



Figure 2.3. Throughout southern China, the depth of dwellings is often at least double that of northern patterns, thus allowing for a loft in the raised space beneath the rafters.

manual that had its roots in the Song dynasty (1983, 11). Four- or six-*jian* dwellings traditionally were avoided, since even numbers were regarded as asymmetrical and inauspicious. Two bays were judged “neutral,” according to manuals, perhaps as a practical consideration in that “among poorer people houses of two bays are very common. It would be too harsh to condemn their houses as unfavorable” (Ruitenbeek 1993, 168). Four bays were avoided, since the word for “four” [*si* 四] is a homonym for the word “death.”

Sumptuary regulations, while formulated to preserve Confucian status distinctions, also contributed to the standardization, modularization, and stylization of Chinese houses. Employed as early as the Tang and flourishing during the Ming and Qing dynasties, sumptuary regulations attempted to control socially inappropriate consumption. Sumptuary regulations stipulated, for example, that houses of common people [*shumin* 庶民] could not exceed three *jian* in width and five *jian* in depth [三间五架] with an exterior gate only a single *jian* wide. According to decrees in 1393, during the Ming dynasty, aimed at affirming social status and limiting expenditures, officials from the sixth through ninth ranks were limited to three bays and seven purlins, while those of the first and second ranks were permitted to have longer and deeper dwellings with five bays and nine purlins (Zhang 1985b, 123; Ch’ü 1965, 141-142).

Temples might reach an alignment of nine and palaces even eleven *jian*, as in the Hall of Supreme Harmony in Beijing’s Forbidden City. Later in the Qing dynasty these rules were altered, but stratified gradations according to hierarchical rank continued. Prescribed widths governed the dimensions of timber and set proportional heights, in the process declaring the occupant’s social status. Decorative details and colors found along the roof ridge, under the eaves, or on the gate were similarly described in sumptuary regulations and differentiated with a striking diligence. Penalties were fixed for violations, with scholars and officials liable for greater punishment than commoners because they presumably understood better the status distinctions that undergirded the codes. Enforcement of sumptuary codes in late imperial China, however, was often lax, perhaps because “enforcing rules was not as crucial as having rules,” according to Patricia Ebrey (1991b, 36). Furthermore, there is clear evidence that the wealthy and those enjoying higher status were able to indulge their tastes to a greater extent than those of lesser means, often resulting in grander dwellings than their ascribed status would allow.

Variations in width and depth of *jian* across China not only reflect the simplicity or grandeur of



Figure 2.4. By tripling the depth of a dwelling and increasing the height of columns, a second floor is made possible. The wooden framework structure of this dwelling, clearly evident because the building is being dismantled, is discussed in Chapter 3. Lubucun, Shuidong *xiang*, Lishui *xian*, Zhejiang. [RGK photograph 1987.]