



NOTES ON A DREAM TRIP TO SONGYANG

8-10 November 2018

- An Essay with 45 photo-notes -

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1. The Songyang landscape as seen from the shuttle bus window ©Zhen Zhang

秋·稻菽宁

远山秋云，平野苍黄，晓来霜露寒洼淞，
拂拂映，田畴农人忙。

Autumn • Peaceful land of rice and bean

*Autumn clouds over faraway hills,
flat plain field with pale yellow hues,
lowland mist immersed in icy frost and morning dew;
once hidden next shimmering, peasants busy in the fields.*

(The poem in Chinese describes a traditional rural autumn scene. It is taken from a souvenir package we received from Songyang, as the motif for a silk scarf. Translated into English by the author.)



2. *Shicang as seen from the rooftop of Shicang Indenture Museum ©Zhen Zhang*

Songyang – a county in southern China’s Zhejiang Province – played host to an international conference entitled “Regions on the rise: culture and architecture as drivers of rural development” on 8-10 November 2018. With 56 international guests and 143 guests from China – many of whom are renowned experts in their fields – the event was a milestone to remember. In the short span of three days, I was immersed in impressions that were abundant, varied – yet so ephemeral that it seemed impossible to capture or ponder them. I felt like a flaneur wandering (and taking shuttle buses...) through a dream landscape, among crowds of curious faces and camera gazes in villages where time seemed frozen. I experienced fleeting impressions and countless delicacies from an otherworldly idyll.

IMPRESSIONS



3. Omnipresent Mount of Solitude, the symbol of ancient Songyang, as seen from the shuttle bus window ©Zhen Zhang

The guests arrived by train at Lishui Railway Station or by plane at Hangzhou Xiaoshan International Airport and after a ride of up to 1.5/3.5 hours in a shuttle bus, they were warmly welcomed by volunteers from Songyang. Local English teachers and volunteers from various local institutions helped organize the symposium and excursions. Well organized and omnipresent throughout the symposium, these enthusiastic young people were always ready to lead the way, provide information, and make sure the whole group of guests got from one place to the next on time.



4. Entrance to old residential houses in Shicang ©Zhen Zhang

The traditional courtyard houses in Shicang from the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing dynasties (1636-1912) used to be Hakka residences. They have been preserved and are well maintained for receiving visitors. Some are museums that showcase traditional agricultural tools and devices such as water wheels or mills, as well as local craftsmanship or festive rituals like the dragon dance. Some were renovated and now offer homestays for tourists.

The highlight of the excursion was of course the architecture from this year's star architect, XU Tiantian, who heads the DnA architecture office in Beijing. Her work in Songyang was exhibited from March to June 2018 at Aedes Architecture Forum Berlin and shown at this year's Biennale in Venice. The exhibition will travel further to Austria's Architecture Museum in Vienna in 2019. The buildings were not the totality of the excursion – the program, exhibits, and performances taking place in and around the buildings seemed to overshadow the envelopes themselves.



5. Diagrams and drawings of land parcels as part of land transition contracts exhibited in Shicang Indenture Museum ©Zhen Zhang



6. Top light as spatial approach as with the example of Shicang Indenture Museum ©Zhen Zhang

We visited where contracts of land transitions with diagrams and drawings of land parcels are exhibited. Shining light and illuminated water drips from above into the darker space of the museum, flowing into the water canals carved in the ground.



