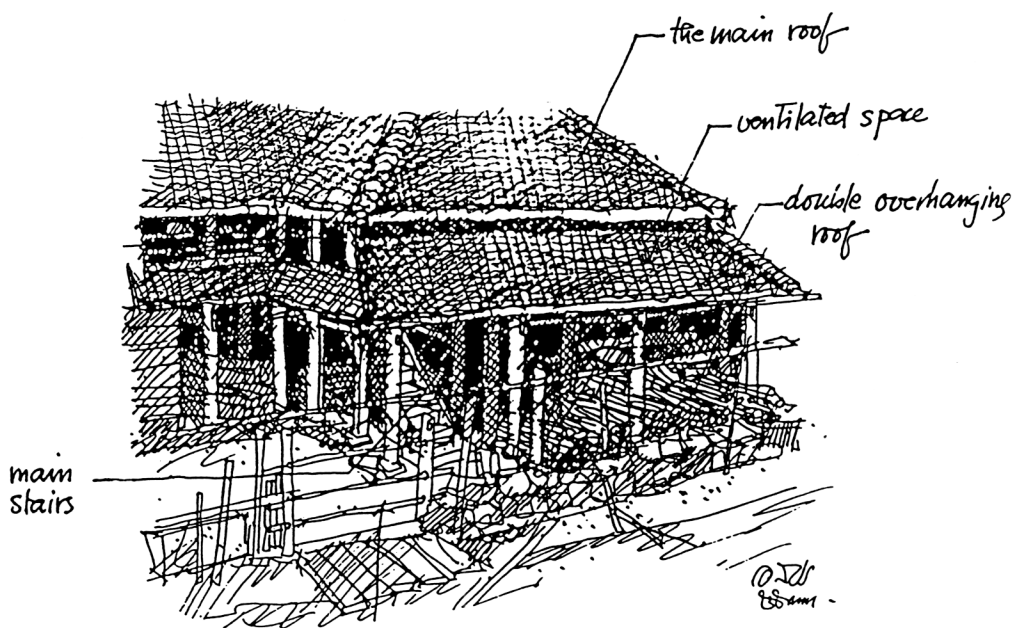
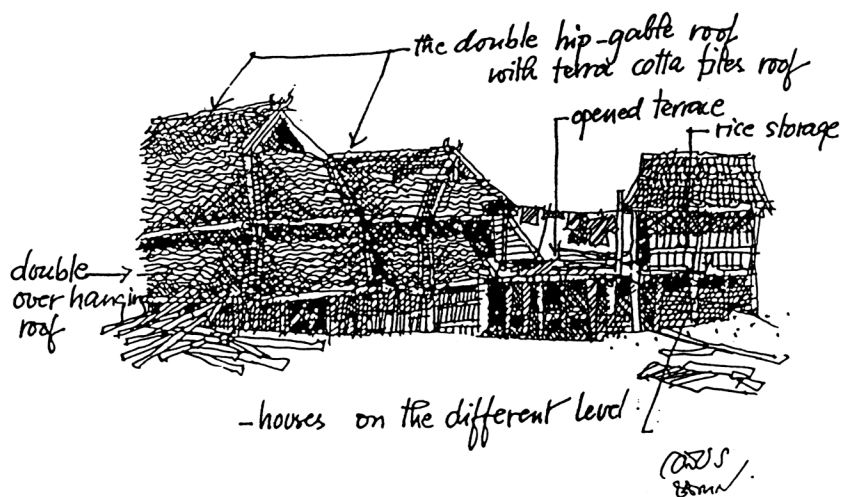
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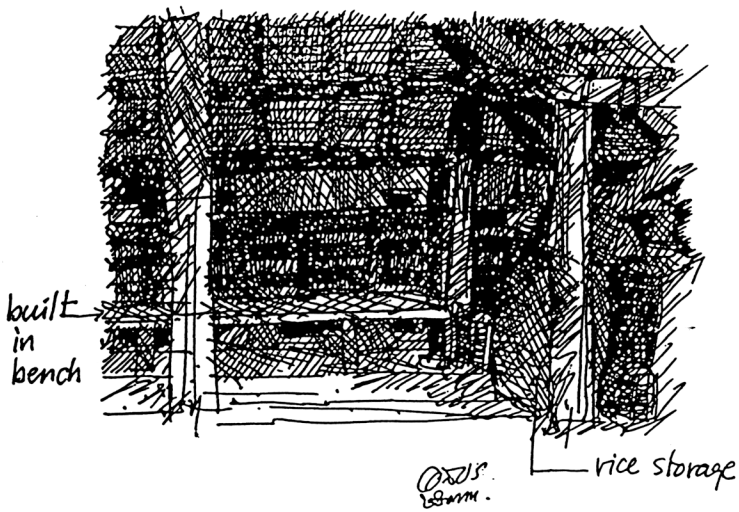
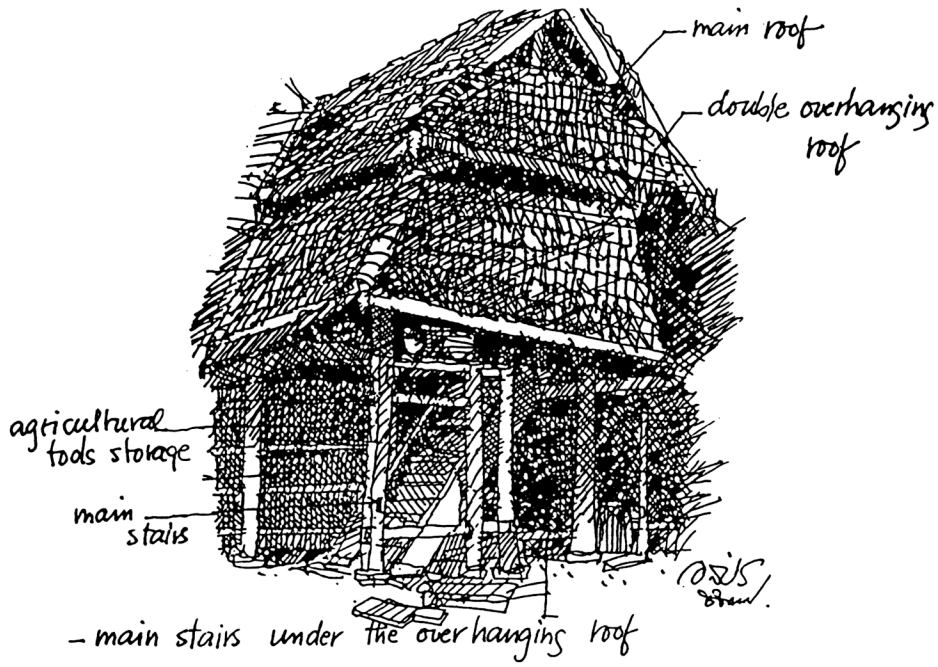
The houses are made of timber and built on stilts. The lower floor is of compacted earth and used as a multi-purpose space. It houses; a living area, a timber storage area, a weaving area, agricultural tools storage, rice storage and sometimes it can also be used as an animal shed. The main stairs under the overhanging roof lead to the upper floor. The area of the upper floors is divided into two parts. One is the private enclosed area for the family sleeping space. The whole family, especially mother and daughters, sleep together, only separated by mosquito nets. The other part is the open continuous space under the shade of the roof. This open area can be used for various purposes. As the floor level changes, so also does the purpose change for which the space is likely to be used.

