

China 2nd Installment

Saturday, May 22, 1999

It rained most of the second day in China. That was ok because we were scheduled to spend the morning at the Shanghai museum and then have the afternoon and evening to ourselves. Before going to the museum, Dr. Jeffery Riegel of UC Berkeley gave his first lecture. He talked about the history of Chinese arts (pottery, bronze casting, sculpture, calligraphy, and painting) focusing on what we would be able to see at the museum. The highlights:

China developed ceramic skills very early. Examples of proto-porcelain, which requires firing temperatures higher than bronze or iron, exist from ~1500-1000 BC. The Imperial kilns, including the most famous one during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644 AD) at Jingdezhen, had an important (not positive) impact upon the environment because of the use of wood to heat the kilns. One single order by a Ming Emperor was for 177,000 pieces. In 1604, 200,000 pieces of Ming china were offered for sale in Europe.

Bronze casting goes back to ~1700 BC. The designs and techniques were derived from their experiences with ceramics. The prevalent use was to create vessels used in ancestor worship to hold food or wine. (Bronze ware for the extremely wealthy, ceramics for the rest.) You made your ancestors happy by heating the wine so that the steam reached them and made them drunk. Inscriptions on the inside of the vessels, using fully mature glyphs, go back to ~1500 BC.

Sculpture was initially wet clay casting, as exemplified by the Xian terracotta warriors (~200 BC), and only switched to the carving of stone with the introduction of Buddhism in ~200 AD.

After the lecture, the bus took us to the museum. The bus was scheduled to go back to the Peace Hotel at noon, but most of us stayed and continued touring the museum, which was on extended hours. Virginia and I had lunch in the museum coffee shop. We put off visiting the museum store, but we looked through the small kiosks located on each floor and created a mental list of what we would buy when we got back downstairs.

We finished the last section of the museum at 5:45 and wearily rode the escalator down from the fourth floor. We headed to the museum store to purchase our pre-selected goodies and discovered



Virginia & Maryanne Bertram, Garden of Stone Lions



Cellacon Zun (Wine Vessel)
proto-porcelain c. 1200 BC



Bronze Zun (Wine Vessel) c. 500 BC

that, although the museum was on extended hours, the museum store wasn't. It had closed at 5:00. Those of you who didn't get gifts from China now know why.

The Information desk told us how to get to the taxi stand that was next to a park behind the museum. Using perfect Chinese, we told the driver where we wanted to go and he quickly took us back to the hotel. It was a real life version of Mr. Toad's Wild Ride. It is inconceivable (see *The Princess Bride* for a definition) that Shanghai traffic isn't constantly grid locked. The only explanation is that drivers in China do not wait for someone to make room for them, they make room for themselves and expect and allow (without anger) the same from every other driver on the road. Our bus driver once made a U-turn in the middle of a four-lane, two-way street, from the outside lane! Traffic stopped in all directions and let him complete the turn. There seem to be lots of three-lane, two-way streets and they somehow manage to efficiently use the middle lane in both directions. They also have streetlights (in some intersections) that count down the seconds until the light will change.



Peace Hotel directions card

Actually we didn't say anything to the cabby. We just handed him a business card that said in both Chinese and English, "Please take me to the Peace Hotel." That is the accepted technique for foreigners traveling around the big cities in China. You start in the morning at the hotel concierge. You tell them your itinerary and they give you the cards to give to the taxi drivers. When you check in, they give you the card that is used to get you back to the hotel. The taxi driver will bring you back to your hotel even if you do not have any money—they know that the hotel will pay them and just add the charge to your room bill.

We were on our own for dinner, but Virginia and I were too tired to eat. Instead, we went into the bar and had a beer and then went to bed. Before going to sleep, we put our bags out into the hall to be collected at one a.m. and sent by train to Suzhou.

Sunday, May 23, 1999

The third day in China we got up early and rode the Shanghai – Nanjing Coconut Palm Express to Suzhou. To our surprise and pleasure, we discovered that there was no smoking in the station or on the train (or at least not on our end of the car). There are two classes on Chinese trains: soft and hard seat. We rode soft seat. The car had a sign with moving lights that gave the speed of the train (among lots of other incomprehensible symbols). The maximum was 136 km/h. The trip took about an hour and we arrived in Suzhou at 8:45 to thick fog that later turned to rain.

