

TRAVEL

READER'S STORY CHINA

Searching for a forgotten past

New China eclipses the old in Suzhou

BY WAYNE NG

Wanting an opportunity to intimately discover modern China and get re-acquainted with my ancestral roots, we find an online offer for a pricey home-stay in Suzhou, the ancient silk capital of China.

After a short train ride from Shanghai, we are greeted by a phalanx of derelict cabs, none of which resemble the modern, sanitized fleets in Beijing and Shanghai. We get to our host Susan's neighbourhood and quickly discover wide, treeless, empty avenues within a massive suburban, industrial park. Starbucks, Tex-Mex and French bakeries dot this enclave for foreign expats and the new middle class. There are non-descript commercial outlets, pubs and services advertised in exploding neon that could be anywhere. The Legoland of highrises are also indistinguishable. They have the same faceless lobbies and sleepy guards.

But my jaw drops at the gigantic abode on the 14th floor of the building where we will be staying. Five-star amenities, stone and exotic wood trimmings with modern fixtures and accents seduce our backpacker sensibilities. Susan is a native to Suzhou and a daughter of a former English professor. Her English is impeccable, though she finishes each sentence with a musical lilt and bounces around like an eight-year-old. She's married to Harry, an Austrian expat who has worked in Suzhou for seven years. Apparently he's in Bangkok on business. They've lived in their apartment for four years, yet the walls and shelves are oddly devoid of decor: no artwork, not even kitschy handi-crap. We do spy several out-of-focus photos that show them looking more like awkward roommates than a blissfully wedded twosome. Barren and desolate come to mind. Susan says when Harry's home, he's happy watching TV and pumping iron. She practises calligraphy, runs a legit massage clinic out of her home and lunches with friends.



PHOTOS BY WAYNE NG

In Tongli, a UNESCO designated town within the city of Suzhou, women who operate the canal taxis fuss over a infant.

Upon closer inspection, the apartment's workmanship and carpentry are shoddy, and nothing works well. It has a steroid quality to it — a rapidly built, robust facade over a hollow, sickly interior.

A third of the building sits empty as expats come and go. It also seems the new Chinese middle class are only a paycheck away from an abrupt return to their heroic proletariat roots.

Lost within the sprawl of Suzhou are UNESCO-designated water villages. There, unlike the concrete blockitecture of the city, even amidst the tourists, one gets a sense of old China,

before the plastic and neon crept in.

The grace and subtle beauty of yesteryear, along with mud-brick huts, still exist. Zen-like classical gardens with perfectly balanced interplays of water, wood, stone and flora transport you back several dynasties.

Ancient canals, cobblestone alleys and handcrafted homes weave a delicate harmony of human and nature. Kids play outside, elders sit, families eat — together.

This is not to romanticize poverty and traditions. But it does speak to what had always made China resilient: family and ancestral bonds.



The exquisitely crafted homes and gardens of past nobility contrast with the shoddily built new highrises in Suzhou.

Though these villages are only minutes away, Harry has never ventured there or anywhere else in China.

Susan went as a child, but now dismisses them as old and dreams of Europe.

She makes little effort to show off her hometown, there are no maps, no tourist lit, no sense of hospitality. She doesn't join us for breakfast. She gleefully accepts our money but not our dinner invites. Our mutual synapses don't connect, but the experience is no less meaningful or telling. I see that my notions of discovering myself in this part of New China are purely quixotic. For individuals such as Susan, remembering the past, and revelling in traditions would be both anathema and akin to sliding backwards.

On our last day she gets a call from Harry. He will be delayed a few more days in Bangkok.

Far from crestfallen, Susan's girlish lilt and bounce soar. She's clearly comfortable doing her own thing, yet she still gets her social standing in the New China.

And all it costs her, indeed all

it cost China, is a soul.

As we leave, we eyeball the neon glitz everywhere. But there is little energy. The same music blares out from a local pub, and the same drunks sing along.

One garish sign flashes in repetitive cycles, as if an SOS were permanently unanswered.

Wayne Ng is an Ottawa social worker who has roots in China. Suzhou was one of the highlights of his recent six-continent adventure.

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