

8 – SUZHOU

At breakfast this morning we were given pork and cucumber, followed by cake – rather unusual, but nice.

It had been raining heavily all night. In fact, there had been thunder and lightning before yesterday evening's film show; now it was cool and wet. We were told that this was typical of the weather in this region. It was hard to imagine that we were in the same latitude as the Canary Islands! When we left the hotel, we put on some extra clothing and once again umbrellas were supplied.

The first place that we were brought to this morning was the Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute, which was not very far away – just off one of the crowded streets. When we stopped and clambered out of the coach, a large crowd of people gathered to have a look at us. The Institute was housed in a fine old building, which included a series of courtyards containing various types of plants and trees. It seemed to be quite an idyllic place in which to work. We were brought into a long room that overlooked one of these fine courtyards and given tea to drink. Mrs Mu, the lady in charge, introduced herself and told us about the Institute.

The Institute had been created in 1957 and now employed some 220 workers. Their aim was to supply the state with fine articles for official presentations, export, and sale. There were three departments: the design studio, the workshops, and the hand-woven silk department. Tapestry, we were told, was also done here. As expected, Chairman Mao and the Gang of Four were mentioned during Mrs Mu's rather wordy introduction.

Afterwards, we were brought around the Institute. In the first room we entered, the design studio, we saw young men and women sketching or painting flowers and various designs that would be used as the basis of various embroidery patterns. Some of the designs looked very impressive indeed; I would have loved to have spent more time examining them. I was told that the young people were taught their skills here.

In the next room we saw more young men and women, this time drawing the outlines of the designs on to tracing paper, which would then be transferred directly on to the silk backgrounds. They did not use any special desks or equipment – just ordinary tables. I noticed that the lighting conditions were far from perfect.

The silk embroidery workshops, in which we saw girls doing exquisite needlework, came next. As in the commune yesterday, the silk was stretched tight across wooden frames, and the girls worked using the pencil marks on the silk and the colour sketches in front of them as guides. The young ladies worked diligently, no doubt conscious that they were being watched, though some of the braver ones looked up and, when smiled at, returned our smiles. Some of them flashed ravishing smiles, which were like rays of sunshine among the mundane surroundings and the drab blue uniforms. Professor Kiang, my Chinese teacher in Dublin, was convinced that the prettiest girls in China came from this region, and I was inclined to agree.



Suzhou Embroidery Research Institute (PF)

In the next room we saw girls doing double-sided embroidery. The silk base used was so thin that, when held up to the light, the background seemed to disappear and the design seemed to float in mid air. One of the designs that we stopped to admire was of a white cat. The fur was beautifully rendered, and the edges merged into the background. To get this effect, the dyed silk was split into very fine fibres. To demonstrate this, Mrs Mu picked up a short length of silk and told us that it consisted of forty-eight strands. Using her fingers, she unravelled it and reduced it to just two strands bound together. Occasionally, when just one strand was used, it was almost invisible!

We were also shown designs that featured fish, in which very fine silk was used to depict the almost transparent fins. We were told that three years of basic training was needed for ordinary embroidery here, but five to eight years for double-sided work. The workers, we were told, were usually middle-school graduates; they were given no wages, but were subsidized by the State. They were also given free medical services. They worked eight

hours a day, six days a week, and took a short rest every two hours in order to give their eyes a rest.

In the following room we saw the *petit point* technique being employed. Like the printing process, images were being made using minute dots or points, created by small diagonal adjacent stitches. Here the girls were building up landscape scenes using this method. So far we had seen no 'revolutionary' themes, though these were about to come when we entered the third and final department.

This was where the hand-woven silk, surely the most tiresome and slowest job in the Institute, was being made. In this room we found girls using very basic-looking hand looms. On one such loom we saw a young lady working on a large piece using silk dyed black and silk covered in pure gold. She was carefully copying a pattern of the Chinese characters written by Mao in his well-known poem *Reascending Chinggangshan* (Jinggang Mountain), so that the black characters would stand out from the gold background. Each character was being copied with scrupulous attention to detail; every minute feature of the hastily-written 'grass-style' characters was being reproduced, including the ragged ends of the brush strokes. This very large work would take two years to complete, and would eventually be hung in the new mausoleum for Chairman Mao, which we had seen being built in Beijing. (I was told that somebody had seen crowds of people arriving at the site, on bicycles, to assist in the voluntary labour of building the mausoleum for their late leader.)

