

Shanghai Journal 5-13-15 (Suzhou with Ravi)

Zaoshang Hao,

Ravi and I went to Suzhou last Thursday and Friday, returning on an early Saturday train. If you remember, when we went in the winter our quaint hotel from the Ming era was very cold and drafty. This time we stayed in a hotel called the Scholars Hotel and it was very lovely and quite comfortable. Most of the other guests were Chinese and the hotel staff spoke very little English, but we got by because Ravi is getting so good at understanding and speaking Mandarin! He really has a knack for languages. We ended up eating dinner in the hotel restaurant both nights because once we figured out what was vegetarian it was easy. The food was very good too. We also found some street food we really liked – spicy grilled tofu and potatoes - yummy and filling for 10 quai – about \$2.50.



We took the train Thursday morning and after checking in spent the rest of the day walking from one garden to another. The first day we saw three gardens – starting with the Humble Administrator’s Garden, then walking to nearby Lion’s Grove Garden, and finishing with the Couple’s Retreat Garden - each unique in its own way. Though it drizzled off and on, it was really pleasant and, more importantly, not too crowded.

We had been to the Humble Administrator’s Garden in the winter so it was great to see it again in bloom. It is the largest garden in Suzhou, created during the Song Dynasty (1131-1162). The author of one of the four great classical novels of China, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, known by everyone and reenacted in movies and operas, is supposed to have lived at the garden during his teen years. The book tells the story of the rise and fall of the Qing Dynasty and many of the descriptions are thought to be of this garden. I really need to read the book since it is referenced everywhere.



Next we went to the Lion's Grove Garden famous for grottos and rocks thought to resemble lions. A Zen Buddhist monk created the garden in memory of his teacher during the Yuan Dynasty (1342). Though every garden we saw has rock formations, this was really different and eerie in a fascinating way.



The Couples' Garden Retreat was down a narrow alley next to a canal. Hardly anyone was there and we thought it would be a small, simple place. But it kept unfolding around every corner and turned out to be enchanting and anything but simple. It was built later than other gardens, in the 1800s by a Suzhou administrator.



Friday turned out to be a gorgeous, sunny day so we decided to go to Tiger Hill. It is a huge park, with a pagoda in the center that is known as the second leaning tower after Pisa. Construction of the pagoda began in 907 CE and was completed in 961 CE. So we wondered if Marco Polo brought this back to Italy as a model for Pisa (begun in 1173). The temple on the way up is quite stunning and has a wall of paintings depicting the life of Buddha.



Another section of the park had a huge garden filled with bonsai trees of every variety and another garden had what could be called bonsai mountains. Extraordinary!



We spent a good part of the day at Tiger Hill, completely astounded by its size, variety and beauty. A great way to spend a sunny day! Below, Ravi and a Chinese tourist (Chinese people often want to take their photos with us). Below also is my favorite photo of me from this trip.



On Friday night we took a boat ride around the city – kind of like the Circle Line in NY. It was interesting to see homes from the river and the different areas of Suzhou. I don't have any good photos but one I wish I had was of a mansion, complete with columns, built on the top of a skyscraper. Incredible! We also saw a group doing yoga on the waterfront and lots of people out walking, enjoying the gorgeous evening. If I lived in China, I would want to live in Suzhou.

We took the train back Saturday morning. Since then, Ravi has been busy with final classes and exams and I've started to pack. We just found out we will have the same apartment next semester so we can leave a lot of stuff and that makes it a whole lot easier. Ravi is teaching fall instead of spring semester next year. I will come with him at the end of August and return to New York at end of October (He'll go to India at end of semester and be back in NY at beginning of January). We are planning a trip to Tibet at the beginning of October during the NYU-Shanghai fall break. I really have to start studying Mandarin in earnest so beginning in the fall I will join Ravi's meetings with his tutor.

This is my final journal of the semester. We leave for New York in three days. We hope to be home in New Paltz by Tuesday. We have a direct flight to Toronto from Shanghai, and if all goes well, we will make our connecting flight to NY arriving at 10 p.m. and spend Monday night with Dipti and Dennis in the city, then take the bus to New Paltz Tuesday morning. Last time, I got stuck overnight in Toronto because the plane was late leaving Shanghai and missed the connection. Hopefully that won't happen this time.

A few additional photos: a sign at the exit from Tiger Hill and another urging care for the environment that show the challenges of dictionary translations; waste bins made to look like Ming vases (next to sign about environment), walking home through our beautiful little neighborhood park.



Zaijian, See you in New Paltz! You are all invited to our annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July party there!

Lee

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