

“Transplanting” Yin Yu Tang to America: Preservation, Value, and Cultural Heritage

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In 1997 the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) purchased Yin Yu Tang (Hall of Plentiful Shelter), a historic Huizhou residence in the town of Huang Cun in China’s east-central Anhui Province. It then dismantled the structure, shipped it to the United States, and rebuilt it on the grounds of the museum in Salem, Massachusetts. The transplantation of Yin Yu Tang provides a unique vantage point from which to reconsider the appropriation of Chinese architectural heritage by institutions in the U.S. This article examines a series of issues related to the relocation and exhibition of Yin Yu Tang in a new geocultural context. It also looks into changes in Huang Cun in the aftermath of the Yin Yu Tang project to understand the challenges of heritage preservation in the Huizhou area.

In the spring of 1997, in what she recalls as a moment of “serendipity,” Nancy Berliner, then curator of Chinese art at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM), arrived at Yin Yu Tang (Hall of Plentiful Shelter) in China’s Anhui Province during a gathering that the Huang family had called to decide its fate.¹ Following the meeting, the museum agreed to purchase the 200-year-old house, which it considered representative of Huizhou residential traditions.² Yin Yu Tang was subsequently dismantled, shipped to the U.S., and rebuilt at PEM in Salem, Massachusetts, eventually opening to the public in June 2003.

Strictly speaking, the exhibition of a full-scale example of classical Chinese architecture in the U.S. is not rare. Since the completion of Astor Court (a classical Chinese garden court) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1980, more than sixteen Chinese gardens have been built in the U.S.³ However, because these were never meant to be inhabited, they may be considered largely asocial and ahistorical spaces. Conversely, as the residence of eight generations of the Huang family, Yin Yu Tang was the setting for human activities through a number of historical periods, and these activities left real traces

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on the building. As the only example of historic vernacular Chinese architecture in North America, therefore, Yin Yu Tang provides an invaluable crosscultural opportunity to examine the domestic life of a Chinese family and understand its interplay with larger social, economic and political circumstances.

In addition to being a palimpsest of lived history, Yin Yu Tang provides fertile ground to examine the appropriation of Chinese architectural heritage in the U.S., especially as this pertains to the cardinal precepts of historic preservation: value and authenticity. Over the past decade the theory of historic preservation has shifted from a fabric-centered approach to a more value-centered paradigm. Thus, according to a recent Getty Institute report, “Objects, collections, buildings, and places become recognized as ‘heritage’ through *conscious decisions and unspoken values of particular people and institutions*”; and this heritage value, “at its core, is politicized and contested” (emphasis added).⁴ What, then, constitutes the value of Yin Yu Tang? How has its value and authenticity been transferred and transformed during the relocation process? Where does the “success” of “transplantation” belong? And, ultimately, how might this project help clarify the philosophy and practices of preservation in Huizhou, China?⁵

In this article I reflect on the transplantation of heritage values involved in the Yin Yu Tang project and the interplay of involved individuals and institutes. I begin by discussing the various parties and interests engaged in the project and by examining how the multiplicity of Yin Yu Tang’s identity complicates its value as a historic house. This is followed by close scrutiny of how the house has been physically reerected at PEM and conceptually recontextualized in a new social-cultural environment that reflects PEM’s longstanding interest in Asian art and its mission to interpret historic environments. In addition, the article offers a close reading of the pluralistic and competing discourses in PEM’s multigenre interpretive message regarding Yin Yu Tang. This message integrates understanding of Huizhou architectural heritage, a reimagination of Huang family domestic life, and an explanation of the interaction between the family and larger socio-historical changes in Chinese society over the past two centuries. Last, the article situates the Yin Yu Tang project, as well as PEM’s other interactions with Huang Cun, in terms of the overall effort to preserve Huizhou heritage in order to shed light on other potential issues that have emerged in the area. Through consideration of these three disparate yet closely related concerns, I will show how the “transplantation” of Yin Yu Tang offers a useful crosscultural vantage point from which to consider how values in historic preservation are contextual, conservational, and continuously changing.

REERECTING AND RECONTEXTUALIZING YIN YU TANG: VALUE, AUTHENTICITY AND NEGOTIATION

The Yin Yu Tang project may have started with a serendipitous encounter between Berliner and the Huang family, but it soon materialized into a transnational social-cultural endeavor, entangling personal, economic, cultural, institutional and even political interests. Members of the 28th generation of the Huang family had succeeded as pawnbrokers in Shanghai and Hankou during the Kangxi reign (1662–1722), and the family built Yin Yu Tang around 1800 with their accumulated fortune. A 4,500-square-foot, two-story, five-bay Huizhou merchant house, it subsequently sheltered eight generations of the Huang family (FIG. 1). In the repertoire of historic Huizhou houses, Yin Yu Tang is probably not that valuable in terms of antiquity. In fact, according to Berliner, PEM was only able to purchase it because it was not “old” compared to other houses that were classified as protected relics.

For a nonregistered historic house like this, however, the cost of maintenance was the sole responsibility of the Huang clan, who had scattered to other places and could no longer keep it up. Yet, even though Yin Yu Tang had become a financial burden, its value as a symbol of ancestral glory and family legacy remained intact and undiminished. Therefore, as far as the Huang family was concerned, in addition to the compensation they would receive for “selling” the house to PEM, its physical relocation would save it from the foreseeable fate of deterioration followed by eventual demolition.⁶ In other words, the family saw the relocation as crucial to the house’s continued existence. Indeed, a 36th-generation descendant of the Huang family, Huang Qiuhua, was later invited to visit the reerected Yin Yu Tang in Salem, and his statement of appreciation for the preservation of his family



FIGURE 1. The lime-plastered Yin Yu Tang house (center) in its original setting in Huang Cun. Source: N. Berliner, *Yin Yu Tang: The Architecture and Daily Life of a Chinese House (North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2003), p.32.*



FIGURE 2. *The Yin Yu Tang house exhibition at PEM as seen from the second floor of the museum. Photo by author.*

heritage was appropriated by PEM as an endorsement for the project (FIG. 2).

