

Modelling Modular Living: *Furniture and Life* Magazine and Interior Design in 1980s China

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In 1981, *Furniture and Life* magazine commenced publication in the city of Xi'an in the People's Republic of China. By the late 1980s, it had become a well-known furniture and home-making magazine, read for its DIY guides, advice columns, and home stories. Each issue discussed how to beautify homes and turn the Chinese Communist Party's vision for a 'socialist material civilization' into practice and lived experience. This article uses the case of *Furniture and Life* to chart the role of modular furniture in urban interior design and the cultural imagination of the 1980s, the first decade of the CCP's economic reforms following the end of the Cultural Revolution. It traces the context in which the magazine was established, illustrating why furniture had become a pressing concern for many people across the country. It then shows how editors, themselves often architects, furniture designers, and engineers, focused on modular, 'board-style' furniture to solve people's concrete problems of small living spaces and a growing desire for personal space. In this process, the magazine editors connected modular furniture and interiors to the CCP's vision of socialist material and spiritual civilization, thus trying to lend concrete shape to broad political concepts.

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The 1980s were a formative decade in interior and furniture design in the People's Republic of China. Following the death of Mao Zedong and the official end of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—first under the leadership of Hua Guofeng between 1976 and 1978 and then under Deng Xiaoping after 1978—departed from the politics of mass mobilization that had marked the previous years. The policy of 'Four Modernizations', including modernization in agriculture, industry, defence, as well as science and technology, was to lead the country onto a more moderate and structured path of development. As part of this process, the CCP initiated a series of economic reforms in December 1978 and announced that the country would seek to fulfil the 'Four Modernizations' through 'Reform and Opening'; which meant moving away from a strictly Soviet or Maoist planned economy and opening to wider engagement with and investment from other countries.¹

One of the key sectors to modernize was light industry, including the coordination and production of consumer goods such as furniture, food, cosmetics, electrical and white goods, wood and plastic products, bicycles, radios and other items. During the Mao era (1949–1976), the CCP had placed an emphasis on heavy industry, often at the expense of light industry. As Laurence Coderre has shown, state authorities thought commodities more a 'necessary evil' than a motor of industrialization.² As a result, many people had found it difficult to obtain even basic goods needed for everyday

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life. By contrast, during the 1980s, the national Ministry of Light Industry and provincial as well as municipal Bureaus of Light Industry oversaw major investments in this sector. This led to the construction or repurposing of factories, expanded the work force, made goods increasingly available and affordable to more people, and thus raised average living standards, creating a consumer culture that has been the subject of much scholarship.³ While many foreign observers interpreted this as the onrush of capitalism, for the CCP and many observers in China at the time, it was part of building a 'socialist material civilization'. To ensure that these reforms remained grounded in and supported 'socialist spiritual civilization', state media continuously explained that the construction of this material civilization would be guided by Mao Zedong Thought and Marxism-Leninism. The goal of reaching Communism, in other words, could only be achieved through a unity of material and spiritual civilization.⁴

Official support for the modernization of light industry gave fresh momentum to individuals working in the field of 'arts and crafts' (*gongyi meishu*), architecture, urban planning, product engineering, and other related fields, who had a shared interest in constituting design (*sheji*) as a profession. Within a few years, they reinstated or established research institutes and associations, created educational programmes and exchanges, and began to publish magazines for a readership interested in design.⁵ As the historian Shen Yu has shown, what exactly constituted design, who counted as a designer (*shejishi*), and how design related to arts and crafts, on the one hand, and science and technology, on the other, were questions they frequently debated during this decade.⁶ In these early years, there was no standardized definition of design, nor of who was a designer. Some of these questions, moreover, were not new. They had been discussed in Republican China (1911–1949) and during the early years of the People's Republic after 1949. During this time, a cohort of people, often born in the early twentieth century, working in arts academies and design institutes, with many trained in Japan, Europe or the USA, researched how to create objects of use that responded to people's needs while at the same time ensuring that light industry production did not command resources needed for more important industrial projects that were part of 'socialist construction'.⁷ But their work was constrained by the state's preoccupation with heavy industry. By the late 1970s, they, together with a younger generation who had studied during the 1950s and 1960s, seized the opportunity that the call to modernize offered.⁸

It was in this context that furniture (*jiaju*) and domestic 'interior design' (*shinei sheji*) were institutionalized as specific disciplines within PRC 'design'.⁹ There had been some activity in furniture and interior design during the late 1950s, and institutions such as the Central Academy for Arts and Crafts had a research group for interior design. However, during the 1960s and early 1970s, many party officials had conceptualized private space as dangerous grounds for counterrevolutionary and bourgeois thought and decoration of such spaces as a bourgeois pastime. By contrast, home was now reconceptualized as a safe environment where morally upright socialist citizens would realize the CCP's ideal of spiritual and material civilization. There was much work to be done. Consumer demand for furniture was high, yet most furniture was still made manually. The other problem was that many people, especially urbanites, lived in small spaces for much of the decade.¹⁰ Furniture and interior designers thus had to devise ways to use space efficiently to accommodate different activities—from sleeping to working, eating, and socializing, often in as little as ten square metres. During the 1980s, an entire industry slowly began to grow around the project to make the home multifunctional, while providing maximum comfort.¹¹

This article charts the development of furniture and interior design through the prism of *Furniture and Life* (*Jiaju yu shenghuo*), a magazine first published in 1981 in the city of Xi'an in China's North-Western Shaanxi Province. Edited by the Xi'an municipal Furniture Research Institute, it had the support of the municipal Bureau of Light Industry. Its content and trajectory tell us much about how editors and contributors—themselves often trained architects, product designers, or woodworkers—reconceptualized furniture for the early years of the 'reform era' (after 1978). *Furniture and Life* was not the only magazine on the subject, nor did it circulate widely at first. Another magazine sponsored by the Ministry of Light Industry, *Furniture* (*Jiaju*) had commenced publication in 1980 and was available nationally. Several other general design magazines, moreover, regularly covered interiors among their other pieces on textile, fashion, arts and crafts, and decoration. However, *Furniture* was at first mostly written for a professional audience. Meanwhile, as of 1983, *Furniture and Life* pivoted to a broader urban audience, including regular advice columns, tips for furniture and interior layouts, home stories, and photo spreads. This proved popular. From a regional circulation of a few thousand copies, it expanded to a national readership with a print run of 250,000 copies per issue by the late 1980s.

