

7 – SUZHOU

Our train pulled into the small station of Suzhou at six o'clock on the dot. There was a rural atmosphere about the station, which was full of local people. Here we were met by a new set of guides: two men and a lady.

We were led to our coach, which was parked in a square in front of the station. The driver was a well-built middle-aged man who wore cotton gloves; he was very pleasant and smiled all the time. Before we set off, crowds of people ran over to take a look at us. Here the people seemed to be more friendly and relaxed, and the pace of life seemed to be slower.



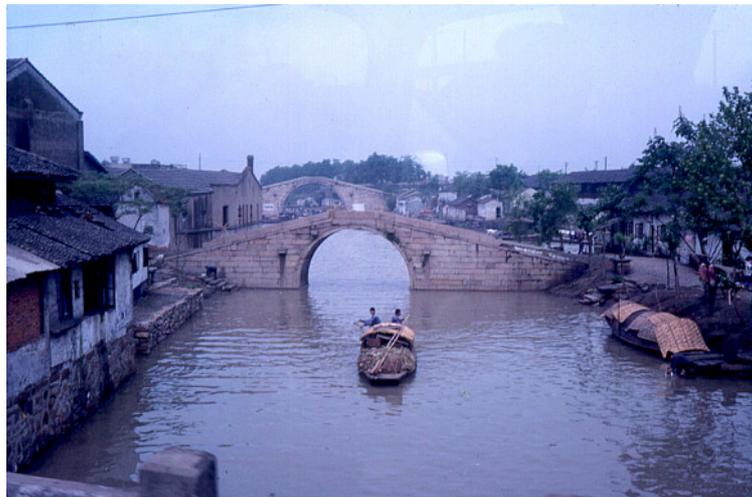
Street, Suzhou (PF)

Off we drove towards our hotel, the driver blowing the horn at every opportunity. I was surprised to discover that Suzhou lacked the grandeur that I had fondly imagined; my impression was that it was a rather poor and primitive country town. We travelled along bumpy, winding streets, many of them lined with trees that met in the middle overhead and blocked out the light. Tucked behind the trees were small whitewashed shacks. Now and then we crossed old stone bridges spanning canals or rivers. At one point we drove past a large pagoda. We saw plenty of people who were walking, cycling, pulling large and heavy carts, or sitting outside eating, with the doors of their little houses left wide open.

I was quite astonished when we turned off a particularly narrow street and drove into the grounds of a newly-built hotel – so new, in fact, that it was not

quite completed. This was the Nanlin Hotel, where we would stay. It was quite luxurious, very clean and spacious inside. Our room on the second floor was painted pale green and had large damp spots on two of the walls. The bathroom was of better standard than the previous two hotels, and was painted white.

Dinner was served at 6.30 in the dining room, which was in a separate building. The young waiters and waitresses were quite charming and the service was good. The meal was excellent and very tasty. As I had eaten little at lunchtime, I tucked in. For the first time, Patricia and Catherine opened up, and the lads and I had good chat and laugh with them.



Bridges, Suzhou

After the meal, I strolled around the pleasant gardens in front of the dining room and then decided to go out for a walk. I bumped into Frank Cahill and together we set off. Passing a couple of security men in a small hut beside the main gate, we turned to the left and walked up the narrow street that we had driven down earlier in the bus. Even though it was dark by now, there were still quite a number of cyclists on the road who constantly rang their bells to warn others of their presence, since none of the bikes had lights. As the street was only faintly lit, we had to be careful, for it was easy to bump into somebody on the narrow footpath or be knocked by a bicycle on the road. The only sounds to be heard were footsteps, bicycle bells and voices.