Although Yin Yu Tang was not initially classified as a protected relic, its value certainly changed when PEM launched the Yin Yu Tang project. For the local authorities of Xiuning County, Yin Yu Tang went from being an ordinary old residence to being a symbol of Huizhou architectural heritage. Just as importantly, it provided an opportunity to connect Xiuning with the rest of the world. In May 1997, when the Xiuning County Cultural Relics Administration and PEM agreed to transfer Yin Yu Tang to the museum, the nature of the transaction was therefore defined as a cultural exchange that would promote international awareness of traditional Huizhou heritage. As I will discuss, this transaction led to a series of follow-up activities between Salem and Xiuning County that had socioeconomic implications for both locales. These activities included publishing educational materials, hosting international forums, organizing and promoting a "Xiuning-Salem" tourist route, and supporting other conservation works in Huang Cun. For local officials in Xiuning, "exporting" Yin Yu Tang has proven to be more than just a cultural exchange; it has represented a significant political and economic achievement.

Meanwhile, for PEM, the Yin Yu Tang project was important because it allowed the intersection of its general mission with its curator's longstanding personal academic passion. Nancy Berliner had studied Chinese art history at the Central Academy of Art in Beijing, and had become fascinated with Huizhou culture during her first visit to Xiuning in 1985. The decision to bring Yin Yu Tang to the U.S. also coincided with an extensive expansion of PEM in 2003. With accompanying galleries dedicated to the house and to Chinese art, Yin Yu Tang is now a major element in the renovated museum. Yet it has also mainly fallen on PEM to justify the meaningfulness of the transaction. The relocation

has thus not only involved physically reerecting the structure in new geophysical circumstances but also conceptually rationalizing the effort. At both levels, authenticity and heritage have been constantly contested and negotiated.

The actual reerection of Yin Yu Tang on the PEM campus began in June 2002 following extensive research conducted during the conserving process in an off-site warehouse in Massachusetts.⁷ Appropriating the authenticity of the architecture was deemed crucial to the success of the project. This not only meant conserving and restoring the existing contents of the house to their original and traditional state, but also negotiating between authenticity and reality, and between tradition and innovation.

Conservation of the timber frame provides a good case in point. To strengthen the deteriorated pieces, architects called for supporting the original wood planks with new boards made from a species of American wood with similar character and strength. Thus, while the new planks provide structural support, the original planks retain their role in the structure's historic fabric. Appropriating the authority of native craftsmen is another strategy commonly used by American museums to construct a sense of authenticity for their Chinese structures.⁸ PEM invited Huizhou carpenters, masons, and other craftsmen to demonstrate and apply traditional techniques to the reconstruction of Yin Yu Tang, and, rather than using nails, components were connected using dovetail tenons, a traditional method of Chinese joinery. By deliberately foregrounding these activities in its documentary film about Yin Yu Tang, PEM was able to successfully construct this aura of authenticity (FIG. 3).

The roof was another feature of Yin Yu Tang that required a creative solution, since the house was moved from the relatively warm climate of eastern China to a coastal town in the northern U.S. To protect the interior of Yin Yu



FIGURE 3. *A close-up from the documentary film Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home showing how two boards are joined using a traditional dovetail tenon. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.*

Tang from harsh winter weather in its new location, a clear-paneled skylight is lifted by crane onto the roof in the fall, and removed each spring. The clear shield enables natural daylight to permeate Yin Yu Tang's central courtyard all year round so visitors can appreciate it as the outdoor space it was designed to be. Other than its interior courtyard, Yin Yu Tang's unglazed ceramic roof tiles were also exposed to winter weather in its new location. In this case, the conservation team replaced the base tiles with more durable, newly manufactured ones, while retaining the original cap tiles. Thus, the original appearance of Yin Yu Tang's roof has been maintained while it has also been modified to withstand harsh new winter conditions.⁹

Along with these measures, new features ensuring visitor safety and accessibility were needed to comply with Massachusetts building codes. These include a comprehensive fire detection and suppression system, heating and ventilation for visitor comfort and building conservation, new plumbing for drainage and water supply for the two skywell pools, and wiring for lighting and other purposes. These new elements were installed in the most inconspicuous and reversible fashion possible so as not to preclude future preservation efforts.¹⁰ Further, in order to meet seismic requirements, electrical conduits, mechanical ductwork, and piping were fabricated using structural-grade stainless steel.¹¹ And thresholds were reinstalled with electric screw jacks to allow disabled visitors to access interior spaces, while preserving the original look of the house.¹² All things considered, then, the Yin Yu Tang that now stands at PEM, with its "authentic" Huizhou characteristics, is not simply a physical entity transported intact from Huang Cun. It is a living reflection of a particular understanding of Huizhou architectural heritage and a negotiation with contemporary American culture to re-present this in a new physical environment.

In addition to physically reerecting the structure in Salem, PEM has had to justify the *relevance* of its effort, especially in relation to its existing collection of historic houses. PEM today preserves 23 historic structures, including four designated as National Historic Landmarks and six that are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.¹³ Ranging from First Period New England structures to those representing the Victorian Eclectic style, these bear witness to the architectural, cultural and social changes in Salem from the early settlement era to the mid-Victorian period. For PEM, the value of Yin Yu Tang is not singularly determined by the physical property, but also by the dynamic interplay between Yin Yu Tang and the interpretative possibilities of this new geosocial context. In other words, if the physical relocation makes the preservation possible, it is the conceptual recontextualization that essentially makes the preservation meaningful.