Building on scholarship in the history of magazine and advice publishing, I survey a selection of *Furniture and Life's* articles, reading them as the editors' attempt to achieve interlinked goals: to turn the space of home into a 'designed object', present plans and solutions for socialist living and interiors, and lend concrete shape to the CCP's more abstract concepts of material and spiritual civilization.¹² In this process, editors helped turn modular (*zuhe*), 'board-style' (*banshi*) furniture into a symbol of new socialist domesticity.¹³ Similar to 'ready-to-assemble furniture', board-style furniture used wood boards in different combinations to maximize on available space. Its key advantage was that it could both be custom-built but was also the ideal type of furniture to be mass manufactured industrially as China's technological modernization progressed. I argue that in connecting modular furniture-based interior design with 'healthy living' (*jiankang shenghuo*) and the 'beautification' (*meihua*) of daily life, the magazine made it part of the cultural imagination of the 1980s. Rather than seeing the rise of China's consumer culture during the 1980s as the negation of socialism, it is more productive to understand the work of *Furniture and Life's* editors as wanting to demonstrate that there was space for good design, privacy and comfort in Chinese socialism, even if many people's experiences of the turbulent Mao era had suggested otherwise.¹⁴ The magazine shows, as Susan Reid has argued for the USSR, that the more comfortable homes of China's 1980s were not by default 'spaces where the official utopia of the party-state was contradicted' and therefore 'the germ of state socialism's potential undoing'.¹⁵ For its editors, the magazine was an opportunity to help deliver on some of the central government's long-standing promises.

Creating *Furniture and Life*

Furniture and Life was a product of its time, politically and culturally. In order to understand the context in which the magazine was founded and operated, and the readership it wanted to address, it helps to reconstruct, in broad brushstrokes, why furniture was an important topic for many people during the late 1970s and 1980s. Throughout the 1970s, state authorities had not been able to meet demands for many furniture items (such as wardrobes or beds) and more housing, and it was a particularly pressing problem for people living in larger urban areas.

Many of *Furniture and Life's* readers likely shared similar experiences of trying to get new furniture before the 1980s, especially if they were urbanites and worked in the state or party bureaucracy, factories, schools or other kinds of 'work units' (*danwei*). Smaller furniture items, such as stools, could mostly be bought from state-owned stores. The problem was usually larger furniture items (wardrobes, beds, etc.). These pieces could be obtained in different ways. One could rent work unit furniture, if there was any available, though this was not a popular choice. One might purchase second hand.¹⁶ Many urbanites, however, wanted their own new pieces. Where possible, families might acquire a saw and other tools, to make their own furniture, or work with someone informally who could do woodworking.¹⁷ Yet the most common way to obtain new large furniture items in many cities was through the ration coupon system, at least until the late 1970s. Work units were allocated a limited number of ration coupons which they could give out to the families in their unit. Criteria for eligibility varied. Young couples could get furniture when they married, and others could apply on the basis of need.¹⁸ In Beijing, for example, ration coupons were handed out by kind, e.g. one coupon per one wardrobe. Each coupon had a number and was associated with a state-owned store. Stores announced regularly which coupons were eligible for 'supply' (*gongying*). Once called, the coupon holder was entitled to visit the shop to purchase the item. However, urban centres generally lacked enough large furniture items. People would often have to wait for six months or more for their number to be called. Even then they might have to queue very early for the day's stock to arrive, often for several hours, only to have to return on the next day because there was not enough stock.¹⁹

Several factors explain why existing domestic industry could not meet people's demands for new furniture. First, much of the furniture was fully or mostly manually made, in workshops and local factories. Indeed, until the 1980s furniture was mostly still classified as 'handicraft' (*shougongye*). Relative to population size, there were few large-scale furniture factories across the country, and few with much machinery. Machinery often dated to the 1940s and 1950s, and at times it was purchased from Soviet allies who, after the Sino-Soviet split of 1962, no longer provided technical support.²⁰ The second problem were material resources. Factories relied on allocation and solid wood was in short supply. Although some factories could mass-produce plywood and particleboard, these were usually the same larger factories in Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai and other metropolitan areas that also had the necessary machinery.²¹ A convoluted system of central resource planning and allocation imposed further restrictions. It regulated how much material producers could obtain. Moreover, furniture made in one city could not easily be shipped to stores in another city.²² For example, furniture produced in the Beijing Timber Mill, one of the capital's large furniture factories that could also make engineered woods, could only be sold or allocated locally. But the Beijing mill and other large factories also produced for export, so their stock was in dual demand: it had to meet local residents' furniture needs and be exported to generate foreign currency. This resulted, as one article explained, in the ironic situation of 'non-material producing areas, especially large and medium-sized cities severely lacking furniture' while 'material-producing areas have furniture to spare'.²³ Investment to increase production capacity might have helped, and furniture sales were lucrative enough. But at times officials in the local furniture industry bureaucracy preferred to retain profits without reinvesting into equipment, something for which Lü Jianzhong of the *People's Daily* publicly criticized Beijing officials in 1979.²⁴