Connecting onto the main stairs, is a main entrance terrace. Next to this main entrance terrace, at a slightly different floor level, is the main hall, which is used as the: family living space, guests sleeping area and family ceremony area, etc. Next to this space is the open kitchen with the central fire-place - which can be used both for cooking as well as keeping warm in winter. The kitchen tools and storage are located on built-in shelves in the kitchen wall. Normally, due to the hospitable nature of the Tai-Lue people, the central hall and the continuous open area are used to welcome visitors. Only the enclosed sleeping area (where the family spirit symbols are invited in) is restricted to visitors.

In addition to the purposes/functions already mentioned, the storage of rice is also most important in Tai-Lue houses. In some houses, a small area of the central hall is used for rice storage. In others, rice is kept in big bamboo bowls on the lower floor. However, many Tai-Lue houses have separate rice storage areas or small barns near the main house. Rice storage is also a reason why the wood buildings are built on stilts. The lower part can be used as timber storage and animal shed, while the upper part is used for rice storage. Many houses have a connected open terrace between the kitchen and rice-storage areas. This open terrace can also be used as the kitchen clean-up area.



- the relationship between the main roof and the double overhanging roof.



- the usage of the entrance terrace

## **Building construction and materials**

Timber and bamboo are the main building materials of Tai-Lue houses. In ancient times, the use of bound bamboo was very popular.

At present, a lack of bamboo means that most houses are now made of wood. Almost all of the houses in Maung Chiang Rung and environs (e.g. Maung Hai and Maung Hum) are made of timber instead of bamboo.

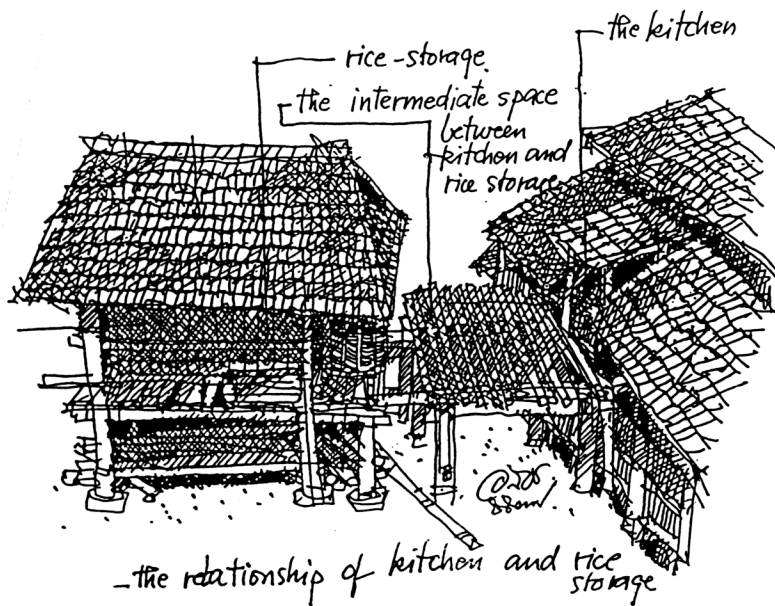
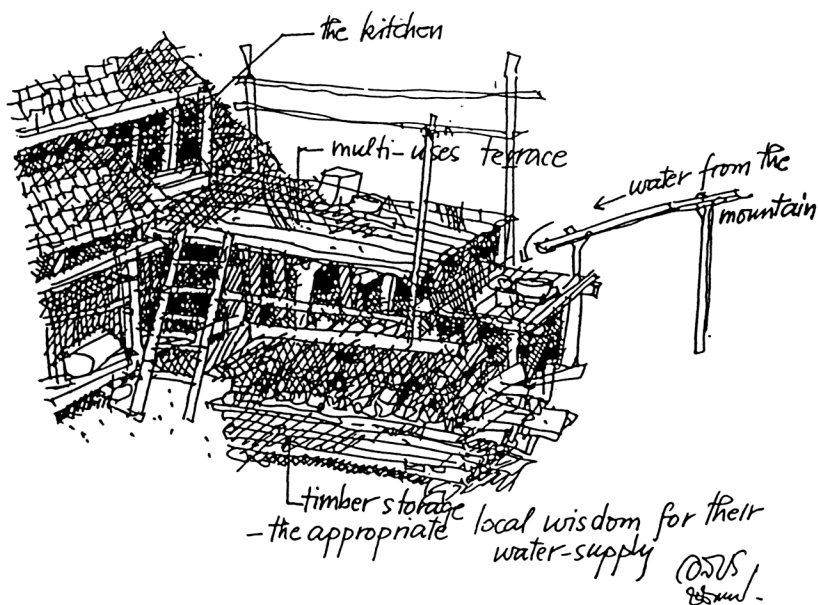
The normal construction system uses posts and lintels with timber materials being utilised for the main structure, floor, and also the roof. Because of the (typically) large roof area, the central rows of columns support the bearing load of the main roof and floor structures. The edge rows of columns and the cantilever floor beams support the bearing load of the overhanging roofs. With this structural system, the large overhanging roofs have strong support, similar to the main roofs, and thus create a harmonising balance between main roofs and auxiliary overhanging roofs.