As well as other revolutionary designs, we saw workers hand-weaving plain silk. This must have been an extremely tedious job, as there was no pattern, and only one foot could be produced in a day. Of course, the girls would never admit to it being boring: they were serving the needs of their country.

After visiting this department, we finally looked at two more workshops. In the first one, we saw girls, using a 'criss-cross' technique in a vertical position, working on huge portraits of Mao, Hua, Zhou Enlai, Zhu De and others. When examined closely, this technique looked rather messy, but when viewed from a distance, it appeared quite effective. However, the portraits were rather idyllic and not very realistic. They had been copied from official colour photographs, which had probably been retouched and 'improved'. The results were just that little bit too colourful and startling for my liking.

Finally we saw girls embroidering with human hair. In these monochrome designs, the lighter tones were rendered using hair that had been washed in different strengths of egg white. The works produced using this technique were quite beautiful; one of the designs depicted horses.

We then returned to the room where we had been briefed. We were invited to ask questions; when we were finished, we thanked Mrs Mu and left. Visiting this institution had been a very enjoyable experience.

Our next stop was the popular Tiger Hill, in the outskirts of Suzhou; in the guide books, it was described as a 'must-see' for tourists. According to legend, a tiger had been seen at the top of this hill guarding the tomb of a king named He Lü, who reigned in this region some 2,500 years ago.



Bridge at the entrance of Tiger Hill, Suzhou

We stopped in a narrow street, which led to a bridge over a river. We crossed the bridge and found ourselves at the entrance to the hill. Crossing this we found ourselves to the entrance of the hill, where there was a wide courtyard leading to a flight of steps. On the way up we saw several pavilions and halls, into one of which we were brought; it was built in the Yuan dynasty and no nails had been used during its construction.

As we continued upwards, our attention was drawn to a large flat stone, which was split in the middle into two equal halves. The story was that another local king had sliced the stone in half with a long sword in order to demonstrate his skill and strength.

The stone steps led us to the top of the hill, where we found a large courtyard. All around it were stone walls, trees and pavilions. Straight ahead was a seven-storey Buddhist pagoda, 150 feet high. This was higher than the hill itself, which was only 118 feet high. When this pagoda was restored in 1956 (a project that had cost 150,000 ¥ or £50,000), several treasures were found in secret cavities within the building. Included was a small stone casket bearing an inscription, which stated that the pagoda had been completed in A.D. 961. In the stone casket was a wooden box containing eight scrolls of Buddhist texts wrapped in fabric. A pottery incense burner, pieces of sandalwood, and coins had also been found. The pagoda, which leaned

slightly to one side because of its sunken foundations, was in a fairly good state of repair despite the turmoil and destruction that had occurred during the recent Cultural Revolution.



Pagoda on Tiger Hill, Suzhou

Also in the courtyard, which was packed with people and soldiers, was a small pavilion that had been built in the Qing dynasty. Our guide, Mr Cou, a small man with wiry hair, a rather expressionless face, and a very good knowledge of history, pointed out panels made of stone over the pillars of the pavilion. On these were carved various scenes, such as a group of musicians.

Having looked at the area around the pavilion, we walked through a large circular opening in the stone wall into a small enclosure, where we were shown the Pond of Swords. This was the place where King He Lü was supposed to have been buried along with 3,000 swords. When Shi Huang Di (the Qin dynasty emperor who had joined together the walls to form the Great Wall) had tried to find the tomb of He Lü at this spot, water had gushed out of the excavations and had formed this pond. Although uncertain about the veracity of this story, Chinese archaeologists feel that if they excavate this pond they may find the tomb at one end.

After we had followed a rather circuitous route by climbing more steps and passing more pavilions, we finally reached the pagoda that we had seen earlier. We only had a quick look inside, for there seemed to be no staircase to reach the various floors and there was little to see on the ground floor. However, the building did offer a fine view of the city. Finally we made our

way back down to the bottom of the hill. I had enjoyed visiting this historical site, despite this morning's bad weather and poor light.

We were then driven to a Ming dynasty Buddhist temple named the Western Garden Temple, which was also in the outskirts of the city. This was a large structure, painted yellow, which had been built on the site of a garden. There was a bit of a commotion when our coach stopped at the closed gates, for we had to wait for somebody to open them. We eventually got out close to the main entrance to the temple, at one side of a courtyard. The architecture was quite splendid, though the dull light did not enhance it.