In this regard, one important strategy PEM employs is to juxtapose Yin Yu Tang with one of Salem's most well-known houses — the Gardner-Pingree House (1804). Despite clear differences between the circumstances behind the origins

of displayed objects, this comparative approach is often employed by museums.¹⁴ In addition to the individual tour of Yin Yu Tang, PEM features a special and separate tour focusing on these two homes.¹⁵ Arbitrarily constructing a sense of comparability between them, this emphasizes how both were built around 1800 by merchants.

There are several difficulties with this crosscultural, comparative approach. First is the fundamental dilemma and controversy pertinent to the entire Yin Yu Tang project. To a certain extent, the purchase and relocation of Yin Yu Tang as an architectural artifact is consistent with PEM's acquisition of other Asian artifacts, which PEM justifies as part of a continuing effort to embrace artistic achievements from around the world. However, no matter how delicately PEM's rhetoric manages to describe the significance of the project, uprooting Yin Yu Tang from its historic location and turning it into a museum exhibition can hardly be said to be devoid of "a collector's instinct."¹⁶ The juxtaposition of Yin Yu Tang with the Gardner-Pingree House is also not an equal comparison. Not only is the latter intact in its original location, but it also stands as part of a clear lineage with the other historic dwellings in Salem. In contrast, Yin Yu Tang was uprooted from its original environment and artificially replanted at PEM. Therefore, while visitors can experience the geocultural landscape of the Gardner-Pingree house firsthand, they have to use their imaginations to reconstruct that of Yin Yu Tang.

A second issue with the comparative approach is that it creates an inherent paradox of "paralleling" and "othering." Studies of museums have consistently pointed out how the very act of juxtaposing two items "others" the differences between them with regard to race, gender, class, etc.¹⁷ Apart from the obvious parallels in terms of class and business activity between the owners of the two houses, the differences between them — e.g., the unique lives and careers of merchants in the East and West and the dramatic differences between their respective cultures and levels of economic prosperity — inevitably create the trap of "exoticizing" the other. Realistically, while visitors may appreciate the furnishings as well as the manners and domestic spatial politics in these two houses, how can their juxtaposition not result in "exoticizing" Yin Yu Tang as a representation of the East? Or is reckoning with the unavoidability of this dilemma the only solution? Interestingly, while each PEM docent infuses the tour with his or her own understanding and personality, the institutional agenda is also in a constant interplay with the individual craft of curation.

My purpose here is not to question every step in the process of the project, but to reveal the politics of decision-making involved in it. The Yin Yu Tang project involves multivalent elements such as the personal, the institutional, the economic, and the cultural that dynamically interact and should not go unscrutinized. Although seemingly as intact as it was in Huang Cun, the Yin Yu Tang now standing at PEM has had its authenticity contested, its identity refash-

ioned, and its values pluralized. Its identity has been transformed from being a relatively simple expression of the Huang family's ancestral legacy to being an exhibited object that is supposed to represent Huizhou heritage, serve as an unwitting cultural ambassador, and provide evidence of PEM's crosscultural relationship with Asia and its continuing efforts to maintain a place at the forefront of heritage preservation. Each facet of this multi-layered identity comes further into play in PEM's interpretive plan.

INTERPRETING YIN YU TANG: EXHIBITION AND ITS COMPETING NARRATIVES

In addition to providing a referential context for Yin Yu Tang, PEM resorts to the power of interpretation to demonstrate the significance of the relocation. To enhance the visitor experience, PEM employs traditional means such as a (self-)guided house tour, a gallery, brochures, and documentary films. Meanwhile, new media (such as online 3D models) reach out to make history meaningful in less traditional ways. I would now like to briefly demonstrate the dynamics between the various interpretative strategies. While PEM's multigenre interpretations seek to emphasize a central theme, "House, Family and History," that integrates the house's architecture with the lives of its generations of inhabitants and their interaction with larger social conditions, different parties involved in the project also voice their own agency.

Prior to embarking on the tour, initial visitor impressions of Yin Yu Tang come from PEM's general brochure describing its renowned collection of historic houses. Here, Yin Yu Tang is juxtaposed with three other houses of different periods: the John Ward House, the Crowninshield-Bentley House, and the Gardner-Pingree House. Interestingly, while pictures of the three New England houses show their facades, the photo of Yin Yu Tang shows only a typical corner of its wall and roof (FIG. 4). Consequently, visitors are immediately directed to a distinctive feature of Huizhou houses — their horsehead walls. This is a type of stepped wall that rises above the roof, creating a distinctive architectural profile with both ornamental and practical purposes.

Traditional Huizhou dwellings resemble fortresses from the outside, with tall, solid, white-washed walls and small windows for ventilation and safety. Closed to the outside and open to the inside, such a house stands as a self-sufficient microcosm.





John Ward House
(ca. 1684)
Federal Garden area

One of the finest surviving 17th-century buildings in New England. It originally stood on a one-acre plot with a kitchen garden, an outhouse and a well — opposite the jail used during the witchcraft trials. The house was moved to the museum campus in 1910. First Period or Post-Medieval style is characterized by steeply pitched gables, large central chimney, asymmetrical façade, batten door, diamond-paned leaded casement windows and second-story overhang. A National Historic Landmark.



Crowninshield-Bentley House
(ca. 1727)
126 Essex Street

Built for fish merchant and ship captain John Crowninshield. This modest house in the Georgian style was moved one block to the museum's campus in 1959. Characteristics of its Georgian Colonial style include its long, rectangular shape with an orderly symmetrical façade, and the paneled door with pediment, transom lights and pilasters — all reflecting an interest in classicism. Listed in the National Register of Historic Places.