Ration coupons disappeared soon after economic reforms began and stores slowly increased stocks. The pressure on supplies remained, however. The sixth five-year

plan (1981–85) included substantial investment into light industry, while the seventh five-year plan (1986–90) emphasized improving people's material lives as a core aim. Both increased expectations for more goods. Moreover, the housing situation created new types of pressure for the furniture industry. While arrangements varied greatly across China, many urban families had long lived in tight quarters, often with several generations in one room.²⁵ Space limitations had gotten worse between the 1950s and 1970s for urban families. Work units, moreover, usually allocated housing by seniority, and young couples and families often lived with parents or in-laws. Sociologist Deborah Davis details how in 1970s Shanghai the 'housing shortage had become so acute, and young couples stood so low on enterprise housing queues, that the percentage of multigeneration households had begun to increase after two decades of decline'.²⁶ The average living space for Shanghai residents was just shy of 5m² in 1980, rising to 8.7m² by 1988. Thirty-three per cent of households still had fewer than 4m² per person.²⁷ In Xi'an the average per person increased from 3.44m² in 1978 to 5.82m² by 1986 and 8.62m² by 1990. Xi'an's increase was therefore slightly faster than the national average, which moved from 4.2m² in 1978 to 8.5m² by 1987.²⁸ These figures show that housing construction brought some improvements by the late 1980s. It became easier to rent apartments beyond the allocation system. Many families nonetheless continued to share two-room apartments—living in one room per couple or nuclear family, or one room for the couple and the other shared by children and grandparents.²⁹

State officials took different steps to address these issues. In line with two of the 'Four Modernizations'—industry and science/technology—they authorized the construction of new furniture factories, purchased machinery from Germany, Japan, Italy and other countries, trained workers, and reworked material supply lines. As modernization was meant to be anchored in scientific knowledge, municipal Bureaus of Light Industry promoted research into furniture design, production and use through a network of research institutes.³⁰ One of the first, the Shanghai Furniture Research Institute (*jiaju yanjiusuo*), began work in the mid-1970s. It pooled local design expertise and offered technical advice to factories. Its members also created furniture prototypes and published guidebooks containing furniture blueprints, information about materials, measurements, and tools.³¹ Members worked with 'furniture industry science and technology information stations' at national and local level which collected and circulated information about furniture from across China and the world. The National Furniture Industry Science and Technology Information Station, for example, disseminated information through its magazine *Furniture* and through internal compendia, sharing technical specifications, translations of international design patents, discussions of good design and guidance on raw materials.

The idea for *Furniture and Life* grew out of this kind of institutional structure in Xi'an. In 1977, municipal light industry officials established the Xi'an Furniture Research Institute.³² A few years later, in early 1980, they set up the country's first Furniture Society. The North-West Furniture Information Station, which covered the remoter provinces of Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang, was also based in Xi'an.³³ In the initial years after 1977, research institute members created furniture and interior layouts for hotels, restaurants, offices and other spaces.³⁴ Yet they wanted to reach more people. They obtained permission to publish *Furniture and Life* which began with four issues in 1981 as a first trial period to see if it would attract a regional readership.³⁵ The editor-in-chief, until his death, was the architect Zhao Shihe (1935–1989). A Shanghai native, Zhao had trained at Nanjing College of Engineers during the early 1950s, moving to Shaanxi Province to work in regional and municipal urban planning

institutes until the late 1970s.³⁶ Zhao and several colleagues then transferred to the Furniture Research Institute in 1977 to apply their expertise in architecture to furniture and the emerging speciality of 'interior architecture' (*neishi sheji*), soon more commonly known as 'interior design'. Editors commonly held positions concurrently within this light industry infrastructure. Zhao was also the vice director of the North-West Information Station. Other editors, such as Shen Daoxuan, also worked for the research institute and collected information about furniture and interior design for the station. In 1984, for example, Shen spent three months in the Japanese town of Shizuoka, investigating local craft, the structure of workshops, designs, and sale.³⁷

Furniture and Life's first issues were available through work units in the local area, with readers in the city's furniture and housing bureaucracy and 'science and technology personnel'.³⁸ After the trial, regional publishing officials issued a license to publish *Furniture and Life* as a quarterly for open domestic circulation starting in 1983.³⁹ The magazine now reached a broader audience of urban readers, especially young professionals, state officials, workers, and often their parents.⁴⁰ Considered the 'new generation' of the 1980s, young people were central to the government's vision for 'socialist material civilization' and the largest customer group for new furniture.⁴¹

Modular furniture as design ideal

Publishing a magazine on furniture and interior design in everyday life proved to be a smart decision. There were still few on the topic. A readership interested in furniture meanwhile was growing. As Davis has shown for Shanghai, people increasingly felt more able to create comfortable homes and urban spending power was rising.⁴² Between 1984 and 1988 in Beijing, per household spending on furniture more than doubled, while in Xi'an it tripled between 1980 and 1990.⁴³ The magazine's aim was not to promote consumerism though. Editors wanted to offer solutions to problems they considered common and bring furniture and interiors into the cultural imagination. Articles seldom discussed furniture in isolation but as part of space, home, and the needs of daily life. The best furniture was at once 'useful, attractive and economical' (*shiyong, meiguan, jingji*) on its own and when placed in the room and home. Such furniture, so the rationale went, would facilitate harmonious family life, health, and thus productivity; all tenets of 'socialist material and spiritual civilization'.⁴⁴

Modular furniture fulfilled this brief and soon became the focus. When the magazine was first published though, modular furniture was more aspiration than reality. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, customers desired furniture 'sets' (*chengtao*). A set was composed of individual pieces; a bed, wardrobe, chest of drawers, dining table, and four chairs. There were variations: no chest of drawers but bedside tables, or both. Or stools instead of chairs. Sets were colloquially described by how many 'legs' they had, with four per piece. Most sets had thirty-two or thirty-six legs and forty-eight legs were considered luxurious.⁴⁵ Between the 1950s and 1970s, fortunate urban residents managed to obtain a full set, but most did not, and rural resident usually had much less furniture.⁴⁶ During the early years of economic reforms, most factories and carpenters therefore focused initially on making such furniture pieces and they became popular—fuelled in parts by how rare they had been in preceding years.⁴⁷

