

Second Place High School

Yin Yu Tang: A Cultural Ambassador

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A member of the Huang family awakens from their elaborately carved bed and strolls sleepily to one of the few tiny lookout windows. Outside, the small village of Huang Cun is just awakening: the sounds of bustling villagers crescendo as the sun rises to its throne in the sky. Water buffalos amble along lazily on the rural roads alongside bikes and white-plastered houses. Down the dirt roads, the rice fields and the terraced tea fields look as peaceful as ever under the guidance of the towering Huang Shan (Yellow Mountain), whose peak is always veiled by swirling mist. The member of the Huang family turns their gaze into their newly built house, Yin Yu Tang, and smiles upon its prosperity and imposing stance. Yin Yu Tang was indeed built to last. Although abandoned by the Huang family centuries later, Yin Yu Tang still stands today and serves as a guide to its visitors by filling their visions with glimpses of the lives of people who once lived there, transporting them all the way back to 1800s China. In doing so, it has clarified Chinese culture in American society with its contrasting and unique aspects.

Distinction between Yin Yu Tang and a typical American home begins with its construction. The sixty-two wooden columns and 256 beams of Yin Yu Tang form a two story structure that is typical of Huizhou architecture. Prominent characteristics of this style include “horse head” walls, “skywell” courtyards, and carved brick front entrances. Prior to assembly of the building, the ink line system was utilized to align components of the timber frame. With lines of ink marking each piece, joinery could be inserted accordingly. Joinery is based on a complex system of mortise-and-tenon principles, thus casting away the need for nails or glue. As early as Neolithic times in China, columns and beams were connected this way, with carved wooden pegs securing the joints. As primitive as this may sound, it was an extremely effective and stable system. The columns sit atop stone bases to prevent ground moisture from seeping into the wood. The most important beam in the house is the ridgepole, due to the fact that it literally holds the house together. Once the ridgepole is set in place, the homeowner would hold a banquet for the principle builders of the home to celebrate their progress. Embracing the completed frame is a “curtain wall” that is covered with white line plaster, which reflects sunlight away during summertime. These walls have no role in supporting the ceramic roof, which

is sloped inward to channel rainwater into the courtyard fish pools and ceramic vessels. This roof design keeps water from entering the rooms, as would a gutter system. With such unique building techniques, the creation of a distinctive final product was inevitable.

Another conspicuous observation of Yin Yu Tang is its ornamentation which is based on Chinese cultural traditions. Adorning the doorway are carvings of phoenixes, mandarin ducks, magpies, and opera scenes. Entering the courtyard, flower carvings representing the four seasons appear on the bases of columns. These, however, are not the only ornamentations. Installed into the house are ornate lattice windows that flaunt wealth and prosperity. Bedrooms have an inner and outer layer of lattice windows. The inner one is covered with paper to control the temperature of the room and the outer one is to provide privacy and decoration. On the walls of the house, one can find cheap newspaper wallpaper or some luxurious imported European wallpaper. More commonly found are pictures of Chairman Mao, whose face replaced ancestral portraits during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976. In juxtaposition with American houses, Yin Yu Tang and other wealthy homes of the time had just as much ornamentation, if not more.

Many features of Yin Yu Tang are carefully planned out to draw as much good fortune into the house as possible, an element not particularly stressed in American homes. Symbols can be very subtle. Beautiful decorations often possess a symbolic meaning in addition to the decorative aspect. For example, designs of vases on window stand for peace, since its Chinese name “ping” is a homonym for peace. This foreshadows the inward-sloping roofs as well. Since water represents prosperity, the roof will allow water to flow into the courtyard which is analogous to the inward flow of prosperity. Chopsticks wedged between columns on either side of the upper reception hall are there to ensure a continuation of the family lineage since “kuai zi,” the Chinese word for chopsticks is a homonym for “fast sons”. Other symbols show their meanings explicitly, such as the Chinese characters for longevity and happiness that appear on walls. The house itself is also very balanced and symmetrical. Much of it has to do with feng shui, the Chinese practice of creating a harmonious environment by balancing the yin and yang. The house has an odd number of bays - vertical sections of the building marked off by columns - for good luck. The sixteen bedrooms that can house multiple generations of the family at a time are placed so that eight are on each floor and four are on each side of a floor. Despite the fact that all of the rooms are more or less the same size, the importance of a room is ranked by its location inside the house. The rooms in the upper hall, facing south, are more auspicious since they receive more light and yang energy,

nature's masculine factor. The rooms below the upper hall are even more favorable. One was assigned to a room depending on their status in the family. Generally, the elderly held the most auspicious rooms and the older sons had more preferable rooms compared to daughters and younger sons. Once a son was married, he and his wife were assigned a bedroom in the house and, eventually, their children would reside with them as well.

The hilly landscape of Huizhou made it difficult to produce a sufficient amount of crops. Most men became merchants and left home for years at a time to support their family from afar. As a result, women, children and the elderly were the primary inhabitants of Huang Cun. The villagers draw water from wells, plow their fields with water buffalo, grow rice, vegetables, and tea, and raise pigs, chickens, and ducks, while caring for the younger generation. During the day, the forecourt or enclosed space in front of the house, was used to relax, hang laundry, and dry vegetables. Similar to a family room, the main center of activity took place in the interior courtyard, also known as "skywell". Being the brightest and airiest part of the house, the children played, women sewed, and food was prepared here. The downstairs also contains the kitchen, and the most important room of all – the reception hall, which is similar to a living room in an American house. Also known as "zhengtang," it is the first room a guest would see if they walked through the front entrance and it slightly larger than the bedrooms. In addition to a place for ancestor worship, it also served informal purposes such as receiving guests, dining, and playing mahjong. Directly upstairs is a more private reception hall for worshipping gods.

By traveling across the world to America, Yin Yu Tang serves as a cultural ambassador. Not only is it a marvelous artifact to preserve, but it also allows us to compare a traditional Chinese home to our own homes in areas such as construction, ornamentation, function, and living space. With careful observation, one is able to decode much of the past by living vicariously through what the house has experienced.