Gardner-Pingree House
(1804)
128 Essex Street

Built for John Gardner, a wealthy Salem merchant and nephew of Elias Hasket "King" Derby. This elegantly proportioned Federal-style house is one of Salem architect Samuel McIntire's finest and best-preserved designs. It is mentioned in the preface to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and is a National Historic Landmark.



Yin Yu Tang
Enter through museum

Built late in the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) in a rural village in China's Anhui Province, this 16-bedroom residence was oriented according to principles of feng shui to ensure a harmonious relationship with the landscape. Coins were placed under structural columns for prosperity. The lattice windows in the bedrooms look out onto two fish pools in the central courtyard. The house was moved piece by piece and re-erected at the Peabody Essex Museum over a seven-year period.

Please go to www.pem.org/visit/tours or check at the admissions or information desks for TOUR TIMES AND RESERVATIONS.

PEM Peabody Essex Museum
Salem, MA 01970 | 978-745-9500 | pem.org

FIGURE 4. The PEM brochure juxtaposes Yin Yu Tang with three other historic houses. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

Since the austere facade and white exterior walls do not immediately reveal as much about the house as do the pictures of the other three houses, PEM's choice to emphasize Yin Yu Tang's horsehead walls effectively heightens the importance of this characteristic feature of the Huizhou dwelling. The importance of the horsehead wall to Huizhou architecture is also demonstrated in a separate Yin Yu Tang brochure. Here the image of the whitewashed exterior not only stands alone as the signature element of Yin Yu Tang, but it provides a background for four other pictures (FIG. 5). These show Huang Cun, an old photo of an earlier generation in the Huang family, the second story of the house structure, and the interior of one room. Together, these photos attempt to provide a snippet preview of the environment where Yin Yu Tang originated, of the Huang family, and of the architecture and everyday life of the house.

Before or after visitors enter the house, they may also visit the galleries related to it. In the Yin Yu Tang gallery's video room three short documentary films play in a loop: *Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home*; *Guo Nian: Passage into a New Year*; and *Guo Men: A Village Wedding*.¹⁸ *Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home* captures the important moments during the transplantation effort and reflects on the revival of cultural legacy. Interestingly, discrepancies between macro and micro perspectives emerge throughout the narrative. A good case in point is the recording of a series of ceremonies conducted for Yin Yu Tang. In an early section, the filmmakers present a traditional Huizhou beam-raising ceremony, a practice which took place when the wood frame of a house was ready for the installation of the final ridge pole. The documentary shows a group of craftsmen burning incense and chanting auspicious words in dialect as they seek blessings from Lu Ban, the patron saint of Chinese contractors. To ensure smooth construction and blessings for future residents, the beam to be raised is partially covered with a red cloth and carries a few small "fortune bags" (*fudai*). During the ceremony, the chief craftsman measures and hammers the beam in a stylized fashion, asserting the suitability of the beam and offering thanks for the blessing of the deity.

On July 22, 2002, as the timber frame of Yin Yu Tang was being reerected, PEM conducted its own beam-raising ceremony to pay respect to Chinese cultural tradition. This pivotal moment is also chronicled as part of Yin Yu Tang's history in *A Chinese Home*. The film describes how the Chinese craftsmen and American contractors worked together meticulously to raise the beam, in the same fashion that the ritual was traditionally performed in Huizhou (FIG. 6). The filmmakers then insert shots that echo the character-defining details of the ceremony conducted in Huizhou to abridge the differences between the two temporalities and spaces. In this gesture of reproducing the ceremony, PEM exhibitors symbolize an inheritance and continuation of the tradition in Salem and successfully borrow an aura of "authority" and "authenticity."¹⁹



FIGURE 5. A whitewashed horsehead wall serves as a background for the Yin Yu Tang brochure. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

The film also records another important ceremony — that which took place when living Huang family members bid farewell to Yin Yu Tang. In July 1997, as Yin Yu Tang was about to be dismantled, members of the 35th generation of the Huang clan, including Huang Binggen, Huang Xiqi, and



FIGURE 6. A beam-raising ceremony is performed at PEM in the same fashion as in Huizhou, as shown in the film *Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home*. Courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum.

his son Huang Zhaofang, gathered to conduct the ceremony. As with many traditional rituals, only men were present. Their rhetoric in describing the importance of relocating Yin Yu Tang is quite interesting. As if engaging in a direct dialogue with them, the men thank the ancestors for their continuous blessings and explain the predicament faced by the current generation — that they can no longer afford to keep repairing Yin Yu Tang. The men then plead to be allowed to have Yin Yu Tang moved and tell the ancestors that by doing so their work will be preserved forever. The divergence in the narratives surrounding the significance of the project could not be clearer. On the one hand, PEM argues for the value of Yin Yu Tang in terms of crosscultural awareness and communication. On the other, the film makes it clear that to the Huang family the relocation is primarily valuable as a way to preserve their ancestral glory.²⁰ The juxtaposition exposes the discrepancy between the grand perspective of explicating cultural heritage and the private perspective of preserving family status.

Gendered voice is also heard in the second short film (*Guo Men*), which documents local wedding customs. The film begins with 96-year-old Huang Cui'e recalling one of her most private wedding-day experiences — being carried in a sedan chair to the groom's house.²¹ Compared to *A Chinese Home*, which is told from the perspective of Yin Yu Tang's male descendants, *Guo Men* captures female perspectives on the social history of the Huizhou area. The film juxtaposes two local women's experiences from different times — Huang Cui'e's wedding in the 1920s and a young Huizhou woman's wedding in 1999. On the one hand, the film purposefully emphasizes the recurrence of certain details, such as the pairing of a hen and a rooster as an auspicious symbol of fertility, to show the continuation of tradition. On the

other, the remodeled wedding suite and the modern-style furniture in the traditional house in the second wedding demonstrate how custom is constantly negotiated to account for contemporary lifestyles. By contrasting the two wedding recollections, the film conveys the deeply rooted yet ever changing nature of tradition.²²

The carefully arranged self-guided house tour also highlights this intertwining of the micro (everyday practices) and macro (social-economic changes). The rooms and items that visitors see on this timed excursion integrate characteristics of Huizhou vernacular architecture and decorative art with Huang family history and a brief explication of China's nineteenth- and twentieth-century history. Also interesting is that while the owners of the other historic houses at PEM are long gone, leaving only their legacy for others to interpret, the previous inhabitants of Yin Yu Tang become co-curators of their lives. In other words, through the audio track that visitors are provided, they become both the subject and medium of interpretation.