People working in furniture research institutes thought sets problematic for several reasons. Carpenters usually made pieces manually using solid wood. That took time and resources. Moreover, institutes criticized that this furniture was chunky, either wasting

or simply not fitting the space available.⁴⁸ Modular furniture units, by contrast, could be planned to fit individual spaces, serve multiple purposes, and they fit the state's agenda of the technological advancement of industry. As an article in the national magazine *Furniture* explained in 1983, modular furniture was a model of the 'three transformations' in furniture manufacturing and design: standardization of products, of parts, and serialization of product norms.⁴⁹ The focus on the modular was not new; furniture designers had already worked on blueprints during the 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁰ Now, research institutes invested in developing lines that would be suitable for mass production. They revisited old blueprints and looked for inspiration (and machinery) abroad, studying IKEA flat-pack furniture, West German designs by Interlübke and Hülsta, and the work of the GDR's Deutsche Werkstätten Hellerau.⁵¹

Besides offering flexibility in spatial arrangement, research institutes favoured modular furniture because it needed less manufacturing and could be made using engineered (or composite) wood boards (*renzaoban*), a type known as 'board-style'. The Shanghai Furniture Research Institute developed the first prototype of particleboard 'board-style' furniture for mass production which was featured in *Furniture and Life*.⁵² Zhao and his colleagues in the Xi'an Furniture Research Institute were also active in this field, already publishing early research advances in *Furniture* in 1980 and then later in their own magazine.⁵³ Boards could be used to construct and connect wall units, beds, desks, and shelving. This created what Germans called 'Endlosbauweise', a type of modular 'built-in' furniture.⁵⁴ Initially made of particleboard, within a few years medium-density fibreboard became the main material for board-style furniture.⁵⁵ The sixth, and especially the seventh, five-year plan made production of more engineered woods a key target, accelerating investment and development. Soon, board-style furniture was available in different wood veneers and coloured plastic coverings, and with each issue *Furniture and Life* intensified its coverage of board-style designs.⁵⁶ Early on, in 1984, one article described board-style furniture as 'rich with a sense of the era' because it symbolized the large-scale industrial production of daily goods that the state had long aspired to.⁵⁷ And in 1985, *People's Daily* listed modular and especially board-style furniture as the 'No. 1 Trend' on the furniture market.⁵⁸

As part of the five-year plans, and to help increase supplies, existing factories reorganized to produce board-style furniture in the interim. *Furniture and Life* covered such developments, to demonstrate to readers that everyone was working to meet their needs. As one example of a factory trying to undergo this process, the magazine featured the state-owned Changling Machinery Plant in Baoji City in Shaanxi province, some 180 kilometres outside Xi'an. Founded as a national defence enterprise during the second half of the 1950s, the plant was one of the major Soviet-supported construction projects of the first five-year plan.⁵⁹ It had had a small carpentry workshop producing furniture for employees. In 1984, the plant's leadership made plans to convert this to produce board-style furniture, using its expertise in machinery. In an interview with factory leadership, they told the reporter that, following the principle 'the military serves the people', they conducted a survey to understand 'customer needs' and recent changes in 'people's thinking and the market'.⁶⁰ Reorganizing production in this way, they believed, was going to help 'beautify people's lives'.⁶¹

Furniture and Life's editors expended much effort to explain why board-style furniture would be preferable, not only from the perspective of light industry but also users. Furniture sets were familiar and to many people they seemed convenient because they needed little planning and items could be moved around. Board-style modular furniture, by contrast, had to be planned out in advance because several components

had to be fixed to walls. One could not just pick out a set, or individual components, one had to consider the entire room and how to use it. However, editors explained why readers should see this apparent downside as a hidden advantage that would allow users to make the most of space, and integrate shelving, beds, desks, sofas, and other objects into one design and one room. In 1986, for example, Ye Bofeng of the Shanghai Arts and Crafts School suggested several ways of arranging the same set of units –a double -bed, modular sofa units (which came in single seating units that could be combined), wardrobe, desk, and multipurpose shelving unit—in a new-built apartment's room layout measuring between 10m² (3.3m x 3.6m) and 13.5m² (3.3m x 4.8m). How to arrange, he wrote, depended on where doors and windows were placed. This could reduce the amount of sofa units that could be accommodated or it required them to be placed in an 'L'.⁶² Empty spaces between furniture items could be filled with lower shelving boards, making the entire room look like it was wrapped in furniture from wall to wall. Such designs also increased storage and were therefore superior to simple sets.⁶³

Even if readers did not wish or could not afford to furnish the whole room in modular style, editors still offered advice on maximizing space by introducing selected modular items. Sofa beds and bunk beds, for instance, featured regularly. Design suggestions for bunk beds included one example in which the two beds were only partly stacked and folded into an 'L', with one half of the lower berth hidden below the upper berth. Featured in the column 'Ask the Engineer', the editor recommended this option especially for arrangements where grandparents lived with grandchildren because it gave the grandparent sleeping in the lower berth more headspace.⁶⁴ Both could live and sleep in less than 8m² or 6m², and the child had a study area. Board-style furniture could also be folded to save on even more space. Fixed to the wall or other furniture, it could be opened when needed. Desks were often designed in this way and integrated into wall units or fixed to the end of beds (Fig. 1). The editors argued that fold-out furniture could satisfy artistic and practical needs, as the cartoon 'Clever planning for small spaces' illustrated in a humorous way (Fig. 2). The image showed a couple on a date in a small but tidy area with three wall pictures. It is the man's apartment and his date is admiring the art. A second image shows him unfolding a table hidden behind one of the pictures, and a third image shows her unfolding the second chair behind the remaining picture to sit down at the table.⁶⁵