Walking together, we were able to peep into many an open door of a poor, roughly-built house. The front door usually led into a dimly-lit main room. Inside we could discern wooden walls, small pieces of basic furniture, thick beams supporting ceilings, rickety wooden staircases, and bicycles. Most people's walls were decorated with printed portraits of Mao and Hua, affixed with drawing pins. The people indoors were either eating, reading

newspapers, playing cards, or chatting. We saw wizened old men with long white beards, old women dressed in black, young parents in the standard and featureless blue cotton suits, and good-looking children of all ages. Although these shacks looked as though they might tumble down at any minute, and most of them could have done with a few coats of paint, they looked clean inside and outside. The plumbing must have been rather primitive, for we frequently saw people throwing bowls of dirty water out the door and on to the street.

Despite the obvious poverty around us, there was a magical feel about the place; here and there lights glimmered through the trees that lined the street. The pavements were in poor shape here and there; some of the stone slabs were loose. We passed several high stone bridges, of the typically old-world Chinese design, which passed over narrow canals and streams behind some of the houses. We even saw a woman washing clothes in one of the canals at this hour of the evening – about 7.30 p.m.



Rivers and boats, Suzhou

A little farther on we crossed a moderately-sized stone bridge that spanned a slow-moving river. In the water, which gurgled in the stillness of the night, floated large flat boats, which looked like sampans; they were propelled silently and skilfully using one large oar at the back. All the boats were loaded with goods that we could not identify and, when two of them met, the owners passed a few rapid words to each other in the local dialect. There was a constant flow of these wooden boats slowly moving up and down the river. Along the banks were countless little shacks that passed as living quarters. The atmosphere was pleasantly relaxed; we felt that we were a million miles away from modern civilization. Frank and I leaned over the edge of the bridge for a while, taking in this peaceful and fascinating scene.

We then continued our walk, wandering through some narrow side streets and alleyways near the river. After a while we retraced our steps towards our hotel. Peeping into people's open front doors, we greeted the smiling inhabitants with '*ní hǎo*'. As we neared the entrance to our hotel, I espied two beautiful young Chinese girls who were walking in the street. I would have relished the opportunity of speaking to them as they looked so charming, but as I had no knowledge of the local dialect and as Frank seemed to be in a hurry, I just smiled at them. They had a good look at us *yáng guǐ-zi* ('foreign devils').

I spent the rest of the evening showering, washing my hair, reading and writing, while Christopher, Donal and John played poker in our room. This evening Tom Jennings was very sick, presumably with the same dose that Paddy Flanagan and I had got. However, a doctor was called and Tom was taken off to a hospital, where he was checked. Later Tom told us that the conditions in the hospital were diabolical, and that he had refused to stay there for the night.

This morning we were up at seven; we had breakfast half an hour later, and at 8.30 we set off to visit a commune. Most of us were interested to see a commune, but I was not particularly keen to visit one. As the weather was rather uncertain, a bundle of umbrellas was packed into the coach before we set off. However, while we bumped through the narrow streets of Suzhou, the sun came out.

After we had turned a corner, the city quickly disappeared and we found ourselves out in the countryside. Here the grass, trees and crops were green and luscious; we saw many people working in the fields and also in the little villages that we passed. The farm workers were either breaking up the soil using what looked like light pickaxes, fertilizing it using the contents of large circular manure pits dotted about the fields, planting rice, or using primitive ploughs pulled by oxen or water buffalo.

The little wooden farm houses, grouped together or spaced apart, and usually near a muddy stream or river, quite often had black walls with white lines around the windows and doors, and dark stone or tiled roofs. Outside most of the houses washing could be seen hanging out to dry.

The narrow roads that twisted and turned around the contours of the land were quite busy. We saw many men and women, wearing wide straw hats, carrying large pails hanging from poles that were balanced over their shoulders in traditional Eastern style. Some people rode old rusty black bicycles, and others drove antiquated trucks and lorries. There were frequent traffic jams as trucks turned or stopped, or when buses halted to collect passengers. At one spot near the end of a bridge and almost opposite some road repairs, an old rusty bus had broken down, and people were milling around it. As there was not enough room to pass, our guides and driver made a commotion and tried to find the bus driver. However, as the old bus could not be moved, we had to squeeze past as best we could. Among the workers who were digging at the side of the road were several young girls who were up to their eyes in mud. As we slowly inched past them, they looked up and smiled at us. Our driver used the horn to bully his way through the people.