The description of the main hall is a telling example. When visitors arrive here, the audio track (with interpretive narration available in both English and Mandarin) includes the chanting of a memorial essay from an ancestral worship ritual and the simulated sound of daily activities such as people chatting, moving around, and relaxing.²³ Visitors are thus encouraged to see how the main hall served both as a solemn public place for important family rituals and a casual space for everyday activities. The main hall also contains items bearing the imprint of a particular era — a speaker used for broadcasting propaganda during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and the portrait of Lei Feng (1940–1962), a socialist soldier-hero — and these items are called out in the spoken narration. In addition to the explanations provided by PEM staff, the audio track contains the voices of Huang family members, who recount their memories. For instance, visitors hear Huang Xiqi's personal recollections of childhood in this room, adding a layer of miscellaneous sensibility to the grand narrative.

Such stories combine personal and private family memories with the collective memory of cultural and social values to demonstrate the perennial yet changing roles of the main reception room. Indeed, throughout the self-guided tour of selected rooms and household items, PEM helps visitors experience the physical space of Yin Yu Tang, imagine quotidian life there, and understand the ethics and social and cultural values behind the lives of Huang family members over time.²⁴

The various genres and means through which PEM has restored and reimagined the Huang family's domestic life and its interaction with larger historical events ultimately transform Yin Yu Tang from a singular dwelling into a matrix of living scholarship of Huizhou architectural, cultural and social legacies. The interpretations integrate powerful and compelling micro and macro views from the past. They

also reveal the gaps and fissures in the narratives surrounding otherwise homogeneous and timeless “heritage.” Together, such efforts provide a panoramic view of the architecture, inhabitants and heirlooms in the house over the course of several generations. However, this has only been made possible by stripping the house of its original social context and transforming it into an object in a museum, exposed to the gaze of outsiders. Yin Yu Tang’s history, constructed through interpretative narratives, is thus presented as a “lived” history that conforms to the established grand historiography of twentieth-century Chinese history. This naturally differs from the preservation of “living” history in Yin Yu Tang’s home region, Huizhou. In particular, the deliberately choreographed traditional ceremonies included in explications of the house are imbued with an ersatz performative aura bespeaking the fact that the authenticity PEM constructs is actually a perfect simulation.

THE AFTERMATH OF YIN YU TANG: CHALLENGES OF PRESERVATION IN HUANG CUN

Experiences with Yin Yu Tang in Huang Cun before and after the relocation project reveal the ongoing challenges of preservation in the Huizhou area. This region holds the largest number of historic vernacular residences in China, yet their gradual deterioration, combined with fast-paced economic growth and the emergence of new housing typologies, poses a serious threat to their continued existence as evidence of the area’s rich past.

The preservation of Huizhou houses can roughly be divided into two stages. In the 1980s the Anhui Province cultural authorities established the Qiankou Vernacular House Museum and relocated a number of severely endangered Huizhou houses from the Ming and Qing dynasties there. This practice, seemingly similar to PEM’s, faced several difficulties, however. First, unlike the houses collected at PEM, which generally have only had to be moved a short distance and which blend well into Salem’s natural landscape, the houses in the Qiankou Museum are walled in and disconnected from their context. Second, due to inadequate professional oversight and lack of financial assistance, the interpretative component of the Qiankou House Museum is extremely limited. Visitors may only benefit from the services of prearranged tour guides, with no other interpretative materials available. As Daniel Bluestone has noted, “material heritage is not understood and valued apart from an act of education and interpretation.”²⁵ To visitors, therefore, especially those with no prior knowledge of Huizhou culture, the mere preservation of old houses in the Qiankou Museum offers no more than evidence of the physical existence of heritage, whose value is not effectively conveyed.

The preservation philosophy and strategy applied to Huizhou houses has significantly changed in the new mil-

lennium. Compared to the 1980s, the present conceptual framework emphasizes protecting and preserving the environmental and cultural ecology of material heritage. This has had two major outcomes. First, instead of the closed-in museum paradigm that focuses on saving individual houses, the new model emphasizes preserving the entirety of villages. Therefore, compared to previous state-led, elitist conservation practices, which arbitrarily determined what was (and what was not) worthy of preservation, the new model preserves a significantly larger range of houses and villages. Second, in addition to conserving the physical structures, the new model seeks to preserve and revive the intangible heritage.²⁶ In other words, instead of preserving selected houses as witnesses of a “lived” history, the new paradigm seeks to preserve integrated village-communities where not only the “bones and flesh” but also the “spirit and vigor” of a “living” history is inherited and revived.²⁷

In November 2009 the Huangshan Municipality launched a Baicun Qianzhuang [Hundred Villages, Thousand Structures] project, aimed at identifying, conserving and reutilizing 1,065 Huizhou vernacular houses in 101 villages in two phases over five years.²⁸ In addition to top-down municipal investment, this project brought in funding from various nongovernmental sources (e.g., professional organizations, business associations, international funds, and private investors). It also aimed to change the scope of action from a singular state-led, short-term salvage campaign to a long-term effort to utilize village resources to ensure that future preservation becomes self-sustaining.