The final advantage of these modular styles was that readers could make them themselves or commission carpenters. The ideal board-style furniture of the future was industrially made of engineered woods, a fact constantly repeated. Yet readers would not have to wait until such furniture became more widely available for purchase. They could find other ways, and work with solid woods. This might not be as efficient in terms of material use, but it would at least help maximize space. As in other socialist countries at the time, China's 'socialist material civilization' initially relied on local craftspeople and people doing DIY work.⁶⁶ Here, *Furniture and Life* could be a source of ideas and models. 'Ask the

Figure 1: Example of a bed with a fold-out desk, 'Bed → Writing Desk'. *JJSH 2* (1986): 18.

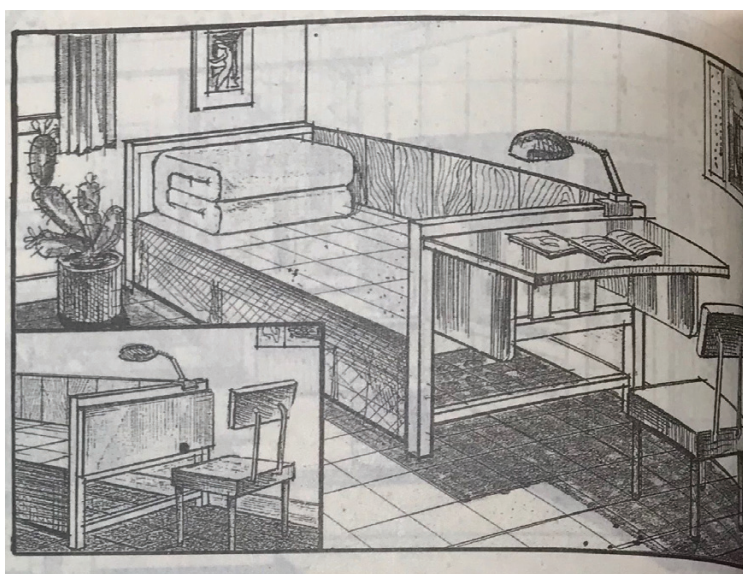
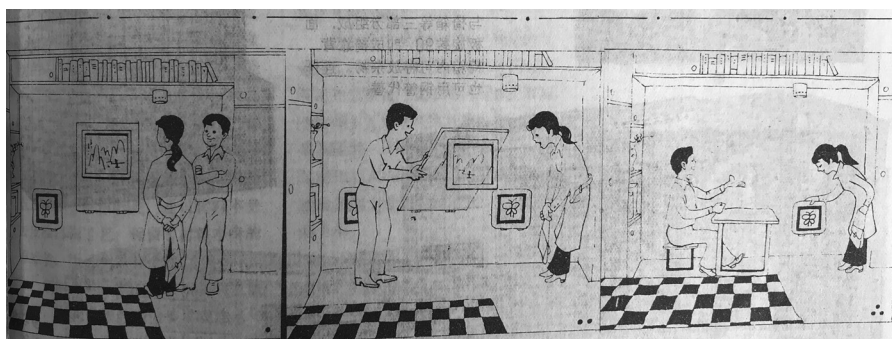


Figure 2: Chen Shi, 'Clever Planning for Small Spaces'. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1984): 7.



Engineer' often covered detailed technical advice, including how to align and properly fasten board-style units and shelving, and how to work across room corners. In addition to being teachers, the magazine's editors occasionally also exemplified DIY options: in 1985, a photo story introduced Huang Guochang's 13m² home, which he had designed for himself, replete with an account of his home-made modular furniture and floor plan.⁶⁷

Modelling a life of material and spiritual civilization

During the 1980s, state officials expected print media to assume responsibility for educating their readers. In the specific case of *Furniture and Life*, this meant infusing into different kinds of articles and contributions implicit explanations of how to live the unity of material and spiritual civilization. That this work was important was clear from the magazine's anniversary issue in 1984, which featured congratulatory pieces from provincial and municipal luminaries outlining what they thought made the magazine relevant to readers. For Tian Lei, the Director of the Xi'an Furniture Research Institute, the magazine united engineering and art, influencing 'people's morals, aesthetic judgement and way of life' and 'contributing to beautifying interiors, and leading people to have a healthier spiritual life'.⁶⁸ In his opinion, the link between design, interiors, beauty, health and spiritual life was crucial. This reflected concerns within parts of the party-state about 'spiritual pollution', the dangers of excessive individualism, and 'uncritical praise of Western thought and culture'.⁶⁹ Party conservatives had initiated an 'anti-spiritual pollution' movement in 1983 and although the campaign had faded out by the end of the year, and mostly did not affect work in science and technology, interior design was caught in the middle; less suspected of pollution because of its links to science, and because furniture production was classified as technology, yet subject to some scrutiny for its critical role in uniting 'healthy spiritual life'—of frugality, modesty, discipline, and communist morality—with a 'healthy material life'.⁷⁰ Xi'an's Vice-Mayor Jin Yiren, for example, was among those wanting to safeguard interior design from spiritual pollution. In his contribution, he explained that material civilization was not a matter of 'material wealth', it reflected people's 'spiritual world', their 'cultural attainments' and their 'national disposition'. A healthy home of 'simple, plain and good taste' would encourage people to 'cultivate themselves'.⁷¹ Editors were to educate people to desire more than mere material improvement. Readers would learn to cultivate the unity of spiritual and material civilization, becoming models to their community. This approach was reminiscent of how Soviet designers and party officials had legitimized design and material improvements during the Khrushchev era when, as Varga-Harris writes, 'a healthy

existence was associated not only with advancements in living conditions, but also with the strengthening of its moral foundation'.⁷² In this way, furniture in China was to be one of the components in the home that mediated a political message of 'healthy domesticity' as spiritual civilization.⁷³