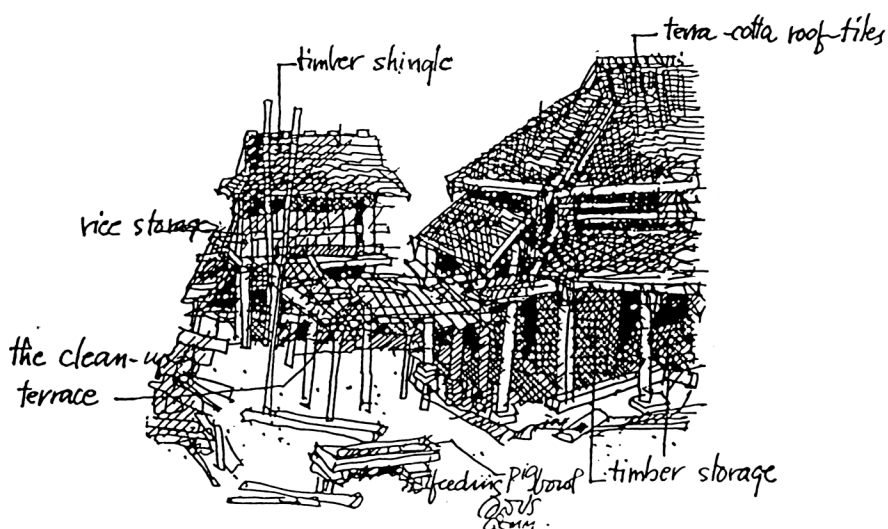
There are two types of wall: the vertical wall and the reclining wall. Timber and bamboo are also used here, but usually, a ventilated bamboo wall partition is put in the kitchen area.

The Tai-Lue house doesn't employ a footing structure under ground level. The use of stone bearings on the ground (similar to the Chinese construction system) is popular. This method of placing stone bearings on the ground to support the columns makes the adjusting of the structural level easier.

The roofing materials consist of; terra cotta, wood shingles and thatch grass (Zhu Liangwen 1992:111). Normally, grass roofing is used with bamboo structures, but this is not always the case as we can also occasionally find timber houses with grass roofing in the suburban area.

The influence of Chinese architectural styles and construction methods can be seen in the overall structural system of the Tai-Lue - examples being the roof structure, details of the edging roof protection and the footing system.