Soon we were off on our journey again. Now and then distant mountains loomed out of a slight mist, then vanished when we changed direction. We frequently crossed muddy rivers in which the by now familiar-looking flat boats could be seen floating slowly along.

After travelling for about an hour through this interesting landscape, we arrived at an old stone archway decorated with red characters, and entered the vast area of the Dongshan Dongting People's Commune, which was almost like a small county, it covered so much land. Here we were smiled at by numerous groups of young people and workers who had gathered along the roadside to wave at us. As I was sitting at the front of the coach, I could see them lining up when they heard us approaching.

We finally came to a stop outside a large, dark grey stone house. It looked rather unpretentious from the outside, but the splendour inside made me gasp in amazement. It had obviously once belonged to one of the local landlords (whom the Communists had naturally condemned as being evil and ruthless slave drivers). A small courtyard with high walls led to the main building, which was entered through two magnificently carved wooden doors, now protected with large sheets of glass.

Inside, we were invited to sit on carved dark brown chairs, placed beside highly decorated wooden tables, and were given cups of the locally-made green tea to sip. The walls, which were made of stone, were plain and whitewashed, and the floor was made of stone. However, the wooden beams that supported the ceiling were decorated with beautiful carvings. As

the house was so cool and restful, we immediately felt at ease and relaxed. While we sat here, we watched tiny birds flying in and out of the building, twittering. These, in fact, were the only birds that we had seen in China so far; during the Cultural Revolution there had been a crazy nationwide campaign to eliminate birds throughout the country, as the authorities regarded them (quite wrongly) as being pests.

A Mr Wang, a burly man who had met us at the coach and had shaken hands with us all, now addressed us and introduced himself as the vice chairman of the Revolutionary Committee of the commune. He explained that this magnificent house had been built in 1922 in the old style, and had indeed belonged to the local landlord. However, when the Communists had come into power in 1949, such extensive stretches of land had been confiscated from these 'ruthless' overlords and redistributed among the peasants. Hence, the land that at one time had belonged to the landlord was now incorporated into the land that made up the commune.

Mr Wang then began to explain how the commune worked. As what he had to say was so interesting, we left our individual tables and crowded around the central one, hanging on every word that he said, while examining various different types of fruit that had been preserved in bottles.

Through an interpreter Mr Wang told us that the commune came into being in 1958 after a land reform movement, when several local communes were combined. We were told that 47,000 people now lived and worked here. The commune had three levels of ownership: the workers, the production brigades, and the production teams. There were three middle schools and a hospital; every production brigade ran several primary schools and a clinic, and every production team had its own 'barefoot' doctors and paramedical workers.

The commune was situated beside the large Lake Tai, where sixty-four different type of fish were farmed and caught. The land around it was used for the production of grain and the growing of fruit. Tea, such as we were drinking, was also harvested here. Sericulture yielded fine silk, which was produced in a local factory. The commune also included some factories and an arts and crafts centre. The workers were allowed to raise poultry, and most of them were encouraged to take their holidays out of season, so that they could work at full force when the crops were ready for harvesting.

After our briefing session, some beautiful girls appeared and smilingly handed us damp face cloths, which were very welcome. We then left the house and travelled in our coach to Lake Tai, which was not far away. It was so vast that it stretched and vanished into the mist before us. A solitary junk with two sails slowly made its way across it. Near where we had stopped some fine gardens were to be seen, along with a handsome and colourful old building (possibly a summer house), a small artificial lake in front of it,

some fantastic natural rock formations that we climbed by means of steps, and an old courtyard. It was very pleasant here and the scenery was beautiful.