As part of the Baicun Qianzhuang campaign, the Huangshan Municipality initiated a new “adoptive-renting” mode of preservation assistance. Previously, benefactors could only assist the preservation effort by “donating” (financially contributing to the conservation of particular houses) or “purchasing” (obtaining title to a house or houses). The new mode allows an investor to contribute to the maintenance of a house together with its current owners according to a predetermined ratio (the investor usually pays the majority of the cost). This arrangement enables the owners to retain legal title to the conserved and renovated house, while it gives the investor certain rights of inhabitation and use. This mode has motivated more groups to participate in the campaign. Furthermore, the multiple use of houses encouraged by this program has gradually transformed a solely tourism-oriented activity into a more wide-ranging social-cultural program in keeping with the revitalization of entire villages.

Due to the Yin Yu Tang project, the Huang Cun preservation work during the Baicun Qianzhuang campaign has witnessed both general and unique achievements and challenges. Since it dates back to the Song dynasty, Huang Cun has a historicity comparable to that of other Huizhou villages. But the Yin Yu Tang project has bestowed it with certain characteristics that distinguish it from its peers. Huang Cun is also the site of Huang Cun Elementary School (1910) and

FIGURE 7. After the relocation of Yin Yu Tang, a modern two-story house with horsehead walls was built on its original site in Huang Cun. New constructions like this are gradually changing the appearance of rural Huizhou villages. Photo by author.



Jin Shi Di (1531).²⁹ Consequently, the village now advertises itself as “a thousand-year-old village, a hundred-year-old school, the home to Jin Shi Di, an international community” — a slogan that laudably connects the traditional with the modern, and the local with the international, by encapsulating the village’s highlights.

However, the actual preservation and reutilization campaign has been far more complicated than suggested by the grand slogan. Huang Cun is caught in a dilemma similar to that faced by preservationists across rural China, where the

conservation of the historic houses sometimes conflicts with their residents’ desire to pursue the comfort and convenience offered by modern technology. A visit to Huang Cun a decade after the relocation is quite telling. After Yin Yu Tang was sold, a two-story modern house with horsehead walls was built on Yin Yu Tang’s former site by another family (FIG. 7). Its faux, neotraditional detailing is a result of both the family’s quest for up-to-date living conditions and the local government’s mandate that new structures maintain traditional characteristics.

My experience with a house similar to Yin Yu Tang in Huang Cun is also revealing. Built in the 1920s, this house is not considered “old” or “valuable” enough for officials to compensate the family for ceding ownership to the government. Yet, since it is part of a village under conservation, its owners are prohibited from remodeling it or replacing it with a new home. Moreover, since it is this family’s only residence, they cannot let it be “adoptive-rented” by a third-party. Thus, as much as its owner sympathizes with the cause of salvaging the house and preserving its cultural heritage, its worn-down condition has made the idea of tearing it down appealing. For individual families like this, the discrepancy between the grand discourse and national cause of preservation and actual less-than-desirable living conditions is a central fact of everyday existence (FIG. 8).

In addition to the lack of adequate financial support for the maintenance of private houses, great difficulties have emerged in historic villages with regard to maintaining public spaces and commonly owned properties such as ancestral halls, shrines, and decorated stone archways. These structures, whose ownership is not identified with any specific



FIGURE 8. The main hall of this house, similar to the hall in Yin Yu Tang, retains traces of both family and social history from the 1970s. However, the deteriorating structure has made the living condition less than desirable. Photo by author.

FIGURE 9. (above). A billboard at the entrance to Huang Cun reads “Huang Cun — Famous Cultural-Historical Village of China.” However, such attempts to develop a tourist economy are belied by the admission office across the street, which has been abandoned. Photo by author.



FIGURE 10. (below). Transportation conditions to Huizhou villages are crucial to their success as tourist destinations. The red banner and the roadside brick piles indicate that Huang Cun is working to improve its accessibility. Photo by author.



individual or organization, have now largely been left to deteriorate. It is ironic that the deeply rooted clan culture that used to hold the village together has now become a problem for preservation efforts. Meanwhile, gaps in relevant legal frameworks have also been foregrounded through this clash between communal culture and institutional mechanisms.

As an extension of the Yin Yu Tang project, PEM has contributed significantly to the conservation of two other houses, Jin Shi Di and Zhong Xian Di, both built during the Kangxi reign. The local cultural authority in Huang Cun erected a stone plaque with a memorial inscription to commemorate the restoration of Jin Shi Di. Interestingly, instead of explicitly pointing out that the restoration was part of the Yin Yu Tang cultural exchange project, the inscription indicates that an “anonymous American friend who was enchanted with Huizhou culture” donated money for the preservation — rhetoric reminiscent of the Confucian cultural cosmopolitanism of cherishing men from afar.

Work at these two houses has included remodeling bedrooms at Zhong Xian Di with modern facilities to allow the house to be used to accommodate scholars and students from the United States who come to Huang Cun as an extension of the Yin Yu Tang cultural-exchange experience.³⁰ The international visibility that Yin Yu Tang has brought to Huang Cun has also jumpstarted Huang Cun’s tourist economy. However, this effort is largely the same as that in other Huizhou villages, and this similarity has become an issue. In particular, numerous villages in Huizhou are now trying

to replicate the success of Xidi and Hong Cun at attracting international visitors since these two villages were recognized as World Heritage Sites in 2000. The relatively remote location of Huang Cun and the poor access to it by road also pose significant challenges to tourist activities there (FIGS. 9, 10).

Photos capturing the visits of U.S. scholars and students to Huang Cun are today hung on the walls of Zhong Xian Di. However, long stretches of inactivity, coupled with Huang Cun’s damp climate, have caused mold to grow on them. The lack of attention and sustained activity raises important sustainability issues regarding the cultural exchange program, especially after the completion of a major project (FIG. 11).