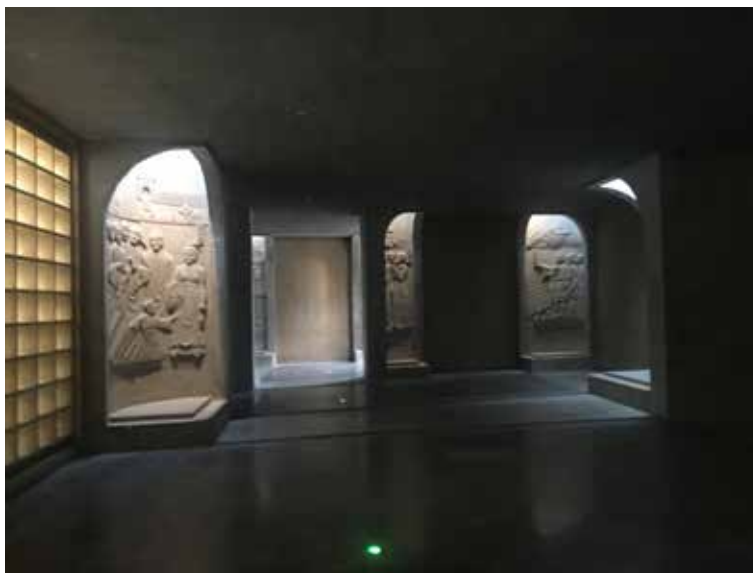
7. Cooking brown sugar performance at the Brown Sugar Factory ©Zhen Zhang

At the Brown Sugar Factory inside the glass cube, workers in orange-coloured costumes plunged their spades deep into the sugar water and then waved them high up into the steamy air and back down – the whole scene was atmospheric and theatrical.



8. *Demonstration of tofu production at the Tofu Factory ©Zhen Zhang*

Production performances were also a feature of the Tofu Factory. By strolling from one room into the next, we saw how tofu is made step by step presented in real-life performances.



9. Stone relief telling the life story of Yongle Encyclopedia's author Wangjing at Wangjing Memorial Hall ©Zhen Zhang

Wangjing Memorial Hall commemorates a local celebrity, Wang Jing, the writer of Yongle Encyclopedia. It features a memorial telling the story of the personality in a carved stone relief.



10. An old woman demonstrating handicraft techniques; one of several souvenir stands on Shiwenyu Bridge ©Zhen Zhang

On Shiwenyu Bridge, we passed by several stands where various handicraft souvenirs such as straw rain capes, handmade notebooks, woven baskets, silk scarves, and ink paintings were exhibited and sold.



11. Performances by school children in front of Shicang Indenture Museum ©Zhen Zhang



12. School children singing among tea plantation rows in front of the Brown Sugar Factory ©Zhen Zhang

Of course, the performance by school children in front of the Indenture Museum is also worth mentioning. They sung and performed freshly rehearsed traditional dances, and when those lovely smiling faces and crisp little voices suddenly burst out from among the green rows of the tea plantation around the Brown Sugar Factory, the vivid impression became fixed in our memories.



13. Tea plantation and rapeseed field seen from the shuttle bus windows ©Zhen Zhang

Between shuttle-bus stops, both our ears and our minds were treated to local anecdotes told by the volunteer tour guides dressed in traditional-style uniforms. Our eyes wandered from one hill to the next and from one tea plantation to the next rapeseed field. At every station along the way, we were generously welcomed with snacks, cakes, and many local specialties. Our impressions and gratitude were extended further and further...

THE RUSTIC STYLE OF ARCHITECTURE



14. Continuous space, isolated microcosms, and top light as a spatial approach – as seen in the example of Wangjing Memorial Hall ©Zhen Zhang

With the idea of “architectural acupuncture”, which has its roots in traditional Chinese medicine, the architect XU Tiantian hoped to revive the region through designing and realizing various architectural objects. She combined a wide range of typologies – from pavilion and bridge to factory and museum – with a wide spectrum of materials – from bamboo and stone to metal and concrete.

The building system used in the Indenture Museum and Wangjing Memorial Hall echoes a Zumthorian approach: isolated microcosms connected by a continuous flow of space. The generally dark interior is exposed to natural or artificial light from above to result in dramatic, theatrical top light pouring into a dark space.



15. Concrete roof and rammed earth wall as a materiality approach seen in Wangjing Memorial Hall ©Zhen Zhang

The buildings are often covered by an exposed concrete roof like a hat atop the bearing structure, facilitating a larger open interior space while the dividing walls display a strong material texture: dry stone, concrete, or rammed earth mixed with straw, for example. On the other hand, the Therme Vals Bath by Zumthor was a building with high construction costs. It featured Swiss precision stonework, construction details to perfection, and the complex requirements of technical devices for a bath complex. The buildings created by XU Tiantian are less obsessed with details and precision; they seem a bit raw, relaxed, careless...and at places unfinished. They are more fittingly described as rustic – in fact, they are low budget.



