

Third Place Middle School

Imagine the Yin Yu Tang: a Comparison between a Qing Dynasty Chinese Home and a Modern-Day American House

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Imagine waking up in a dimly lit room hearing the sounds of quiet chatter down below. Imagine smelling the deliciously fragrant aroma of breakfast ready to be eaten. Picture yourself crawling out of a curtained bed and out of a narrow door as you reach a balcony looking down to a beautifully designed, spacious courtyard. You start to become anxious to play with your siblings as you hurry down the narrow stairway into the courtyard. With a radiant smile, you join your twenty family members as you think, "This is the way to live in Yin Yu Tang." Now envision yourself doing your daily routine as you wake up and dress for school back in your American home. As one pictures his or her ritual, one begins to discover the differences between living in a Chinese 1800s house and an American house such as one's own.

As my Chinese school class entered the glass doors, we faced the side of Yin Yu Tang. Immediately, I stared at the beautiful outside decoration. At the same time, our tour guide, Bruce H. MacLaren, explained the architectural design. Before construction, the Chinese considered more than the measurements of the house. Instead, they considered the direction the house should face and the environment surrounding the house. The Chinese thought, before building, of the way the sunlight would be shown through the skywell, as well as the importance of surrounding the five elements of the universe: fire, wood, earth, water, and metal. On the other hand, American houses do not consult with the five elements of the universe, or take any similar considerations. MacLaren described how each brick was covered with white lime plaster, similar to an American fireplace. The difference, however, was shown on the rim of the house. All along the house were evenly spaced anchor tiles. American houses are more than usually decorated plainly with paint carefully brushed across. As I looked above, I noticed the uniquely shaped roof. I pondered as I looked at the three flat, curved layers built upon the rooftop. I asked the tour guide about this distinctiveness. MacLaren said the three layers of tiles were built to keep rain from coming into the house. He also mentioned the way the rooftop was held up with a wooden frame to keep a strong top for the house. Usually, American houses are sealed with flat or sloped roofs with filters to catch rain

or snow. As I thought of this I marveled at the ingenuity of the Chinese people.

Right as we walked through the doors of Yin Yu Tang, I gasped in amazement at its decoration. I looked up to see a skywell with the sun lightly shining down the courtyard I stood in. With excitement, I looked down to see a pond of gold fish swimming delicately in a pool of water. All along the edge of the courtyard I was awed by the carved wooden screens on what seemed to be a second floor balcony. MacLaren endlessly pointed out numerous magnificently designed constructions. Carved stone vents lay across the walls. Stone bases were decorated almost like snowflakes, with no two of them designed the same. As I looked at these breathtaking decorations, I wondered how Americans design their own homes. As I thought, I discovered that Americans base their homes on the family traditions or pictures rather than intricate, carefully carved designs. Each American home is different with different decorations portraying their own family.

Family traditions were more than important in a Chinese family's home. As I explored Yin Yu Tang, the tour guide mentioned all the traditions, cultural activities, and symbols of prosperity, longevity, and fortune that were built into the house. One such example was that a red flag was put up the ceiling of the upstairs reception hall when the house was symbolically said to be completely put together, even if it wasn't. Another such example of many traditions is that as the house was being built, coins were placed under wooden posts to guarantee prosperity for the family and its future generations. Each house may have its own tradition held inside, but American houses as a whole do not have similar traditions within the neighborhood. As known in the world, America is full of various family cultures and beliefs; therefore, American houses have separate traditions in contrary to houses in China.

Up the stairs I went onto the second floor. When I peeked into a bedroom, I noticed it was not much different than any average American's. A bed, a desk, a dresser – the furniture was much the same. As told by MacLaren, China traded with Europe for imports such as wallpaper. This was shown in one of the bedrooms, for the walls were decorated with European designs. As I know, America today also trades with countries around the world. Like the Chinese, wallpaper is imported from different countries. Each room may have different varieties than the next, and many of them are signs of trade.

As we walked out the door of Yin Yu Tang, I thought of how wonderful it would be to live there. But then, I thought of life now in

America. Even with their similarities and differences, both types of houses provide a good way to live.