

Living

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CULTURAL EXCHANGE

An exquisite 200-year-old Chinese house—which just happens to be in New England—offers stunning lessons in history and design.

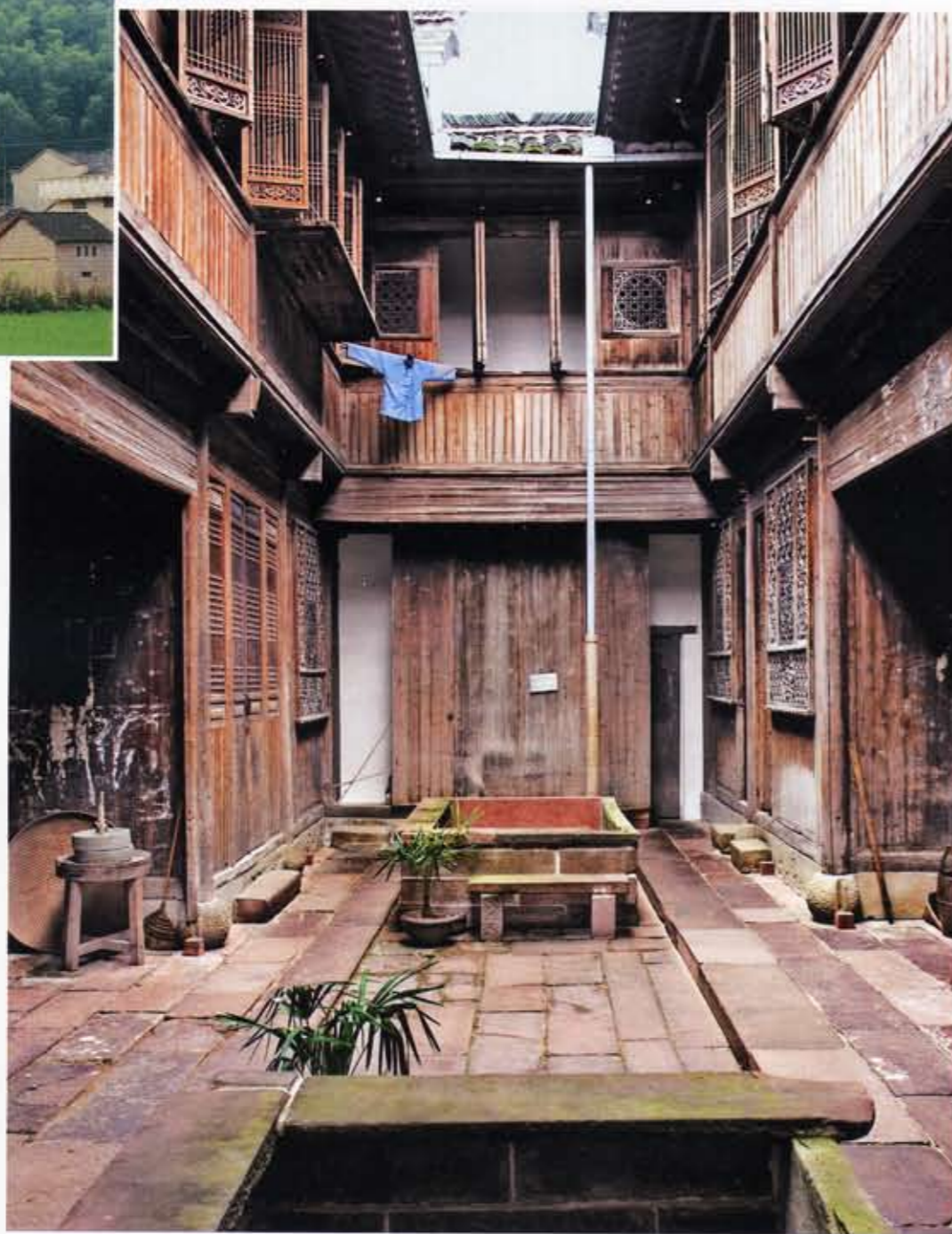
TEXT BY KATE BOLICK PHOTOGRAPHS BY BJÖRN WALLANDER



ON A RESEARCH TRIP through China in 1996, Nancy Berliner was shown an abandoned building in a remote village 250 miles southwest of Shanghai. The hulking, fortresslike structure was typical of merchants' homes in the rural Anhui Province and had been vacant for more than a decade.