16. *The Bamboo Pavilion in the middle of a tea plantation in Damushan is reminiscent of a folly in a natural landscape garden ©Zhen Zhang*

Replace the English meadow in a William Kent garden with a realistic suburban landscape and tea fields. In terms of typology, it can be compared to follies in large English or French estates, which are purpose-built for leisure and have vague functions, although they are sometimes assigned one. Of course, the scale is a lot bigger and instead of strolling from one place to the next, we took shuttle buses offering mountain views from their windows.



17. *Shimenyu Bridge and the surrounding suburban landscape with peasants' houses* ©Zhen Zhang

These low-budget, humble buildings are not unambitious – on the contrary, they are photogénie. Although some of the buildings are very much embedded in what could be called a landscape of suburban realism, as in the case of Brown Sugar Factory or the Shimenyu Bridge, there are always some angles from which a building shows its lone self in the middle of an idyllic, natural countryside, ready for a press picture. In German, they say “die Schokoladenseite” – the chocolate (one’s best) side – and after all is this not one of the main endeavours of architects and their photographer peers?

The “chocolate side” is exactly what undergoes transformation through the ages. Its preferred flavour changes: at times it is icy like a giant glassy tower in the middle of other glassy towers; at times heavy and hearty like Swiss cheese or German dark bread; and at other times light and refreshing like a bamboo sprout bursting out of the earth... But an earthy taste is nice, isn’t it? It’s original; is it original? After recent decades of urban development with its concrete and glass forests of high-rises and China’s radical pragmatic internationalism and functionalism, the Songyang projects claim a paradigm change in the taste of chocolate. As XU Tiantian said, she wants rural residents to have confidence in their own culture and lifestyle instead of feeling that they must follow the urban images of Beijing, Shanghai, or Hangzhou.

ICONS, LOGOS, LANDMARKS: “GLOBAL VILLAGES” FOR TOURISM



18. Postcards for sale at the tourist centre close to the Tea House, featuring photos of XU Tiantian's architecture ©Zhen Zhang

Our generation grew up hearing the story of how Shanghai developed from a fishing village into a world metropolis. Its landmark is the Pudong skyline, which is a must-see destination for tourists. Twenty years ago, the skyline of Shanghai Pudong was pasted on postcards and souvenirs, turning it into the desired icon and setting the path for the entire country's urban development for an epoch. Today, the new icon is in Songyang. The architect's images were created and branded; branding transformed the image into an icon, carving its contours deeper and giving it a collective societal status – a paradigm change.

We know the story of Shanghai and Beijing's development, and we know that creating landmarks and branding these iconic images as a new trend in development sets off a chain of effects. Ever more people are attracted by the image; tourism and migration – and of course investments follow. This is the phenomenon of “global cities” in Saskia Sassen's sense. By hosting the Olympic Games, world exhibitions, art festivals, and similar international expositions, cities further strengthen their iconic images. With the help of worldwide publicity, the status of global cities is reinforced.

Reviving the earthy taste through building aesthetics defined by architects' standards, reinforcing the aesthetics in architectural images, and publicizing the images through media, exhibitions, conferences, and tourists' shared selfies is the process by which a new icon is created and enhanced. In fact, the Shiwenyu Bridge is known as “Wang Hong Bridge”, meaning that it is popular with Netizens who take selfies with the bridge, and so many tourists came from all over China to see the architecture during the last October holiday that the terrace of the Tea House was completely full.



19. Tea break area of the conference in Songyang opposite the main venue in a traditional courtyard house ©Zhen Zhang

Looking at the architecture designed by XU Tiantian in Songyang, I saw new landmarks arising. Their images are captured again and again to ultimately create a collective icon that is further strengthened by international publicity, giving rise to the concept of “global villages”. In fact, Chinese rural areas are increasingly using the term “being put online”, meaning that previously isolated areas are now literally on the map – in our case, the map of global architecture tourism. Of course, using architecture as a means of branding and boosting the development of disadvantaged areas or topics through publicity is not without precedents. The IBA (International Building Exhibition) in Germany, which not only documented but also fostered the development of early Modernism and later, Bauhaus settlements, set an example. Songyang is obviously enjoying great national and international publicity: the number of tourists is rising, and ever more interested investors are eyeing villages in Songyang.

