

## ***Second Place Middle School***

*Yin Yu Tang, Through Māo's Eyes*

Amelia Andrews-Carter

“Now listen closely. I have something important to tell you.” Those were the words that filled my heart with joy, for I knew I would be transported to an old and wonderful place, Huang Cun, China.

I never knew how she came here, or for that matter who she really was, but either we had adopted her or she had adopted us and we were happy all the same. Māo was a dignified she-cat who loved recounting the tales of ancient China and a beautiful house called Yin Yu Tang. She recalled her ancient days lounging on the large beds with silken draperies or playing in the courtyard.

“I gazed intently at the shimmering koi fish calmly drifting in the cool waters below. Aw...,” she purred, “what I would have given to eat just one, yet that was not to be. I was perched on the outer rim of a skywell.”

I opened my mouth to question what on earth a ‘skywell’ was, but she silenced me and continued.

“...A large courtyard in the center of the house. There is an opening in the middle of the roof that opens to the sky.” She mewed, “I was from China, where the skywells were sacred because the house’s open roof let rain flow in, symbolizing wealth flowing into my family.”

*Ugh*, I thought *how could she have lived in a house for so long where she couldn't go from one room to another without getting cold or wet?* I shivered, appreciating the solid roof over my head.

“I knew that I would be thrown outside if I killed a decorative fish, so I resisted temptation. I leapt down onto the damp slate tiling on the floor. Rubbing against a wooden chair and sniffing a grimy pot, I made my way over to a bowl of fresh chicken lying on a worn table. As I bunched my legs up to spring, a woman carrying a broom entered the room and immediately began scolding.

“The men in the house had left on business and rarely returned. In my case, this was a good thing as they tended not to approve of cats.

“But I was hungry all the same. So I stepped outside and maneuvered my way through the thickly growing bamboo stalks. The kitchen was separate from the house, likely to avoid fire hazards.”

*The kitchen wasn't in the same building as the rest of the house? I wondered. Why on earth would you need fire in a kitchen? You've got a microwave, you've got a refrigerator, and you've got your little Tupperware containers! What more do you need?*

Māo began to speak again. “So I caught a mouse in among the woven baskets of dried ginger and mushrooms and the cloth sacks of rice. A small girl in silk clothes ran over and scooped me up. She handed me a piece of a recently slaughtered chicken. There were towering walls around the courtyard to keep out bandits, but a dog would have been sufficient rather than those squawking hens.”

*Our family keeps a small beagle who would not have hurt a fly. No, I thought decidedly, Mr. Cuddles was not kept to scare robbers away.*

“That was the beginning of a long friendship,” Māo said. “She had to share a bed with most of her family; otherwise I'm sure she would have shared it with me too. That was a very long time ago. I am sure by now she has found another kitten to care for,” she sighed. “I'm not positive what became of her. Here though, I have a small girl who loves me just as much.” Māo was quite content lazing on the couch there. Yet something in her still loved the Yin Yu Tang house and its long ago inhabitants.