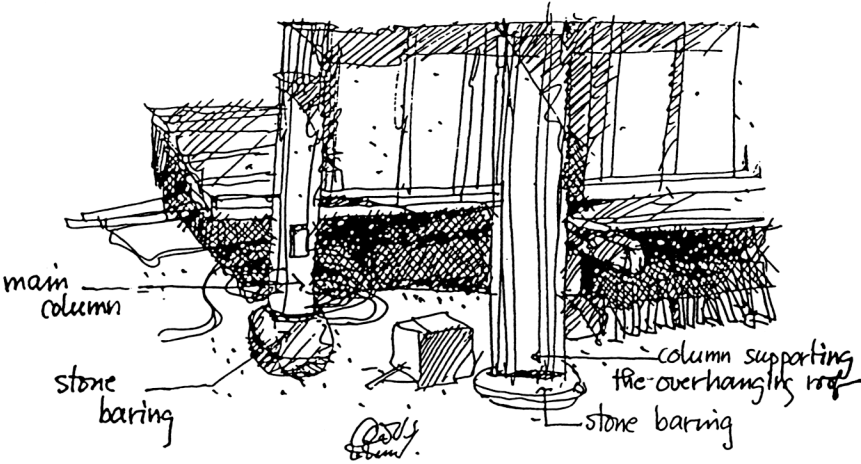
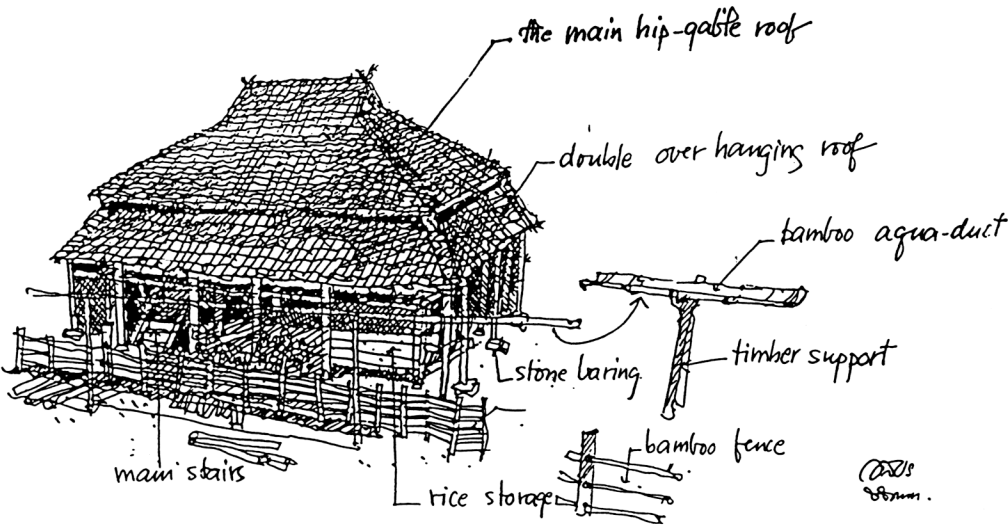