After we had taken a look around, we returned to the coach. We were to go up to the terraced fields, but as it was now far too hot, we decided not to do so. I was a little disappointed, for I would have liked to have seen them. Nearby I noticed that some old gravestones had been used in the construction of a stone wall. Many ancient gravestones had been pulled up by the Communists in order to clear the land for crops. Also to be seen here were some ginkgo trees, which I had never seen before. They produce a yellow fruit that looks like a small plum, and which has a kernel that can be eaten.

Next we were then driven to the commune village. This was a delightful one-main-street affair, lined with old shops with dark, cool interiors. As soon as we arrived, a crowd of people, mostly young children, ran over to us to stare, smile, and wave. Mr Wang invited us to do some shopping if we wished to, and people were turfed out of a grocer's shop, which we entered. It was a large, old-fashioned place that sold quite a range of goods, such as sweets, fruit, vegetables, tea, canned foods, and orangeade. Several of us, including me, bought some of the local green tea. Having selected a colourful tin from a range displayed behind glass under the counter, the correct amount of tea was weighed on an ancient-looking balance scales. This was then placed on a sheet of brown paper and tipped into the tin, which was then closed and put into a paper bag. The price for this was about 3.75 yuan (£1.50) – slightly expensive by Chinese standards, but a novelty well worth having.

Outside, the crowds who were waiting to see us followed us to the next shop, where clothes were sold. Again, the interior was old-fashioned; clothes were displayed behind glass under the counters and stocked in cupboards with glass doors behind. I bought a decorated Chinese comb here. The method of paying and receiving change was a blast from the past: the smiling girl assistant wrote the price of my comb on a piece of paper that had already been used, wrapped my money in it, and thrust the docket and the money into a bulldog clip that hung from a wire overhead. This was sent whizzing along the wire to a central cashier, and a moment later the docket and change came zooming back.

I also bought a red and white pure cotton tee shirt, which cost less than £1. I selected the one I wanted by pointing to a painting of it on a board overhead. My purchase was neatly folded, then rolled into a cylinder. A sheet of coarse brown paper was skilfully tucked around it and my parcel was ready – no string or adhesive tape was necessary to hold it together.

We then returned to the former landlord's house by walking through narrow and quaint alleyways. At one point we passed a narrow canal, where we saw a woman washing clothes in the water. It was delightful to return to the coolness of the house, where we were greeted by the girls and handed more damp cloths. The room in which we had been given our briefing had by now been turned into a dining room; white table cloths had been draped over the tables, and chopsticks and glasses had been placed on them. We were offered orangeade or beer to drink. The delicious meal that we were served consisted of several dishes, with six different types of fish, including shelled and unshelled shrimp, and carp. In true banquet style, rice was served towards the end, and the meal finished with a bowl of edible fungus soup.

Afterwards, we were actually allowed to rest in the house for half an hour. I changed into my new cotton tee shirt, which was much cooler than the nylon one that I had been wearing. It turned out that there were other people staying here; we could see Chinese people outside their bedrooms upstairs, looking over the balcony to the inner courtyard.

Later we were brought to the local arts and crafts centre, located in a series of old buildings around beautiful courtyards, which we found very interesting. First we visited a tailors' workshop and saw people making beautiful pyjamas with imperial dragons embroidered on them – unsurprisingly they were for export only.

Next we entered a long room full of young people, probably in their mid twenties, who were skilfully carving large wooden ornaments in minute detail; one such ornament was a beautifully carved eagle. A piece would be passed from one worker to another, each one specializing in different techniques or areas; one item could take up to two weeks to complete. The young people, who were all very pleasant, were happy to answer my questions, which I got Mr Yao to translate. One lad was twenty-five years of age, and had studied his craft here for three years. I could have spent hours watching them work, but we had to move on. Just before we left the room, we paused to watch a man who was very skilfully carving minute designs on nuts. He was working on a face. Although the tools appeared to be big and clumsy, they were obviously very sharp and accurate.

