



It Takes a Village: Reviving a Group of Houses Under the Great Wall Helps Invigorate the Local Economy

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By Lucy Birmingham

"There's an old Chinese saying," says American businessman-turned designer James H. Spear Jr. "If you drink the water, don't forget the person who dug the well." Since 2006 Spear and his Beijing-born wife and business partner, Liang Tang have won awards for their sustainable tourism enterprise they founded in Mutianyu, a village an hour from the capital nestled near a 1.4-mile stretch of restored Ming Dynasty Great Wall. The conference center and retreat they call the Schoolhouse also serves as the office for a thriving rental venture and houses a glass-blowing studio and art gallery for the display of the villagers' work.

With no formal training in architecture or design, Spear, who moved to China from the United States in 1986, found his calling a few years later in remodeling stone peasant houses, many decrepit and abandoned. "I worked directly with contractors and had to learn how a brick wall was made properly and true, to make a flat roof that didn't leak, and so on."

He has designed 23 houses in or near Mutianyu, 11 of which are for rent by individual owners and bear picturesque names like Persimmon Court and Stone Forest. Each has been sensitively modernized without losing its rustic feel, and Spear has retained their character by preserving blackened farmhouse rafters, leaving old cob in situ and laying aged-rock floors — sometimes trading a sturdy new tile roof for a neighbor's weathered slate roof. "The houses have all been through various incarnations," says Spear. "We've kept all the footprints and restored with locally sourced materials."

Each rental house boasts a view of the Great Wall, which climbs across jagged mountain peaks against wondrous sunsets. Below are verdant groves rich with chestnut, apricot, persimmon and cherry trees bursting with fruit and color in the spring and fall. Some of the houses are furnished with antiques and handmade textiles from the owners' collections or with Tang's careful finds, such as an old fruit-harvesting basket or stone farm implements that have been repurposed as sinks or fire pits. Dining tables made from local cedar are laden with produce grown in villagers' gardens and glasses and serving dishes handmade at the Schoolhouse studio.

Heart's Repose, a peasant house built in the 1950s, is situated under two magnificent old walnut trees. "The owner was a woman with bound feet who had married into the village," says Spear. "You can tell that it was of the period because at each end of the roof there's a tile with a gray-black Chinese communist star. My wife and I knew this wonderful woman and her family since we first moved to the village. She was 93 when she passed away last year.

"There were no Great Wall views from the original house," he continues. "The new part of the structure is higher by a meter so that you get this wall of windows facing north with an entire view of the Great Wall. The main gate to the house is black walnut that came from a tree in the village, and the main door inside is made by a local peasant.

Spear and Tang's pioneering efforts have revitalized Mutianyu and neighboring Yingbeigou with over \$10 million in outside private investment and job opportunities for as many as 100 residents at a time. The couple have owned a Spear-renovated house in Mutianyu since 1994, moving there fulltime in 2005. Spear's warm and cooperative approach, sustainability savvy and fluent Mandarin have made him a local hero. "We haven't displaced a single person," he says. "We are working small-scale because this preserves the local community as well as the natural ecology. Many people have described the Schoolhouse at Mutianyu as an oasis, which is so gratifying."

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