In the magazine, two columns—'Free Design' and 'My Home'—gave editors a space to showcase life with modular furniture, explain its benefits through practical example, and address readers as amateurs desiring advice, and as models embodying socialist material civilization.⁷⁴ Neither column sought to model the unattainable, but to mediate a vision of material civilization that was supposed to be in reach of as many readers as possible. The columns thus turned interiors into 'sites of inquiry', to use Jie Li's term, positively recasting privacy and home in material terms.⁷⁵

The team behind the column 'Free Design' had been part of the magazine's first issue in 1981. Initiated by the interior designer Wang Yinan and others, Wang explained in his preface to the column's first appearance that his team wanted to help readers figure out how to 'decorate your home if you only have a limited amount of space'.⁷⁶ They invited readers to submit written requests for interior designs, including information about their family size, living conditions, details of the layout and measurement of the room they wanted to furnish and what kinds of design suggestions they desired. Out of all the submissions between magazine issues, the editors selected thirty to which they replied in detail, sending suggestions for which kind of furniture to use and how to furnish the room most effectively. Three to five of these responses were then published, detailing who had requested the designs, why the editors selected a layout, and how it fit the readers' needs. According to the editors, the format became, by popular demand, a regular feature in each issue from mid-1986.⁷⁷

The column demonstrated how modular furniture could help a diverse readership trying to cope with limited spaces, from studios to small apartments. There was, for example, the widowed Shanghai Jiangnan Shipyard worker who wanted his teenage daughter to have her own space in a studio in which they shared one room for sleeping and work. The team suggested a board-style bunk bed, concealed behind a curtain, and two small built-in desks facing away from each other on opposing walls (Fig. 3).⁷⁸ How to style areas for daytime and night-time activities in one room was a common question. One couple in Anhui province wanted to combine living and entertaining in a studio. Editors sent them a fashionable layout featuring a sofa with hidden storage and a TV in the front half of a rectangular room. The other half, further removed from the entrance door, was a sleeping area with double bed and storage in wall units above.⁷⁹ Two teachers in the Wuhan Geology College, meanwhile, requested a 'stylish' design for their 29m² studio, with space to entertain, work, and store things. The team suggested dividing the room, with a desk at the end of their double bed, thus separating the living and sleeping area.⁸⁰ Sometimes the team also helped fix board-style furniture design errors. A vehicle factory worker from Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province had proudly built his own board-style bed and expansive wall unit but had accidentally followed blueprints that were too large for his small room. The team recommended he disassemble some of the units, place some behind the bed, and add a slimmer sofa to provide seating (Fig. 4).⁸¹

Since space was at a particular premium for newly-weds, who were also among the magazines' target readership, editors decided in 1987 to feature a special on the advantages of board-style furniture in the home for newly-weds (*xinhun jushi*).⁸² By the magazine's own account, dozens of newly-weds and engaged couples had written to the team, all asking the same question: how to purchase appropriate new furniture, and how to

Figure 3: One-room design for the Jiangnan Shipyard worker. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 2 (1986): 17.

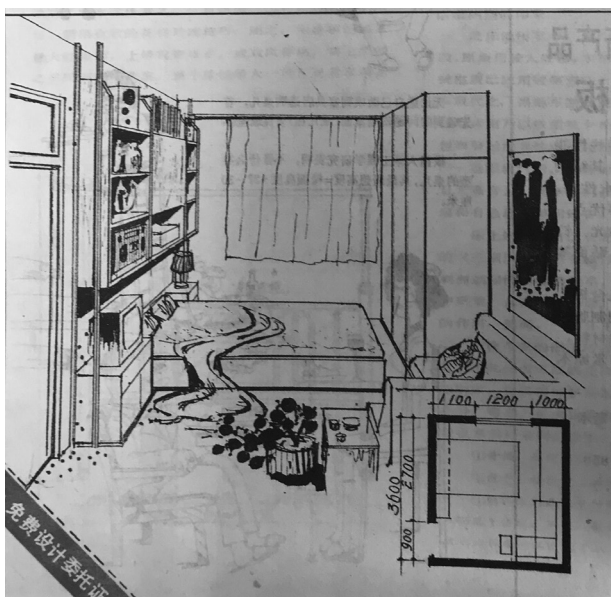
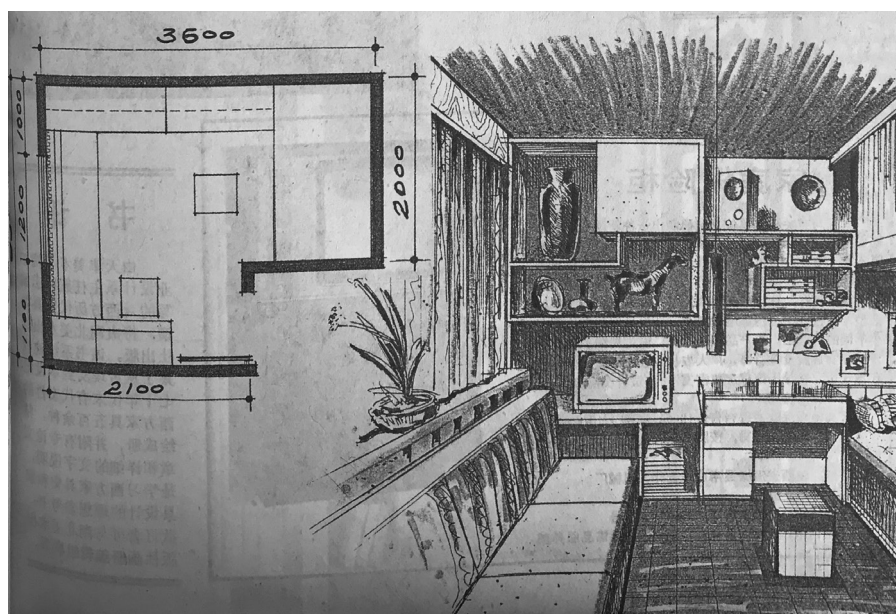