The inside was so full of decoration, statuary, and magnificence that it was quite bewildering. In the main hall we paused to admire a beautifully carved and decorated large wooden statue of the Buddha, with four attendants, two on each side. Around the side walls were more statues and other works of art.



Luohan statues, West Garden Temple, Suzhou (PF)

We were then brought around the many other halls in the temple. In one hall we saw eighteen *luohan* or disciples of the Buddha and, in another, some five hundred of them. They were all made of clay, here in Suzhou, and were gold plated. These five hundred statues, each one different from the others, all represented Indian *luohan*, except for the last one, which was Chinese. This particular *luohan*, we were told, had studied Buddhism in India. It was wonderful to walk along these rows and rows of seated figures, studying the different expressions on the lifelike faces. There was a mysterious atmosphere in this long hall, enhanced no doubt by its unusual musty smell. Here we also saw particularly lifelike and expressive statues of two monks, Ji Gong and Song Jiang. Finally we stopped to admire a camphor-wood statue of Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, which had a thousand eyes and a thousand arms.

Unfortunately we were whisked through this temple very quickly, and so it was difficult to take everything in and remember the details. Most of the walls were whitewashed, and brown wooden pillars supported the beams of the wooden ceilings. Mr Cou, who spoke very good English, gave us a good and detailed explanation of the place, as he had done at Tiger Hill, and had not bothered us with the usual propaganda, which was very refreshing.

Afterwards we were driven back to our hotel for a delicious lunch. The meals here in Suzhou were quite excellent. As we were leaving late this afternoon, we had to have our cases packed and outside our rooms by two o'clock, which was when we left in the coach for some more sightseeing.

This time we were taken to a nearby fan factory, which was situated in beautiful old buildings with courtyards not unlike those of the Embroidery Institute that we had visited this morning. A Mrs Shen brought us around the rather tatty workshops. Although the place looked a little untidy and chaotic, excellent work was being produced. At first we saw girls, boys and older people painting exquisite classical scenes on fans, and applying gold leaf to parts of them for effect. In the same workshop we also saw more young people painting silk fans. These were flat fans of different shapes, with the silk stretched across a wire frame, to which a handle had been affixed. The outline of the picture had been printed on or transferred to the silk in black ink, and the artists were skilfully colouring them using various types of brushes and techniques. We were told that about two hundred of these could be produced in a day. I was already familiar with these type of fans, for I had bought a couple of them in Dublin for about 90p each.



Fan factory, Suzhou (PF)

After we had left this workshop, we crossed a beautiful courtyard and entered another room, where we saw young men sawing the intricate

designs used on sandalwood fans. The saw resembled a bow, with a thin blade where the string would normally be. Holes had been bored in pieces of wood within the areas to be cut out, and about twenty of these wooden pieces were put on the saw by threading the narrow blade through one of the holes in each piece. The bundle was secured to the top of the saw, the first piece pulled down and held with one hand, while the other hand manipulated the saw up and down in order to cut the desired shape. When finished, the worker allowed it to drop down to the bottom of the saw, and pulled down the next one. Later we were told that the sandalwood came from either Hainan Island or the province of Yunnan.

In addition to these techniques, we saw workers burning fine designs on to the sandalwood fans, using a special type of electrically-heated small poker. We also saw a few beautiful ivory fans being made. In this last room we also saw a 'disk jockey' seated in a corner, who was playing records for the workers around the factory. In front of him was a microphone for making announcements.

After our tour, we were given tea and a short briefing in an airy room that overlooked one of the lovely courtyards. Mrs Shen told us that before liberation, people had made fans at home. The factory, she explained, now employed about five hundred workers; some two hundred thousand sandalwood fans and two million silk fans were made every year. The workers trained by serving a three-year apprenticeship; when fully trained, they were able to paint about seventy small silk fans per day.

When Mrs Shen had finished speaking, we had a look at some fans that were on show and then lined up to buy some. A couple of pretty girls sat at a table, which was piled high with silk and sandalwood fans. There was a great deal of confusion and laughter about money and change, but the girls were always on the ball, no matter how much confusion there was. I bought two sandalwood fans, beautifully packaged, for about £1 each, and some silk ones which cost only a few pence. We then left, laden with our purchases, and set off once again in the coach.