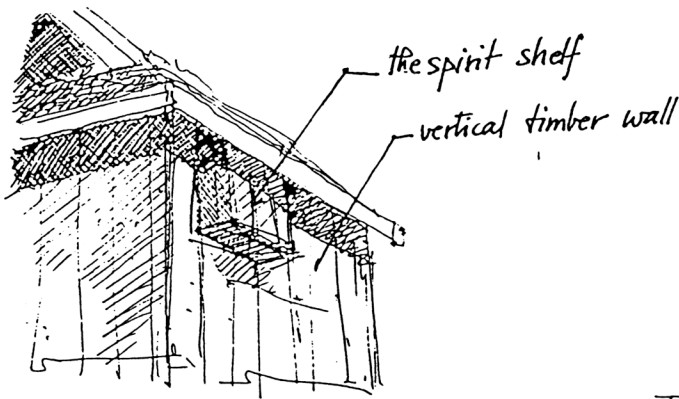


- the attached - rice storage



- the detached - rice-storage

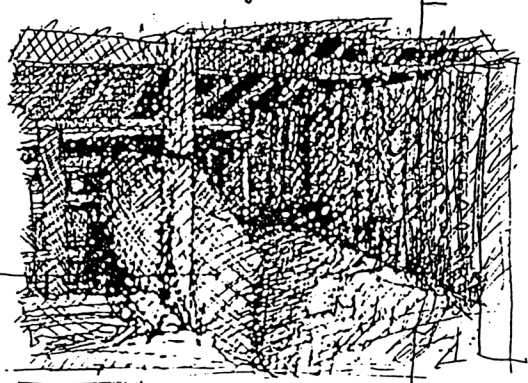




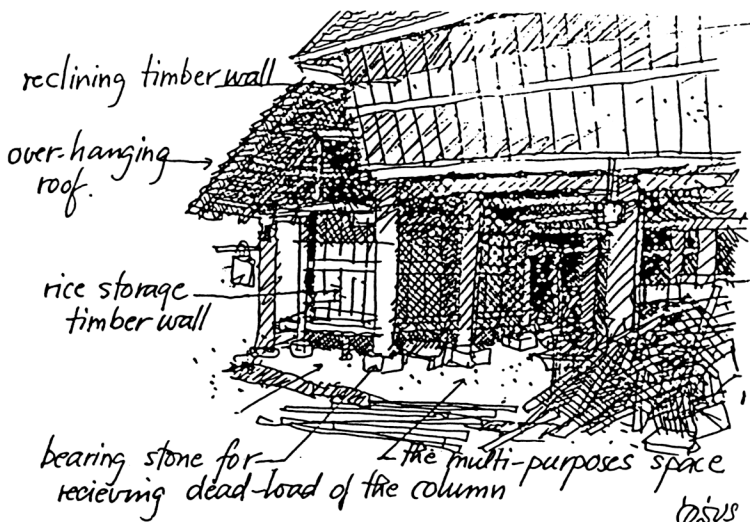
- the spirit shelf on the bedroom timber wall of Tai-luc house.

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straw mat

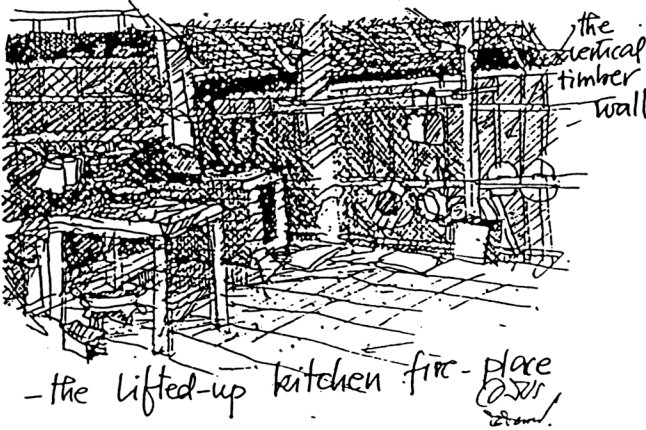
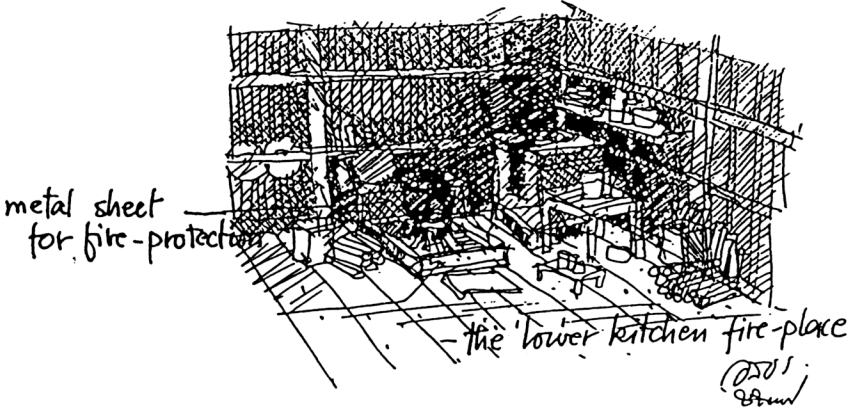


- the central multi-purposes hall also used as the family rice storage OSUS  
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bearing stone for receiving dead-load of the column