Figure 4: Design suggestion for refitting board-style furniture. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1986): 10.

arrange it in their standardized room layouts. Approaching the question methodologically, the team started on the premise that ‘to make a home, the room needs to satisfy needs of sleep, daily life, study, receiving guests, preparing and having meals, hygiene and storage.’⁸³ Ideally these activities are separated’, they explained, but this was not realistic in ‘current circumstances’. They chose to emphasize sleep, daily life and study, which meant accommodating a double bed, sofa or small seating area for at least two people, desk, wardrobe, bedside table, and tall multipurpose shelving and wall units. Accounting for different apartment sizes, they then proposed blueprints for rooms ranging in width from 3.3m to 3.6m and in length from 4.2m to 5.4m. Readers could select from three basic designs: one where the sleeping area was clearly cordoned off (with tall shelving and curtains), a ‘half-closed’ one (using furniture to separate areas), and an ‘open’ one (with the bed in a prominent position). The team advised readers to consider which ‘use and functionalities’ they wanted for their sleeping area and how much privacy they

desired; a relevant question for those sharing apartments with parents. Readers would also have to decide whether a quiet work area was important. If not, the article suggested placing desks somewhere with more ‘movement’. Having decided on their preferences, readers could consult twenty-four drawings of different room arrangements which varied according to these considerations but also according to how the room was laid out and where doors, windows, and balconies were located (Fig. 5).

If ‘Free Design’ offered blueprints, ‘My Home’ demonstrated how urban interiors might look in practice, using colourful photo spreads and home stories. At first, the column had mainly introduced local TV actors, singers, or artists to show that they, too, lived in smaller

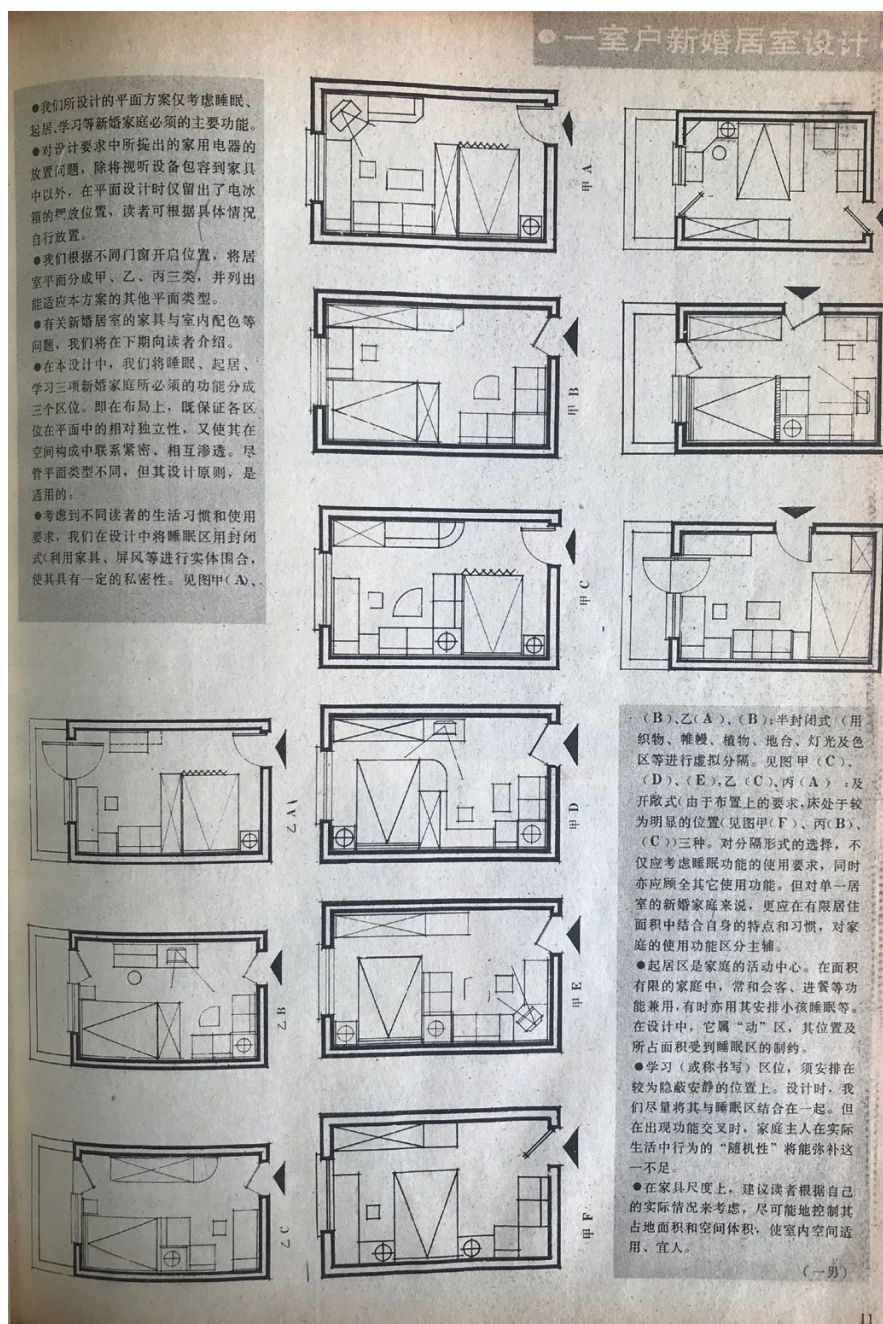


Figure 5: Free Design Column's 'Bridal Chamber' layouts. *Jiaju yu shenghuo* 3 (1987): 11.