A NEW DIRECTION?

Perhaps ironically, while the other Huizhou villages are known for what is there, following the transplantation of Yin Yu Tang, Huang Cun is increasingly known for what is no longer there. As resettled in PEM, Yin Yu Tang is no longer occupied. Meanwhile, many houses conserved on their original sites are still inhabited, and they are expected to continue to offer functional accommodation to their residents.

To explore a new perspective on heritage preservation where “lived” and “living” history converge, PEM has recently cooperated with scholars and architects to experiment with strategies for preserving architectural traditions that ensure that houses continue to be part of local everyday life. One

FIGURE 11. Photos recording visits by U.S. scholars and students to Huang Cun are hung in Zhong Xian Di. Huizhou's damp climate, coupled with long stretches of inactivity has allowed mold spots to appear on the photos. Photo by author.



such project is a continuation of the Yin Yu Tang project, a joint effort of PEM and the Xiuning County authorities called Xin Yin Yu Tang [New Yin Yu Tang]. It explores ways to combine the traditional Huizhou residence with the convenience and ecological advantages of modern technology. The model house that the Xin Yin Yu Tang project envisions in Huang Cun will not be a replica of any existing traditional dwelling;

nor will it be a modern structure decorated with Huizhou architectural characteristics. Instead, it will be an "organic" combination that draws upon the Huizhou traditional view of human habitation in combination with architectural features that promote ecological sustainability.³¹ As such, it may provide a new direction, one that offers both to revive heritage and give new connotations to tradition.

REFERENCE NOTES

1. This article benefitted tremendously from a July 2012 interview with Dr. Nancy Berliner at PEM. I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Dr. Berliner for taking time to discuss the Yin Yu Tang project, and to PEM for their hospitality and support during my research. Dr. Berliner's recollections about her visit to Huang Cun and her encounters with the Huang family have also been recorded in the CCTV documentary film *Liang and Lin*, which details the lives and careers of Liang Sicheng (1901–1972) and Lin Huiyin (1904–1955), the famous Chinese architect and architectural historian couple.
2. Dating back to a prefecture of the Song dynasty (960–1279), Huizhou comprises the southernmost part of Anhui Province together with Wuyuan County in northeastern Jiangxi Province. But today Huizhou is as much a cultural concept as a geographical reference, just as Jiangnan is used to refer to the lower Yangtze delta.
3. Carol Brash's paper "Classical Chinese Gardens in Twenty-First Century America: Cultivating the Past" provides a detailed list of the current and proposed classical Chinese gardens in the United States. See *Asianetwork Exchange*, Vol.19.1 (Fall, 2011),

pp.18–19.

4. "Report on Research," in E. Avrami, R. Mason, and M. de la Torre, eds., *Value and Heritage Conservation* (Los Angeles: The Getty Conservation Institute, 2000), p.6.
5. In her review of Berliner's book *Yin Yu Tang: The Architecture and Daily Life of a Chinese House*, Cecilia Chu pointed out that questions regarding the politics behind the Yin Yu Tang project, such as "Who does the project benefit?" are left unanswered. See *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review*, Vol.16 No.2 (2005), pp.93–94.
6. Even though Yin Yu Tang was the Huang family's property, the transaction of "selling" it to a foreign institute needed government approval. Reports of this project in the Chinese media have reiterated that the Huang family voluntarily "denoted" the house to the local government, only requiring a symbolic compensation. According to Nancy Berliner, the Huang family was well compensated, even though she cannot reveal the exact amount.
7. A detailed timeline of the Yin Yu Tang project is available at <http://www.pem.org/sites/yinyutang/project.html>.
8. From the Astor Court to the Garden

of Flowing Fragrance, each classical Chinese construction project takes tremendous pride in the participation of Chinese craftsmen and the incorporation of traditional techniques. Documentary films such as *Ming Garden* (on Astor Court) and *The Creation of Portland's Classical Chinese Garden* (on Portland, Oregon's, Lan Su Garden) and books such as June Li's *Another World Lies Beyond: Creating Liu Fang Yuan, the Huntington Chinese Garden* provide valuable images and texts in this regard.

9. More details regarding the creative solutions that PEM came up with to adjust to the new circumstances can be found in N. Berliner, J. Lewandoski, and C. Palazzo, "Yin Yu Tang: A Moment in the Preservation Process of an Eighteenth Century Huizhou Residence," *Orientations*, Vol.31 No.1 (January 2000), p.58; the documentary film *Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home* (Salem: Peabody Essex Museum, 2003); and John G. Waite Associates, Architects, *Yin Yu Tang: Preserving Chinese Vernacular Architecture* (Albany, NY: Mount Ida Press, 2003).
10. The Yin Yu Tang project was the first of its kind to have preservation guidelines

peer-reviewed by a multidisciplinary committee prior to the reassembly. Such guidelines established project parameters and detailed how the objectives, procedures and significance of the project were envisioned and theorized. The guidelines required that all interventions be reversible so that they did not preclude future preservation efforts. The full Yin Yu Tang Re-erection and Preservation Guidelines are available at PEM's website: <http://www.pem.org/sites/yinyutang/preservation.html>.

11. Meeting the seismic building codes of different states has been a common challenge when re-creating traditional Chinese structures. Each project has had to come up with creative solutions. In Portland's Lan Su Garden, for instance, each column was drilled through to insert steel rods to strengthen the pillars and support the heavy roof. In Santa Monica's Liu Fang Yuan, wood was wrapped on the outside of the steel structure to simulate the look of a wood column.