Clearly, the place hadn't attracted much interest. But to Berliner, a museum curator who specializes in Chinese vernacular furniture and architecture, the home's ordinariness is precisely what made it intriguing. As she stepped closer, her heart lifted: She knew that behind the impassive façade would be two high-ceilinged floors encircling a central stone courtyard, all of it rich with intricate carvings. But it was the last stop of the day, and dusk was falling. After a quick peek, she was forced to turn and walk the mile back to town before the sun set.

A few weeks later, Berliner set off on a long walk and wound up at the same house. When she approached it this time, her heart quickened—the door



EAST MOVES WEST Transported from a rural Chinese village, above left, to Massachusetts, the 18th-century Yin Yu Tang house is a time capsule for 200 years of Chinese history. Ancient wisdom

abounds: A wide eave overhang lets in the sun and protects the perimeter of the courtyard from rain, facilitating indoor and outdoor living; a pair of square stone pools collects rainwater.

was open. Crossing the threshold, she discovered not empty rooms but a group of people clustered in the courtyard. They were members of the Huang family, gathered for the first time in years to resolve what to do with their ancestral homestead, Yin Yu Tang, or Hall of Plentiful Shelter. Built by a prosperous merchant in the late 1700s, the home had sheltered their clan for eight generations. But everyone lived in cities now, and the place was too big to maintain. Perhaps they'd sell it for building parts. Or, someone joked, maybe Berliner knew someone who would like to buy it.

And so it came to pass that a team of carpenters, masons, and preservationists dismantled, transported, warehoused, and, in 2003, finally unpacked and reerected the Yin Yu Tang house—stone by stone—more than half a world away, at the Peabody Essex Museum,

in Salem, Massachusetts. "Ever since," Berliner says, "the Huang family has said our meeting that day was fate."

On a recent morning, Berliner was sitting on a rough-hewn wooden bench in that same courtyard, sun spilling through the light well. Beside her, scarlet koi flickered in two stone pools. Upstairs and down, the 18 perfectly restored rooms were cloaked in cool shadows. Hers was an enormous undertaking. Every one of the 10,000 bricks and 50,000 tiles composing the 4,500-square-foot residence was meticulously numbered, each joint—the entire edifice was built without nails—gently pulled apart and reassembled. »

HIDDEN TREASURES Right: The house's plain, windowless façade ensured privacy and security. Below: This reception room is a trove of everyday artifacts, including wooden "warming baskets" (portable space heaters) and one of the building's two lightbulbs.



AMERICAN TREASURE

That was just the beginning. Whatever remained in the house at the time of the sale, from tables and beds to a chopstick wedged between a beam and a column, made the two-month ocean voyage to New England. And then all of it, including that wayward chopstick, went back exactly where it had first been encountered. When the Huang family came to visit in 2004, they unanimously agreed that it didn't feel "like" they were at home, but that they were actually at home. "One woman explained that every little crack in every little stone sparked a memory," Berliner says. "One man just couldn't stop crying."

It seems that the only incongruous detail of this unlikely story is the house's present-day setting. A window on the second floor frames an evocative view: a scrolled lip of Yin Yu Tang's ceramic-tile roof, a sharply modern brick-and-glass edge of the museum itself, and the pitched gable of a Colonial home old enough to have witnessed the infamous Salem witch trials of 1692.



But it turns out that even this location, steeped in American history, seems to be preordained. The Peabody Essex Museum was founded by ship captains in 1799 to showcase the "natural and artificial curiosities" they had brought home from their travels to Asia and elsewhere. In other words, it's not beyond the realm of possibility that the museum's original collection featured wares sold by the merchant family of Huang—reinforcing the ancient Chinese saying, "Falling leaves settle on their roots."

PERSONAL FLOURISHES Above: The home's 16 bedrooms—eight on each floor—were outfitted with mosquito netting made of hemp, a typical fabric in China's Anhui Province. Bedrooms for newly married couples were often decorated before the bride arrived. Left: This is the only one with wallpaper, an English or German floral print imported to Shanghai in the 1920s.

AMERICAN
HISTORIC
HOME
TREASURE



RICH SYMBOLISM Clockwise from top left: Plum blossom motifs at the base of a column represent springtime and purity. The house's centuries-old visual glossary includes modern entries, such as a propaganda poster and a portrait of Chairman Mao. An intricate two-level window-shutter system warded off wind and cold during the winter; the vase motif found in each represents peace and harmony. The kitchen was set outside the main walls to prevent a house fire.

Peabody Essex Museum is located at East India Square, 161 Essex Street, Salem, MA; 978-745-9500 or pem.org.

