

Scenes from Another Garden City

By Dr Martin Chio, Editorial Board Member



Suzhou Museum



Ancient jade ornament on display in the Suzhou Museum

The high speed train from Shanghai Hongqiao Railway Station took barely 20 minutes to reach Suzhou. For all the recent bad press about the railways, this was actually one of the more comfortable train rides I have had. Suzhou's close proximity to Shanghai was one of the reasons we decided it was ideal for a day trip.

One thing that we learnt was that the maps are deceptive and it is *not* possible to walk from the train station to the Suzhou Museum... Hopping into a taxi, I prayed that my ACS Mandarin would not confuse the taxi driver into taking us to a house of ill repute instead of the Suzhou Museum. Thankfully I was also able to point to the map to avoid any confusion. ☺



Decorated roof in the Humble Administrator's Garden



One of the many houses in the Humble Administrator's Garden

Suzhou Museum was founded in 1960, and was originally housed in the historic Prince Zhong's Residence. A new museum was designed by IM Pei and opened in 2006. The museum is situated along the pedestrian-only Dong Bei Street and entrance is free. We took our time wandering through the 2,000 sq m of exhibition space and viewed various ceramics, metalware, relics, paintings and calligraphy. Adjoining the museum is Prince Zhong's Residence and the highlight for me was a classical Chinese opera theatre replete with costumes on display. More details can be found on their bilingual website, <http://www.szmuseum.com>. Do note there is no proper museum restaurant, so we had to get by with a "functional" lunch of meat buns of unknown origin from a roadside stall...

No visit to Suzhou would be complete without a visit to at least one of the classical gardens (苏州园林), which are on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites. Conveniently situated next door to the museum is the Humble Administrator's Garden (拙政园). It is far from humble as it is a sprawling 50,000 sq m and by far the largest in Suzhou. Some consider it the most picturesque in southern China. The garden served as residence to a Tang Dynasty scholar, then became a monastery garden, and thereafter went through a succession of owners, including an imperial envoy, a vice minister, a province governor and a histographer. In 1949, the divided garden was reunified, and in 1952, it was restored

into its current manifestation. Qing Dynasty writer Cao Xueqin lived in the garden as a teenager and it is believed the scenery served as inspiration for the garden in his novel *Dream of the Red Chamber*. The garden has numerous houses, pavilions and bridges, with a large lake located in the centre. It is a popular destination for both local and foreign tourists, school groups and artists. A highlight for me was the duck pond with its resident brace of Mandarin ducks.

We decided to move southwards and picked a contrasting compact garden, as we were a tad worn from jostling with crowds. The Master of the Nets Garden (网师园) in the Canglang district was next on the itinerary. It is apparently regarded among garden connoisseurs for its mastery of the techniques of relative dimension, contrast, foil, sequence and depth, and borrowed scenery. It was first constructed in 1140 and passed through various hands. Its name is an allusion to the simple life of a fisherman. The 5,000 sq m garden is divided into east and west sections, comprising of residential quarters, gardens, halls, courtyards and the requisite pond. Small buildings are set on rocks or piers directly over the surface of the water, while large buildings are separated from the pool by yards planted with trees to obscure their size. It was much quieter than the previous garden, and we were therefore able to enjoy the tranquillity of the environment and soak up the ambience.



The large lake in the centre of the Humble Administrator's Garden



A fat mandarin duck residing in the Humble Administrator's Garden duck pond



Master of the Nets Garden

We decided to end our day with a visit to the Pan Gate (盘门) situated on the southwestern corner of Suzhou's Main Canal. It is estimated to be 2,500 years old and a remnant of the ancient city wall, built in 514 BC, that surrounded and protected the city. The present gate was built in the 14th century.

Within the same complex is the Ruiguang Pagoda (瑞光塔), the earliest pagoda in Suzhou, which was built in 247 BC. Ruiguang Pagoda, which originally consisted of 13 storeys and currently has seven storeys, is constructed of brick with wooden platforms and has simple Buddhist carvings at its base. Its name is derived from a legend: during the Jin Dynasty, when it was undergoing major repairs, brilliant rays of five colours were seen above the pagoda,



Voracious fish in the lake at Ruiguang Pagoda



Ruiguang Pagoda in the sunset



Prawns with ginkgo and celery



Crispy eel



Shizitou meatballs

and the then emperor proclaimed that a bronze board with the inscription *Rui Guang Ta* (Pagoda of Auspicious Light) be hung on the pagoda. (Cultural relics which were found in the pagoda are now on display at the Suzhou Museum.) We managed to feed the voracious fish in the lake there and watch the sunset over the complex.

We ended the trip with dinner at the nearby Hai Tien Lo within the Pan Pacific Hotel (the easiest and safest way to get a taxi back to the train station). We sampled Suzhou specialities like drunken chicken, prawns with ginkgo and celery, crispy eel and shizitou (狮子头) meatballs, paired with Biluochun (碧螺春) tea. A delicious end to our day trip! **SMA**



Martin finds travel and food photography (taken with a simple Canon S95) a pleasurable distraction.