LIFE IN SONGYANG



20. Local residents close to Wangjing Memorial Hall ©Zhen Zhang



21. Local residents encountering visitors with smiles and curiosity ©Zhen Zhang

During the trip, we were certainly outsiders wandering through villages with amazement and curiosity. We frequently encountered local residents who seemed to have felt similar sensations. We received gazes, stares, and smiles; the postures were mostly still, the gestures relaxed. People carefully approached the crowd of visitors from the city and were especially curious about the Westerners, who are a rare sight in their daily lives. The two groups took photos of each other. And then took more photos of each other. I hope that we were gentle enough and our sudden visit did not disrupt their quiet, undisturbed lives too much.



22. *The outsiders and the locals gazed, stared, and took photos of each other*
©Zhen Zhang



23. *The outsiders and the locals gazed, stared, and took photos of each other*
©Zhen Zhang

Songyang is the poorest county in Zhejiang Province; but Zhejiang Province has traditionally been one of the richest and most developed areas in China. Hangzhou and Suzhou are the most well-known cities in Zhejiang. All Chinese are familiar with the saying: “Heaven is up there, but down here we have the Su-and-Hang cities”. This shows how beautiful, rich, and prosperous the cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou must have been. As early as in the 13th century, Hangzhou’s population was already one million. Geographically, it is located between the Yangtze area and the south-eastern coast and is close to the southern end of the Grand Canal, the main waterway that connected the south and north for centuries in ancient China. Hangzhou was the southern trade hub, making it possible to transport goods from the rich south to central Beijing. It was the marketplace for foreign products and locally produced silk, tea, flowers, bamboo, fish, jewellery, toys, ceramics, salt, and more, and the epicentre of private economy and entertainment venues like teahouses and theatres.



24. *Songyang's mountain, water, land* ©Zhen Zhang

Songyang County is 300 km south of Hangzhou on the hilly south-western side of the same province. Like the region around Hangzhou, it is blessed with a moderate climate and a topography featuring a central plain surrounded by hills, through which the local Songyin River flows.



25. *Songyang's tea plantation* ©Zhen Zhang

Agricultural activities such as tea cultivation were traditionally rooted in the hinterlands of the Hangzhou region. “Eight hills, one water, and one field”: this local saying indicates that its hilly topography disconnected Songyang from the rapid economic growth China has experienced in the past forty years. In conjunction with the limited amount of arable land, some of the villages there seem frozen in time.



26. *An everyday scene in an old Shicang residence: a middle-aged woman sitting alone amidst everyday devices ©Zhen Zhang*

A poem by SHEN Hui in the Song Dynasty (960-1279) was quoted by Mr HUANG Yung Sung: 西归道路塞，南去交流疏，唯此桃花源，四塞无他虞。 The poem describes Songyang's special location: Westward there are difficult roads and paths, and there is little communication with the south.



27. *Local people gathering mussels in the river beside the Shimenyu Bridge ©Zhen Zhang*



28. *Small vegetable patches along the street ©Zhen Zhang*

Indeed, here and there we see the authentic rural way of life. The local peasants seem to lead simple, carefree lives.

People were leisurely gathering mussels beside the Shimenyu Bridge; we found tiny vegetable gardens next to the street.



29. An open-air vegetable market along the street close to the Shimenyu Bridge ©Zhen Zhang

The agricultural production of the area is almost exclusively confined to tea and vegetable oil, as one can see from the landscape. Small open-air vegetable markets and shops exist on the street close to the Shimenyu Bridge.