There was much discussion between the local guide, Sam (aka "little Mao"), and our tour leader, Alice Lengers, as to the itinerary for the next two days. Part of the discussion was the best way to handle the inclement weather and part was how many shopping opportunities we would have to endure. As far as shopping opportunities go, the local guide seemed to win. We got the impression from this and other sessions that the local guide wished that he had been born a century earlier when men were obeyed and women had wrapped feet.

We started the first day in Suzhou by visiting the Zhouzheng yuan (the Humble Administrator's garden) in a soft mist. It is part park and part garden, covering 12.8 acres. Even on such a large scale, the garden was crowded with visitors. The garden was originally created in the Ming



Humble Administrator's Garden: man in front is using a cell phone

dynasty, 400 years ago, and took 60 years to build. But revolution, war, and especially the Cultural Revolution of this century have resulted in much modern restoration.

The second stop, in a pouring rain, was the Wang shi (Master of the Fish Nets) garden. This garden, of 6.6 acres, was created during the Song dynasty, 960-1126 AD. It was rebuilt in the 1700s. One of the pavilions, the Hall for Eternal Spring, is reproduced in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This was followed, at the Suzhou Hotel, by one of the best lunches of the trip.

The afternoon was spent at shopping opportunities. They, at least, kept us out of the rain. The first was a silk thread/silk felt comforter factory. Before we got to see the silk cocoons unwrapped and spun into thread, the local guide gave us a lecture on the life of the silkworm. (Actually the lecture was interesting, just the attitude of the guide was off-putting—you will pay attention when I lecture and keep the samples moving.) The silkworms when mature look like albino caterpillars. Mulberry leaves must be picked every day so that the silkworms get fresh food to eat.

At this factory, only women workers create the silk thread. The machines that are used to spin the thread look like they were designed during the English industrial revolution, but given the skill required of the women running the machines there is probably very little that can be done to improve the process. Whenever a cocoon finishes unwinding, the worker immediately attaches the filament from a new cocoon to the machine. The filaments from six cocoons are spun together to make a single thread. The machines are capable of spinning sixteen threads at a time. While we were given the tour, the workers were only spinning three or four threads each (and keeping eighteen to twenty-four cocoons unwinding at all times).

The filaments of cocoons containing more than one silkworm are so jumbled together that they cannot be unwound. They instead are just pulled apart and stretched to make felt. The workers in the factory showed us how they made the felt and then gave us the opportunity to buy a comforter.

After the pretense of taking us to the garden of Secluded Beauty (built in 1841)—its name could be easily changed to Elusive Beauty—we were ushered into the Silk Embroidery Institute next door. The artists (no other word fits) embroider images taken from paintings, photographs, or specially created designs. They only work in natural light and only for three or four hours a day. The back side of the embroidery either has a reverse image or a totally separate image. There are no signs of “working” threads or knots.

After dinner, Jeff gave his second lecture. He discussed the issue of North versus South (the dividing line being the Yangzi (yong-tzuh) river) and the historical importance of Suzhou and Hangzhou. The highlights:

Until recently, it was thought that Chinese culture was derived exclusively from the North, but archaeology has shown that there was interaction and co-mingling all the way back to the Stone Age. The South became more integrated with the dominant Northern culture when the nomads invaded North China in the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD and the elite fled South. The Grand Canal, connecting Beijing to Hangzhou, was finished in the 7th century to carry taxes (rice, tea, silk, and lacquer) to the North, but, of course, commerce and culture flowed both ways. In 1127, when the Tartars (Jurchen) occupied North China, the Song dynasty moved the capital south to Hangzhou. It remained there for 150 years, until 1279 when the Mongols



Spinning Silk Thread, the worker has a hand full of cocoons



Silk Embroidery

reunited the whole country. We were told that if you ask a Southerner if he is glad that foreigners no longer rule China he will reply that they still do.

Suzhou was founded in ~550 BC as the capital of the State of Wu by King Helu. During the Warring States period (401-221 BC), Wu (which controlled the lower Yangzi basin) and the State of Chu (ruling the middle portion of the Yangzi centered at Dongting Lake) fought over who would control the river traffic. Ultimately, Wu was defeated. The Three Kingdoms era (221-280 AD) was again a period conflict for the control of the Yangzi. This time the struggle was between the States of Wu, Shu (centered in Sichuan province, on the upper Yangzi), and Wei (in the Yellow River basin). Again, Wu lost.