Our next stop was the Humble Administrator's Garden, which was situated in the northeast of the city centre. This garden had been built in 1522, during the Ming dynasty, and it had long been prized as the best of the gardens in Suzhou. Its name, which literally means 'the Plain Man's Politics Garden', refers to a remark made by a man named Fan Yue, who once said, 'To cultivate one's garden to meet one's daily needs, that is what is known as the politics of a plain man'. It was the creation of one Wang Xianchen, a censor, who retired to 'cultivate his garden' after a hard political life. However, his son lost it in gambling and it changed hands many times. In 1871 it became a seat of the Banners' Association; it was then turned into a school and finally, in 1952, into a public garden.

Here we saw exquisite small bridges, ponds, pavilions, towers, small buildings, hillocks, and terraces, all beautifully and expertly arranged; it was a quintessential Chinese garden. We ambled through its many different sections, the aim of which was to give an illusion of a succession of incidents, like wandering in a vaster landscape. We gazed, fascinated, at the various asymmetrical and undulating forms before us. What we saw was a representation of nature on a smaller scale, but with man-made elements included. Strangely-shaped natural rocks abounded; these suggested the crags of high mountains.

We passed through several wonderful sections of this garden, the elements of which had been given delightfully romantic names, such as the Hall of Distant Fragrance, the Small Flying Rainbow Bridge, the Pavilion of Surging Waves, the Loquat Garden, the Pavilion of Fragrant Snow and Azure Clouds, the Pavilion surrounded by Lotus Flowers, and the Pavilion of Expecting Frost.

Although it was a marvellous experience being taken around this fine garden, our visit was too short and hurried. A garden like this is a place for one to tarry and gaze at a scene for a long time in order to appreciate it to the full. The various sections of the garden were supposed to be intimate, but the place was full of local people in their drab modern clothes and us in our coloured raincoats, holding modern umbrellas.

We saw very few flowers in bloom here; most of the plants were just green in colour. In fact, we had not really seen any flowers in China yet.

In the last part of the garden that we were brought to, we were to see a collection of miniature trees growing in pots of all shapes and sizes – what the Japanese call *bonsai*. However, when we arrived at the entrance to place, we discovered that the gates were locked. There was more commotion while our guides endeavoured to find the man with the keys. Eventually he appeared and opened the gates for us at a leisurely pace. We were then able to wander around, admiring these ancient and gnarled trees.

After this, we quickly headed back to the bus. The garden looked quite different seen from the other direction. We crossed elegant small bridges, walked through courtyards, peeped into buildings, went through long zigzagging open corridors, and stopped to admire sections of distant areas framed by the circular doorways in the stone walls. Whenever I used my ciné camera to capture a scene, the Chinese people would hurriedly get out of my way, and the people near or behind me generally stayed put until I had stopped filming. I found it extremely difficult to film the people behaving normally, for as soon as they realized that they were being filmed, they would run away or smile and stare at the camera fixedly. If I asked their permission, they would carefully arrange themselves and smile their best smiles. They were always very curious about my ciné camera, as they

probably had never seen anything like it before. It was quite usual for me to find myself surrounded by a group of gaping Chinese when I put down my camera. Whenever this happened, I would smile at them and, after a moment of uncertainty, they would return my smile. From now on I would have to use my ciné camera, as I was running out of slide film for my still camera. There seemed to be little hope of buying more slide film here in China.

Our last stop was at a rather scruffy Friendship Store in the centre of the city. We were allowed forty-five minutes to do some shopping here; I just purchased a booklet entitled *China Travel* for about £1, and a packet of postcards for about 12p. Postcards did not seem to be sold separately; one could only buy them in packets of ten.

After this short visit to the shop, we drove to the railway station. It was a pity that we had to leave after such a short stay, and it was disappointing that the weather today had been so poor. Suzhou had fascinated me as it was full of character and had many historical sites. It began to rain in earnest while we were at the station, but we were able to shelter while mixing with the crowds and listening to dramatic music being played over the loudspeakers. Our train soon appeared and we clambered aboard, handing back our umbrellas to our guides and wishing them goodbye. Sheltering under their umbrellas, they waved to us as the train pulled out of the station.

We were soon out in the countryside and speeding towards our next destination: Shanghai. As before, we had no idea of what we were about to see there. It was only when we arrived at a city that an itinerary would be presented to Patricia and Catherine. Whenever we asked about the possibility of visiting other places, we were usually told that there would not be enough time available, despite the fact that we were often asked if we had any special interests or wanted to see particular places.

After drinking some green tea, I fell asleep. As the journey was short, we had arrived in Shanghai when I woke.