12. For a picture demonstrating the structure, see Waite Associates, *Yin Yu Tang*, p.19.

13. Nowadays, these historic properties spread across three city blocks of PEM's main campus. Interestingly, because Yin Yu Tang has been dismantled and reassembled, it is considered a new building by local authorities, instead of a historic one. Hence, it has had to comply with the guidelines and regulations of the State Building Code of Massachusetts. See Waite Associates, *Yin Yu Tang*, p.5.

14. In this case, after it was built in the early 1800s, the Gardner-Pingree House was home to some of Salem's most prosperous families before being given to PEM by the Pingree family. In contrast, Yin Yu Tang remained the property of the Huang family for its entire existence before being sold to PEM.

15. In addition to these two tours, PEM features a tour of its Salem house collection titled "Shelter to Showpiece: Three Centuries of Salem Architecture and Design." Please refer to PEM's webpages for details regarding these three tours: <http://www.pem.org/visit/tours>.

16. Bonnie Burnham, president of the World Monuments Fund, raised this thorny preservation issue, comparing Yin Yu Tang's exhibition at the museum with the experience "when Americans disassembled huge wings of important European houses and brought them back." See T. Rozhon, "Moving House, With 2,000 Chinese Parts," *New York Times*, February 22, 2001.

17. See, for example, S. Crane, *Museums and Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.3.

18. The three documentary films are directed by Richard Gordon and Carma Hinton, a documentary filmmaker and Professor of Visual Culture and Chinese

Studies at George Mason University.

Raised by American parents in China, Hinton has the perspective of both an "outsider" and an "insider" when it comes to recording Chinese traditions. The short films are also available on the DVD, *Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home*.

19. The museum's appreciation of and respect for Chinese culture is displayed through the entire process of the reerection. For example, the orientation of Yin Yu Tang and the other houses in Huang Cun demonstrates both the influence of traditional *feng-shui* ideas and the compromises made for practical reasons. In Chinese tradition, it is most preferable for houses to face south to maximize sunlight and receive *yang* energy. However, Yin Yu Tang (and many other houses in Huang Cun) actually faced north to avoid the blockage caused by the hills on the south part of the village. To be faithful to its original orientation, Yin Yu Tang was erected facing north at PEM, just as it was in Huang Cun.

20. On Yin Yu Tang's website, the reflection of 35th-generation Huang family member Huang Binggen, who now lives in Shanghai, is directly juxtaposed with the museum's grand agenda. Huang Binggen concedes "[This] arrangement is the best solution for preserving the house. It's actually a big favor for us descendants. We can preserve the house forever, and it will help us to remember that our ancestors had glorious achievements and that we must keep forging ahead ourselves and make progress in our own careers."

21. Berliner's *The Architecture and Daily Life of a Chinese House* also records this interview with Huang Cui'e on pp.23-24.

22. The third short film, *Guo Nian: Passage into a New Year*, features the same theme. By demonstrating how customs related to New Year celebrations are continuous yet changing, it defies the view of Chinese cultural tradition as monolithic and timeless.

23. Other annual traditional ceremonies are also performed at Yin Yu Tang. Every year during the Chinese Spring Festival, for instance, the ancestral portraits would be hung in the main reception hall and offered tribute, just as a family member recalled in their oral history.

24. As in the *Yin Yu Tang* documentary, the selection of rooms on the tour also takes into consideration the role of women in a Chinese family. When visitors are on the first floor, their attention is directed to a faded "double happiness" (*shuangxi*) poster on a bedroom door. From there, a daughter-in-law's duty is pictured. On the second floor, visitors are introduced to the room above the reception hall, which was used by women to pay worship to Guanyin (the Buddhist deity of Great Mercy and Compassion) and play

mahjong. In addition to their traditional roles, women's education is also discussed. Huang Zhenzhi's wife — Wang Yaozhen (1908-1994) was one of the very few literate women in this household. Through her and Huang Cui'e's recollections of their school experiences, visitors get to see how women's roles and spatial practices changed over time. Another aspect emphasized through the tour is the influence of the larger socioeconomic situation on Yin Yu Tang. On the second floor, visitors see the wedding room for Huang Zhenzhi (1909-1941). It was luxuriously decorated with a European mirror and multicolored, flowered wallpaper that his father, Huang Zixian (c.1878-1929), brought back for his wedding. This becomes a window for visitors to see into the interaction of a Huizhou merchant family and the socioeconomic situation of China in the early twentieth century.

25. D. Bluestone, "Challenges for Heritage Conservation and the Role of Research on Values," in Avrami, Mason, and de la Torre, eds., *Value and Heritage Conservation*, p.66.

26. One prominent demonstration of this change is that in 2008 Huizhou wenhua shengtai baohu qu [Huizhou Cultural Ecology Preservation District] was established and recognized as a national preservation zone.

27. This is what Wang Fuhong, the secretary of a municipal party committee, summarized in his report of the Baicun qianzhuang project.

28. Information on the Baicun Qianzhuang project comes from an unpublished booklet compiled by the Huangshan Municipal Government. Announcements and reports are also available on the government's website, <http://www.huangshan.gov.cn/topic/Default.aspx?SpecialId=10011>.

29. Originated as an old-style private school for the Huang clan in 1910, Huang Cun Elementary School later became one of the first elementary schools to adopt the standards of modern education in China, a development that is recognized as a milestone in modern Chinese education history. Jin Shi Di was built by Huang Fu, a *jinshi* (metropolitan graduate in the imperial civil service examination) from Huang Cun around 1531. It is now the most ancient and well-conserved architecture in Huang Cun.

30. The agreement between PEM and Huang Cun has brought scholars and students from American institutions such as Northeastern University and Boston University to Huang Cun for field research and cultural excursions since 2006.

31. During a visit to Huang Cun in the summer of 2012, I obtained some unpublished materials regarding the Xin Yin Yu Tang project from the local cultural authority. Most of my information about this project is derived from these materials.