In the next room harmoniums, of the type that we had seen in the schools, were being made. Christopher had sat down at one of these and was playing, with one finger, Beethoven's 'Ode to Joy' when I walked in. I joined him and supplied some harmony.

A silk-weaving workshop came next. Here we watched the laborious job of weaving silk on simple looms. An elderly man was creating a coloured design on one of the looms. I concluded that this type of work must be very tedious indeed.

The final workshop that we visited was quite astonishing, for here we saw girls patiently embroidering exquisite and complicated designs on to silk, using a double-sided technique that enabled the design to be seen on both sides of the silk. The silk was stretched tightly across a frame, and the girls passed thin coloured silk through it, using needles. The outlines of the pattern had been pencilled on the silk as a guide. These elaborate and very beautiful works could take anything between two to six months to complete. No doubt these superb works of art were also only for export.

Finally we were taken to a showroom displaying examples of the various different crafts, which was in a Ming dynasty building at the corner of a shady courtyard.

We then returned to our coach and were driven around the commune. At one point we were able to see the fish farms from a height: large square lakes with trees planted between them. After this we stopped at a small wooden building, where we saw hundreds of white silkworms feeding on mulberry leaves. To be exact, there were forty thousand of them. The room had to be kept at a steady temperature of 80° F (26.6° C).

We continued driving and passed the scene of an accident. An old rusty bus had somehow or other rolled off the narrow road, and was now lying upside down in a shallow muddy pond. Fortunately there had been nobody in it but the driver, and he had escaped unhurt. A crowd of workers had gathered and were standing around doing nothing, which caused a traffic jam.

We were then brought to a workman's house: a small structure with whitewashed walls inside and wooden partitions that divided the building into rooms. Half of our group and some of our guides squeezed into one of these tiny rooms, where we were introduced to a smiling middle-aged man with a couple of silver front teeth. While he laughed and talked to us in the local dialect, some lovely little girls shyly peeped at us from the door, smiled and then ran away giggling when one of us asked them a question. However, they plucked up courage and returned to watch and listen to us.

The man was forty-eight years of age and had been married in 1953; the couple now had four children, all of whom were attending school. He and his wife shared the housework, such as cooking and sewing. The production team in which the man worked specialized in fruit picking and sorting. When we asked him why he wasn't working today, he said that he was on holidays. In all probability he was not; the Revolutionary Committee probably arranged for him to be at home for our arrival.

The man then began telling us about how bad things had been in the past, before 'liberation'; we had heard and would hear accounts like this throughout our stay here. He had come from a family of eight, which had lived in one room, and his parents did not have enough money to support

their children. As they could not afford to send them to school, they were illiterate. However, after liberation ('and under the guidance of our great and wise leader, Chairman Mao'), things changed for the better. The land was redistributed and he and his brothers built new houses for themselves. Evening classes were set up in a local school and he learned to read and write.

After we had a look at the bedroom, we were brought to the back of the house, where we were shown a shed in which we saw a pig and a goat, and also an extension that housed a rather primitive kitchen with a solid-fuel oven. Overall, the little house appeared to be spotlessly clean and reasonably tidy. Although it was interesting to visit it, I would have preferred to have dropped in unexpectedly and to have spoken with the man without our guides!

From here we were driven to a nearby Buddhist temple known as the 'Purple-Gold Temple', dating from the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907). Painted imperial yellow on the outside, it was dark and mysterious inside. Here we were able to feast our eyes on exquisite statues of the Buddha and other deities made in the Ming dynasty (A.D. 1368–1644). Around three of the walls were numerous smaller Buddhas created in the Southern Song dynasty (A.D. 1127–1279). These particular statues were magnificently carved, and all had beautiful faces and gestures. Of particular interest were three Buddhas whose eyes were fixed on a dragon painted on the ceiling; the faces on the statues expressed defiance, admiration, and fear. The most beautiful statue in the temple was the 'Contemplating Buddha', which was expertly sculptured. The figure's eyes were closed in meditation, and the white robes gently folded around the body.

