

Third Place Middle School

Two Societies, Ages Apart

Alexandra Polak

Based on my observations from visiting the Peabody Essex Museum and the fascinating Yin Yu Tang exhibit, I believe it would feel, in many ways, extremely different to live in Yin Yu Tang compared with an American household. I have come to this conclusion for many reasons, including: the intricate and detailed architecture of the house, the tools and items found within Yin Yu Tang, and my acquired knowledge as to the inhabitants of this ancient Chinese home.

After being exposed to the absolutely captivating architecture of Yin Yu Tang, there are many things I could write about that felt very different when compared to the average American home. What struck me most, however, was how deeply ingrained all aspects of Chinese life were in the structure of the house. The open roof, for example, reflected the deep belief of the Chinese in symbolism. This intriguing architectural aspect allowed rain to fall into the house, which signified wealth flowing into the family. Chinese religion was also built seamlessly into the house's structure, through such things as a spirit wall, and shrines to the ancestors of the house's inhabitants.

The design of the entire structure is possibly the most prominent facet of the architecture of Yin Yu Tang that reflects the belief by which the Chinese governed their society. Yin Yu Tang was constructed during a time period that was ruled by Confucian teachings, which stressed filial piety and loyalty to one's own family. Indeed this is reflected in the house's structure most prominently, because all of the detail and intricate framework was built on the inside of the house, leaving Yin Yu Tang's exterior plain and without embellishment. This shows how much importance was placed on the thoughts and happiness of the family, compared with the amount of concernedness when it came to what the rest of society thought of the individual family's plain and unimpressive house. Needless to say, an individual would be hard pressed to find any element of American culture in the architecture of the average house in the United States. On the contrary, most of the structural elements that are built into our homes are out of necessity. For example, slanted roofs allow rain to slide off or our houses not into the interior, and rooms are designed to serve a specific purpose. It is because of this that I would find the sheer architecture of Yin Yu Tang alone to give a completely different feel than that of an American household; it's

almost impossible to images living in an environment that would constantly enforce the religious, symbolic and social beliefs of one's society just through the architecture of one's living space.

To compare the items found in a modern day Chinese home to those found in an American home would surely supply the observer with many feelings of difference and excitement between the two places of residence. One can only imagine all the items and tools found in Yin Yu Tang that would cause it to feel different from an American household. To begin, in Yin Yu Tang the water in large decorative koi pools were used to put out fires that were a result of the house being mainly constructed of wood. Of course we do not find the necessity for such a device in the American household, and I'm sure, for anyone living in the United States today, having to put out a fire in their own home would prove to be a very difficult task.

Some of the items that I found to be most interesting were the various newspaper clippings and portraits of Mao that lined the walls. Having the numerous pictures of Mao on the house walls could provide the same effect as if Americans hung pictures of George Bush around every corner of their residences. Although having to constantly see the ruler of your country on your bedroom wall is one of the minor differences between Yin Yu Tang and an American household, it's more what this says about the Chinese government at that time that provides the greatest variation between the two places of residence. This simple wall decoration shows us just how much respect the Chinese were forced to hold for both Mao and the communist government. Furthermore, it makes this observer wonder about the extent to which the communist ways were incorporated into the daily life of the house's inhabitants, if every day they had to be reminded of their leader, and, in essence, who they were performing their daily tasks for.

I also found the "western" wallpaper that I observed on the walls of several bedrooms in Yin Yu Tang to be very interesting. Needless to say, that sort of wallpaper would be easy to come by nowadays, or even in America during the time that Yin Yu Tang was built. However, in China this simple commodity was viewed as something foreign and a marker of high status. I would find it to feel very different to live in a place that marks status through the acquisition of an object that we certainly take for granted here in the United States.

Finally, the inhabitants of Yin Yu Tang were different from those of an American house. On average, thirty people could reside in this Chinese household, whereas many Americans find it hard to accommodate a family of four. Yet another difference is that once married, the wife would live with her husband in his family's home. There were many kitchens in a Chinese

home in case more than one son brought his bride home. Indeed, in Yin Yu Tang, there was a much greater sense of family than that which we see in America today. It seems that all teenagers can wait to do is leave their family so that they may go to college, marry, and start their own lives separate from their family. This is a dream that greatly contradicts the Chinese belief. For any American living in the United States today it would feel completely different to live in a household that could contain up to thirty people, stresses filial piety, and depends on relationships between family members – especially when most Americans find it hard to make time to eat dinner with their own family.

In conclusion, for the reasons stated above about the architecture of Yin Yu Tang, the tools and items found inside the ancient Chinese household, and the inhabitants of the house, I believe that it would feel very different to live in Yin Yu Tang compared with an American household.