

First Place Middle School
An Outside-In Way of Life
Lena Champlin

I stood and looked down into the courtyard, my thin hands resting gently on the railing like two birds landed from flight. I am the youngest daughter of the Huang family. Below me the square courtyard is simple, but beautiful. It is the height of summer and tangerine colored afternoon sunlight spills, like a lady's long skirts, through the open roof in the middle of our house casting light into the square. When rain comes to the land, like a thousand tears, it falls through this opening as well. The rain falls into our house. It is collected in two small square pools at either end of the open courtyard. Handsome fish live in the collected waters. Orange and red and the purest white fish live there. Yin Yu Tang, our house, is balanced. There are stairs at either end of the house and the rooms are placed across from each other. Because it is summer now, pots of flowers are placed around the fish pools and throughout the square. I can see those flowers my mother and I picked just this morning. They are plump and yellow with black centers, like bumble bees. The laundry is hung on strings across the square and it waves and bounces in the wind, dancing like spirits.

I walk down the thin staircase. My hands run along the railing. I hurry down into the courtyard where my mother, grandmother, and sisters are preparing supper. The beams of the lower rooms of our house are laden with drying food. Thin, green stalks and mushroom plants have turned brown and dried into wispy plants. My family and I eat supper seated on the walls around the pools or sitting on the stone floor. My father is away now, but we are joined by other people, people who are strangers to me. They have no homes and so we share ours. As I glance around, I know the faces of my own family so well. Our family is strong because we spend time together and learn from each other. When supper is finished, the first fingers of night are creeping around the spirit wall that stands before our main door. Before I return to my room, I stand in the room we use to honor our ancestors. I bow to them, they who are the past, I who am what is to come. We honor our ancestors greatly; they brought us here so we may live a life, a second in eternity. They gave us this chance to do something great in the world. We build small houses for our ancestors and burn them. The smoke will carry them up into the sky to our ancestors. I remember seeing the flames reflected in my family members' eyes, our ancestors live in us.

My room is set up like the other rooms of the house. My bed is in the back and my desk is by the shutters that face inward to the courtyard. Here, I sit now and look out through a shutter that is elaborately carved with a flowery design. Yin Yu Tang is simple on the outside, but within it is beautiful. We do not care to show our riches to the world. Our houses are inwardly focused, like our lives. How people design their house can show much about their culture. Very few windows open on the outside of our house. I believe we should not care what is on the outside. Rather, it is what is in our souls that is most important for there the true beauty lives and burns like a fire. It is important to be able to reflect on yourself and look inside yourself. There is also a focus on family in my community. I know my family and several other people. We all know each other so well that I think I can read their emotions like one might read a book. Most importantly, I know myself. I have the ability to look inward and reflect on the person I am. I think if we open windows to the whole world we sometimes forget, forget who we are. One may know a million people, but one will not find peace if they do not know themselves. As I sit by the window and look out to the courtyard, the last light of day burning my face, I smile for I know that the peace and love in Yin Yu Tang is inside of me as well.

I, Lena Champlin, a tall, uncomplicated girl with simple brown hair, stood and looked down over the courtyard in Yin Yu Tang. It moved so far both in space and time since the Huang family lived in it in China. Now it stands in Salem, Massachusetts in the United States. I look down into the bare courtyard. The house is empty now and has been for many years. I look down into the fish pools and see the fish - orange, red and the purest white – that were put here because fish of the same kind once swam in these waters many years before. I look down on the empty square courtyard. I can see the beauty of the inside of this house. The shutters are carved with a careful hand and the stones cut smoothly. From the outside one would never know that this house is so beautiful within. I think of the houses in my world today and of my own house. They are beautiful on the outside and simple within. This expresses the American culture today. People care about how they look and not how they are inside. I wonder if the Huang family reflected on themselves and cared about how people are inside like how their house was designed.

As I stand with my hands resting on the rail, I wonder how the people who lived here many, many years ago and in a very different place were different from me. They were people like I am even if they lived different lifestyles and believed in different things. Because their windows did not open to the outside world I wonder if they were shut off from the world.

Somehow I can feel them in this house even now. I can hear their whispers from the past, calling from the worn floorboards and cracked stones. Who were they? Were they, like their house, beautiful inside?

I am, like my house, not trapped inside myself. My windows open outward. I know a hundred people as friends and a thousand other faces. I know People. I can look out. My windows let sunlight into me. But maybe I forget who I am if I never look inside myself. We are all people and all different and being ourselves is one of the most wonderful things. Maybe I forget sometimes that it isn't important what we look like on the outside but how we are inside. Our lives tick away as we stand in our fancy American houses. Maybe if we look at houses like Yin Yu Tang – houses that have an inward focus – we can remember to look into ourselves and find the beauty that is in us all. Maybe then the fire of a powerful peace will burn within us and we can reflect that outwards to others.