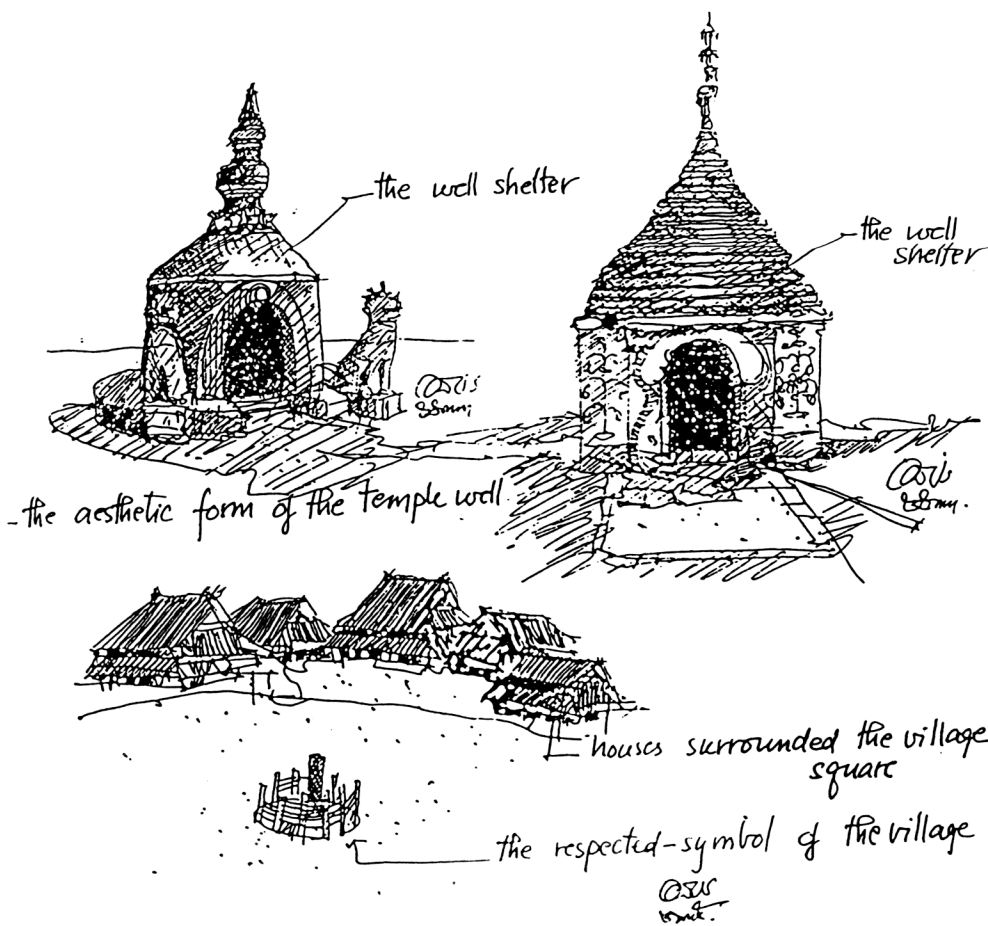
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### **The Water-well shelter**

As mentioned before, *water* is a priority in deciding the location for village settlement. *Water* doesn't just mean the water required for their daily living - it is also significant in terms of their religious beliefs. Lots of their religious ceremonies are concerned with water. In addition to its obvious necessity to their daily lives, the Tai-Lue in Sipsongpanna also pay considerable respect to their water. Lots of villages in the suburban areas have their own water-well for drinking, which is normally used by the whole village. A public water-well with a highly ornate form of shelter is one of the most obvious identifying features of the Tai-Lue village. The water-well shelter takes various forms - with beautiful decorative elements - both two dimensional ones (such as the mural paintings inside) and three dimensional ones (such as the sculptured forms of imaginary animals or the relief patterns on the door-way). These decoration are thus not only an indicator of the importance of water to their daily lives, but also representative of the respect the Tai-Lue have for the provider of the water - their God in Heaven. (Zhu Liangwen 1992:123)

From these studies of Villages, Houses and Religious Buildings in the vicinity of Maung Chiang-Rung, it was found that the basis of the Tai-Lue culture has been influenced by physical (climatic and geographic) conditions and that this influence manifests itself in varied types of architecture. This, in turn, highlights the relationship between life and culture for the Tai-Lue and also helps us to see their cheerful nature and warm hospitality towards others - qualities they seem to possess to a level which could hardly be found in most other societies.



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