spaces. In 1987, the editors shifted to focus on ordinary people's homes, inviting people to submit their own photo-stories as part of a competition.⁸⁴ The best submissions, those that showed how people dealt with small spaces to create comfortable but unpretentious homes, were then featured as colour spreads, complete with room plans and the couple's description of how and why they arranged their spaces the way they did and how they used modular furniture to achieve the desired result. 'My Home', in other words, turned readers into designers and an inspiration for others. Submissions selected for publication

surveyed urban residents across the country, with a focus mostly on factory workers, office workers, local state officials, and people working in the arts or design.

Each issue thus invited readers to learn about different ways of urban living with modular furniture. The competition's second instalment, in autumn 1987, for example, featured four couples. These included a young couple from Foshan in Guangdong province. He a design worker at a plastics factory, she employed at a sweets factory, their two-room apartment was decorated in cream-colored board-style furniture, with assorted decorative items on display.⁸⁵ Then there was a couple in their fifties from Tangshan in Hebei who had lost everything in the 1976 earthquake. They declared that the earthquake had not destroyed their 'love of life' and that this showed in their rebuilt home with white board-style furniture, orange lamps and a *Monstera deliciosa*.⁸⁶ A third couple from Chongqing described their home's modular interior as 'the crystallization of our combined labour' and felt 'incomparable excitement and pride' at what they achieved in 12m².⁸⁷ Photos highlighted happy couples—reading the magazine or knitting—and thus a homogeneous vision of domestic harmony in modular living. Few submissions featured styles other than modular furniture, reinforcing the message that modularity should be seen as the material proof of successful economic reforms.

Throughout, editors were concerned though that readers understand the difference between design and excessive decoration. Decoration, as one article elaborated in early 1987, could be 'superficial' and produce 'clutter'. Good design was 'smart', made the most of little, and was 'necessary'.⁸⁸ How to distinguish this was a constant problem. After 'My home' initiated its competition, many readers sent in photos of them and their apartments, hoping to be featured. Soon after, a note to all readers asked them not to send photos that were too staged. Many submissions, editors noted, had included excessive decorations—with fruits, toys, handicraft items on display that made the room look more 'like a department store' rather than the kind of clean, modern homes editors wanted to promote. To them, these rooms lacked a 'feeling of stability' and 'spiritual beauty'.⁸⁹ Not that the magazine's criteria for good decoration would necessarily have been clear to readers over time. Only a year earlier, editors had also introduced a different column dedicated specifically to DIY ideas developed by 'wives'. It celebrated Coca-Cola cans cut open to serve as storage for pens and cognac bottles repurposed as the base for standing lamps. This was presented as sensible decoration, with 'the wife working with her brain, the husband working with his hands'.⁹⁰ Compared with such questions of decoration, modular furniture aligned more easily with the vision of material civilization.

Conclusion

Furniture and Life was among the first publications after 1978 to make home an object and a site of positive inquiry in China. In the period analysed here, its editors were trying to improve people's lives by creating new furniture in research institutes, introducing these in the magazine, and trying to anticipate and address questions and needs readers might have. It was their contribution to creating a 'new era' of Chinese socialism—a departure from the Cultural Revolution, but not from a commitment to socialism. In the early years, the magazine was more scientific and educational mission than business enterprise. In texts and images, the magazine's editors linked the process of modernization and the aspiration of socialist spiritual civilization—including simplicity, frugality, modesty, healthy living—to a concrete set of products, one of which was modular 'board-style' furniture. Though aspirational, *Furniture and Life* was not

futuristic; advice on small, gradual, and affordable changes was to ensure that aspiration appeared achievable.

Because it originated in the remoter urban centre of Xi'an, *Furniture and Life* thus offers an opportunity to think through the role of material culture in urban life and in making the cultural imagination of the 1980s, including but not limited to the political centre of Beijing and the commercial hub of Shanghai. Things changed significantly for Chinese citizens, the magazine, and its editors during the 1990s. The home-building market boomed. Many more interior design magazines took up publication, including Chinese editions of international design and home-making magazines⁹¹ Board-style modular furniture was now widely available and popular with many. But it was no longer the height of fashion; a place soon occupied by more ornate 'European-style' furniture. Magazines focused more on brands, advising readers what and where to purchase. Buying foreign-made furniture came to signify social prestige. While state institutions receded from much of this consumer culture, the connection between furniture and interior designers, research institutes, and the light industry bureaucracy remained. The developments of the 1990s should not overdetermine how we interpret *Furniture and Life's* history during the 1980s, however. There is a danger of seeing the 1980s as a transitional decade, and interpreting people's actions with hindsight, knowing of the eventual fall of European socialist states and the effect this momentous change had on the PRC and the CCP, including accelerated marketization. Today, the party has reinvigorated talk of China's socialist material and spiritual civilization. The developments of the 1980s can thus help trace some of the historical legacies of the party's vision for the connection between home, design, and politics in future.

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- 82 'Yishi hu xinhun jushi sheji', *JJSH* 3 (1987): 7–11. The preface to this spread was accompanied by a list of more than three dozen names of readers, as well as their work units and hometowns, who had written to the column editors about this design problem.
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- 84 The announcement appeared in 'Wo de jia you jiang jingsai qushi', *JJSH* 1 (1987): 42, and the first photo story featured in the next issues, 'Wo de jia', *JJSH* 2 (1987) 24–25.
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