FLASHES OF THE FUTURE



30. Shicang's old houses seen from a traditional gate ©Zhen Zhang



31. Entrance to one of Shicang's old houses ©Zhen Zhang

In Songyang „the last hidden land in Jiangnan“, altogether there are over one hundred well preserved and relatively untouched residential villages such as Shicang. They are like time capsules. Traditionally, the villages were dominated by local squires and simple peasant life is present in the area today. Traditionally the Hakka, an ethnic group of the Han, resided in Shicang village and from what we heard, were connected through kinship. There are still Hakka there today, but kinship certainly no longer plays a major role: we saw unused and run-down ancestor halls. Due to their disconnectedness, the villages seemed to have been forgotten by the urbanization drive of recent decades. But now the wheel of fortune has turned.

We also saw that the areas between villages, or adjacent to or in the villages and the town had taken on a suburban look.



32. Suburban landscape of Songyang between or in the villages ©Zhen Zhang

The region's time capsules are insular, existing amidst a suburban kind of life that already has urban qualities. The peasants' houses next to the Shimenyu Bridge are one example. With its urban facilities and high-rise buildings, Xiping Town, the centre of Songyang County, already resembles a small city. Some areas still have well-preserved traditional buildings such as the conference venue, Tanglan Guild Hall. The building used to be a temple for Guanyu, a historic figure and a general in the period of the Three Kingdoms (220-280). He stood for loyalty and integrity, and the local businessmen worshipped him as a god. The plaza at the entrance to the hall used to be a market but it was greened: small plants were newly planted there.



33. People sitting on the balustrades at a building that looks like a temple ©Zhen Zhang



34. Mr Kim's ancestral hall was newly renovated after being unused for years ©Zhen Zhang

Temples are no longer used as temples. Mr Kim's ancestral hall was recently renovated after long years of disuse.



35. Traditional houses close to the conference venue, run-down and propped up ©Zhen Zhang

The neighbourhoods and lives that still have traditional rural characteristics are struggling.



36. An authentic small shop for tools sells scissors for the equivalent of 1 euro ©Zhen Zhang



37. An authentic cobbler's shop ©Zhen Zhang



38. An authentic shop for herbs and spices ©Zhen Zhang

Old buildings have become a rarity that are now attracting the attention of investors from the city. The trend is already visible on the old Ming/Qing street. Little shops for everyday needs still exist: a local peasant was selling scissors for eight Yuan, for example. But only a few meters away, a courtyard house renovated by a planner from Shanghai had become a beautiful experience centre for traditional Chinese medicine and an exhibition space for old chairs and objects plucked from their rural context.



39. Beautiful experience centre for traditional Chinese medicine ©Zhen Zhang



40. Beautiful exhibition space for old chairs presented far away from their rural context ©Zhen Zhang

Within a few years, the whole street might have been upgraded and one cannot help but have mixed feelings about that. Yes, the old houses will be renovated and put into better, safer condition thanks to the rich city dwellers' investment. And the traditional processes involving tea, medicine, and weaving will be modernised and increasingly differentiated. However, the authentic rural character of the scissors shop, the cobbler's workshop, and the antique shop whose owner was able to tell the whole story of a little, old device made of clay will someday be history.

While we absolutely admired the traditional villages in Songyang and had nothing but praise for XU Tiantian's architecture and design, concerns arose, and questions were asked.

On the other side of the world in Switzerland, we have the architect Peter Zumthor, the proud creator of Therme Vals, a work that had enjoyed great international fame since its inauguration in 1996. Zumthor was very disappointed when the local community decided to hand over ownership of Therme Vals to a private investor in 2012. This not only undermined the public social value of the project but was also a case of selling off a local resource for profit. The news that a high-rise hotel offering state-of-the-art comfort was being planned in the Alpine countryside of Graubünden came out in 2014. The Vals area had become more popular among tourists as the result of the constant flow of architectural pilgrims.

European cities are increasingly facing the challenges of tourism, especially those resulting from homestay services such as airbnb. They lead to high hotel vacancy rates and high apartment rents at the same time: ever more apartments in city centres are being handed over to tourists, who are ready to spend the money, while local residents can no longer afford to live in their neighbourhoods. In the long run, there will be a problem: tourism cannot sustain a vibrant city culture. Simply put, who is going to water the flowers on the balconies when nobody lives there anymore? Apropos balconies, the European Balcony Project took place on 10 November 2018 on the other side of the world. Theatres and artists all over Europe had been invited to discuss the European values of rights and democracy on the citizen level.