The architecture of the temple was interesting, as the original pillars and beams were still in place. On the right-hand side of the entrance was a large bronze bell with Chinese characters engraved on it. As nobody else was in the temple other than ourselves, I suspected that it had been opened specially for us. Although I had remembered reading somewhere that, in theory, people were allowed to believe or not believe in religion during the communist period, it was patently obvious that religion was not tolerated any more; communism was the new religion and all its beliefs were being preached to the common people in a manner quite similar to the way religion was taught in the West. The constant reiteration of certain phrases and concepts during our frequent briefing sessions, and uttered in almost reverential tones, was already becoming rather tedious.

After we had visited the temple, we crossed a small courtyard in front of it and entered a nearby room decorated in a style similar to the interior of the temple. Inside we found old porcelain seats, beautifully decorated, and ordinary chairs and tables. We sat down and were given cups of green tea.

We were now invited to ask any questions that we had. Some members of our group did ask several, mostly pertaining to marriage and married life, but most of us, including me, were too tired to ask any. This session dragged on a little too long for many of us, and so we were glad to leave when it eventually finished.

We now returned to our coach. On our way to drop off Mr Wang, we passed the scene of the accident once again. The bus was still in the pond, and the workers were still gathered around it, gaping. When Mr Wang left us, Patricia thanked him on behalf of us all, and told him that we had greatly enjoyed our visit. He thanked us for coming and hoped that we would return some day.

Although it had been an interesting experience seeing around the commune, I felt that this had to be a model commune that had been singled out for tourists, such as ourselves, to admire. Not all communes could have been as interesting or efficient as the one we had been shown. Modelled on the soviet communes, the Chinese ones were founded by Chairman Mao in 1958 in order to collectivize China's agricultural and industrial economy. These People's Communes, as they were called, could not have been as efficient as they had been made out to be, for many mistakes and disastrous decisions had been made over the years. In addition, it is well known that people have a tendency not to work efficiently in large state-run businesses, and that self-employed people are normally much more efficient. The Chinese People's Communes were eventually replaced in 1983 by townships.

We now sped out of the commune and drove quickly through the countryside to Suzhou and our hotel. Once again, there were more hold-ups and traffic jams. The broken-down bus that we had squeezed past this morning was in exactly the same place, though this time there were people sitting in it. The workers nearby were still digging the hole. For some strange reason, there was less room this time and we could not get past the bus. Our guides got out of our coach and spoke to the people, and our driver blew the horn and bellowed at them to move the old bus. Suddenly the passengers jumped out, ran to the back and started to push it. The bus moved slowly, the engine coughed and spluttered, and eventually it roared into life. The driver steered it out of the way, and the passengers stared at us as we left, probably mystified as to what all the hurry was about.

It was a relief to finally return to the hotel at six o'clock. We all could have done with a good rest, but no: it was announced that dinner would be served at ten past six. I arrived in the dining room on the dot; needless to say nobody else had appeared. The head waiter, who was looking rather anxious, asked me in Chinese if the rest were coming; I told him that they would all come very soon.

After an excellent meal, we went into an extension of the dining room, separated by curtains, where we were to see a film about the arts and crafts of China. I sat at the back with Patricia and Catherine. Two 35 mm ciné projectors were set up, the lights were turned off, and the show began.

The first film was short and in colour; it showed Chairman Hua receiving some foreign delegates in this hotel. Next, we saw some rather uninteresting black and white films about some famous singers and a couple of well-known comedians. The main film, which was in colour, was very well produced. It contained detailed shots of some of the beautiful modern Chinese arts and crafts, such as embroidery, silk, fans, paintings, pottery, and magnificent carvings in wood, jade and cuttlefish. Of course, many of the examples had revolutionary themes, which I did not care for very much.

The film show finished at about nine o'clock. I was very glad to retire to my room, where I had a welcome shower and went to bed. It had been quite an interesting day.