Suzhou continued to prosper, or to recover, and by the Song (960-1126) dynasty had a population of about one-half million. Marco Polo claimed that during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) Suzhou was 40 miles in circumference and had 6,000 bridges.

The Grand Canal currently ends in Suzhou. Because of all of the smaller canals that crisscross Suzhou, it has been called the Venice of China. Suzhou was a favorite retirement site during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties for court officials and wealthy merchants. Their villas became the public gardens that are the magnets for tourists today. Most of Suzhou was rebuilt in the late 1800s after being destroyed in the Taiping revolution.

Monday, May 24, 1999

We started the fourth day in China with a boat ride on the Grand Canal. The day was dry, but overcast. We passed a large barge going the opposite direction loaded with large stones (small rocks?) and a cluster of sampans loaded with fruit and vegetables that were docked creating a farmers market. We turned onto one of the smaller canals that was crowded on both sides by one-story houses. Many of the houses had steps that went right down to the water. There we saw workers loading sand/soil from an excavation into a docked sampan, people washing clothing and chamber pots in the canal, an artist, who had attached an easel on top of the back fender of his bicycle, painting a picture of the canal and the bridge we had just traveled under, and lots of friendly people who waved as our boat passed.



Artist painting canal and bridge

The boat ride ended at the entrance to Tiger Hill. The hill contains the tomb of King Helu (d. 496 BC). The grounds are now a Buddhist pleasure park—a place where Buddhists go to celebrate special events. The city was having a flower show at Tiger Hill and there were potted plants everywhere. Jeff said that he saw two of our party looking at the flowers on the local TV news program that evening. Virginia was frustrated for the last two days because, in the city of gardens, no one seemed to know what most of the plants were.



Leaning Pagoda

On the top of the hill is the Leaning Pagoda (959-961 AD). Because the Chinese were not asked to participate when Italy convened the world's experts to stabilize the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Chinese asked all countries except Italy to offer suggestions for stabilizing the pagoda before they began repairs in 1957. While I was admiring the view, a young Chinese lady came and asked me to take a picture with her father. When I asked her to give me her camera, she said, "Oh no. I want to take a picture of you with my father!"

The next stop was the Shi zi lin (Forest of Stone Lions) garden. It was originally created in 1336 by the painter Ni Zan and was restored by the grandfather of I. M. Pei. The lion shapes are to be found hidden in the eroded rocks from the bottom of Lake Taihu. You have to look long and hard and have a giant leap of faith before you can see them. There is one rock that is so large that a maze has been created,

connecting its eroded caverns and grottos. Little kids must enjoy the maze even more than we did. It was one of the highlights of the trip.

After lunch we visited the Marco Polo Bridge (last restored 200 years ago) which he might have seen in the 13th century. It spans the Grand Canal, here acting as part of the moat, to the Pan Men gate in the South West corner of the city wall. The gate dates from 1351, but was last restored in 1978.

Next we visited the Canglang ting (Blue Wave Pavilion), the oldest garden in Suzhou. It was created during the Song dynasty and re-landscaped in the Ming dynasty. It was destroyed in the Taiping Rebellion and then restored again in 1873. In the 500 Sages Hall there are portraits, etched in stone, of the men, going all the way back into mythology, who represented the intellectual lineage of the villa's owner (a classic example of large-scale name dropping.) On the walls of the covered walkways were etchings, carved during the Ming period, of men enjoying themselves in the garden. All of the etchings were in locations too dark for photography. The most photogenic thing there was a bonzai-ed orange Bougainvillea—a wonderful idea.

The last stop before dinner was at a Confucius Temple. We couldn't go into the temple, because it was being rebuilt, but the museum next door was still open. The museum holds a collection of stone tablets taken from the villas and other buildings that have been destroyed over the years. Their most prized possession is a map of Suzhou (then called Pingjing) etched in stone in 1229—the oldest city map in China. The next is a star map carved in 1247. The collection also contains two maps of China that are almost as old.

We returned to the garden of the Master of the Fish Nets in the evening for a sampling of Chinese entertainment. As we moved from pavilion to pavilion, we were treated to a comic play, music on classical instruments, and a short selection from Beijing Opera (clearly an acquired taste). Most of the performers were young and all were very talented. After the bait and switch of our first day in Suzhou, I had expected amateur night and was instead very impressed.



Stone Lions Garden



Marco Polo Bridge