41. Local delicacies presented at the Brown Sugar Factory ©Zhen Zhang



42. Tofu tasting at the Tofu Factory ©Zhen Zhang

Of course we enjoyed the icing on the cake!

Dear Songyang, will you be able to bear your fame well or will you succumb to the charms of the Bilbao effect? Will you resist the lure of profit or start following the urban model with limitless land transition and speculation? The tradition of high-speed development in China will undoubtedly soon be applied to the rural regions as well. Are your legal and institutional framework and pool of human resource ready and willing to prevent development from becoming an uncontrollable process? Did local communities find empowerment in the Songyang story? Will they be able to find a place in their hometowns without becoming new, remote landlords who move away and turn over their homes to tourists? Will the income from tourism be invested in infrastructure and improving ecological systems? Will Songyang become an open-air museum?

I cannot help recalling a poem written by Tao Yuanming in 421 called Peach Blossom Spring Story (桃花源记). In it, he described how by chance a fisherman, the protagonist, discovered an otherworldly place where people led a simple and unsophisticated life. They “did not know there is a Han Dynasty, let alone a Wei or Jin Dynasty”. The fisherman was told not to tell any outsiders about the place, but he did anyway. The place could never be found again.

This is nothing new: paradise cannot be seen and as soon as savages are seen, they disappear.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the whole world was going through a time of interconnection, transition, and loss of tradition. European ethnographers and artists moved to the Indonesian island of Bali, which was an exotic, faraway destination for these city dwellers during the colonization period. They were amazed by traditional Balinese rituals and dances and tried to record them in textual, graphical, and photographic accounts. With their subjectivity, naiveté, romanticization, and imperatives, they gave an uncritical account of the truth as they perceived and (mis)understood it. The interaction between foreign and local artists created new forms and choreographies of expression that were rooted in Balinese tradition, but as seen and interpreted through foreign eyes. Years later, the locals understood this artistic co-creation to be what was foreigners and tourists desired to see and they integrated it into their presentation of local culture.

Since then Balinese dances, which (arguably) never really existed in the mythical and festive manner described by the Europeans, have become the tradition of Bali that today’s tourists know. What was subjectively seen through the eyes of an alien European artists’ colony defined what eventually became “real”. Nothing has changed: the lives of the unsophisticated are still subordinated to the elites’ perspective.



43. *Conference attendees entering the Brown Sugar Factory* ©Zhen Zhang

It is possible to see the future more relaxed and positively – for the sake of the arts. Certainly those romanticized accounts were far from the truth, but without them there would only have been less informative textual sources and no detailed accounts from that time at all. Light would never have been shown on the past; it would remain unknown. No testament. No Balinese dance.

The Romans wrote the Greeks' myths and the Renaissance the Romans'; the English discovered the Scottish cottages and the Imperial British adored silk and tea. Once there were Lijiang, Dali, and Moganshan and today there is Songyang. And during the fifth season, a remembrance of its savage period, Germany's Cologne knows that the prince, the peasant, and the maid make their peace. The prototypical duo Tünnes and Schäl (the peasant and the petit bourgeois) and their narratives belong to the city as much as the cardinal and Kölsch beer do.



44. The landscape of Songyang seen from the window of the Tea House ©Zhen Zhang

There have always been romance and myth – a desired romance and an imagined myth – and enlightened viewers dare to admit this. Our traces, steps, memories and photos from Songyang are like this. They note what it once, perhaps, was.



45. A faraway view of the omnipresent Mount of Solitude, a symbol of ancient Songyang, as seen from a rooftop terrace on the Ming/Qing old street ©Zhen Zhang

[THE END]

With my thanks to Aedes as the organizer of the event, to Songyang as a generous host, to Citymakers for supporting the trip, and to Kathryn Abbott for the copy-editing.

*All Images ©Zhen Zhang
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As a guest author and a guest editor, ZHANG Zhen contributes on a regular basis to the dialogue program CITYMAKERS, which aims to connect, grow and enable a community of CITYMAKERS between Germany and China.

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