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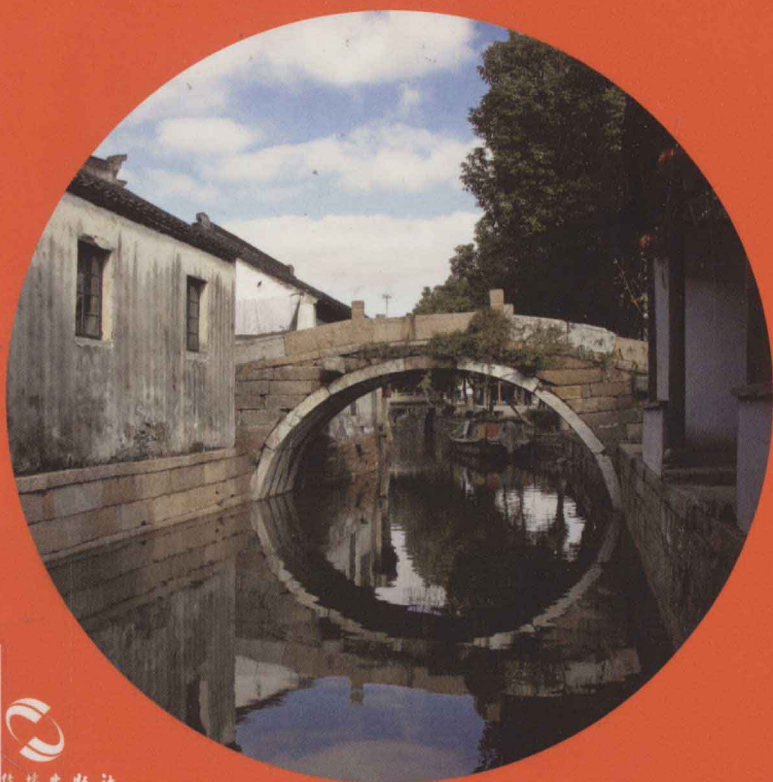
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ULTIMATE
City Guide

Suzhou BASICS



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by Bruno J. Svac

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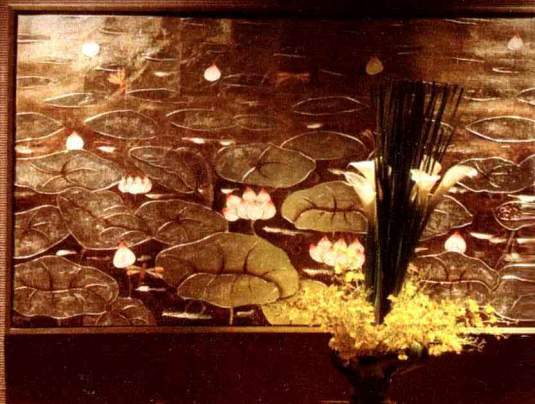
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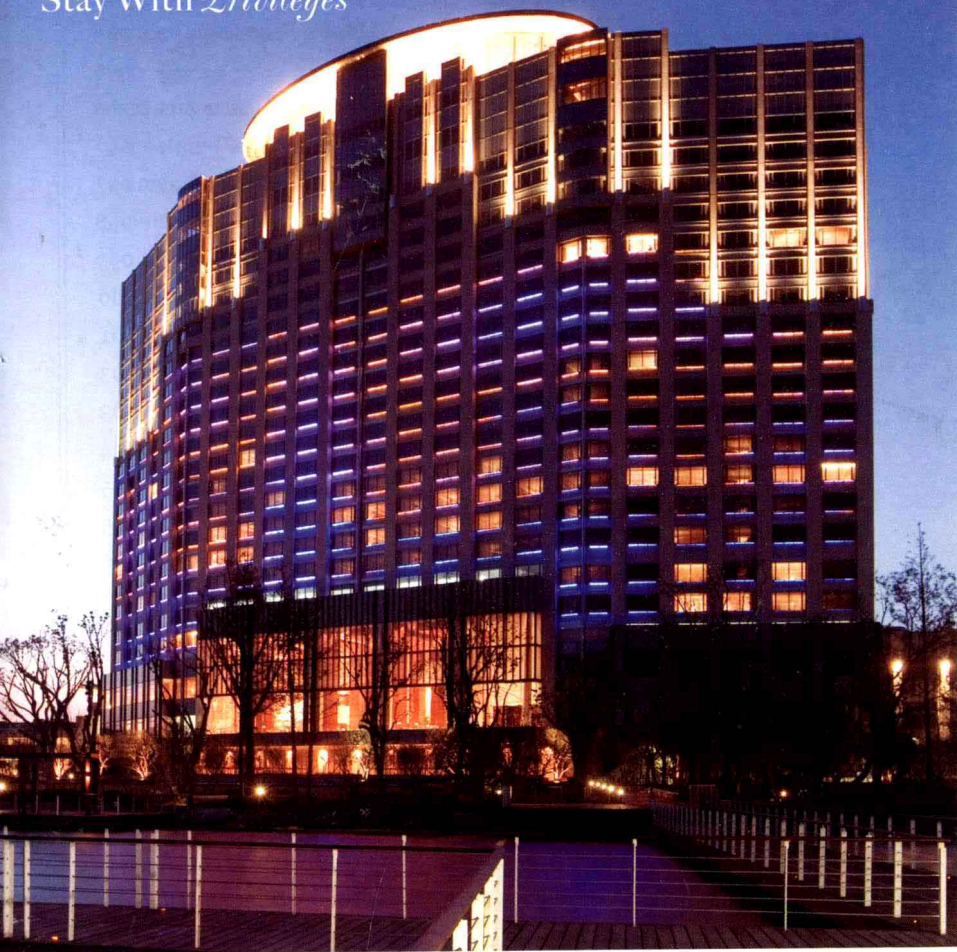
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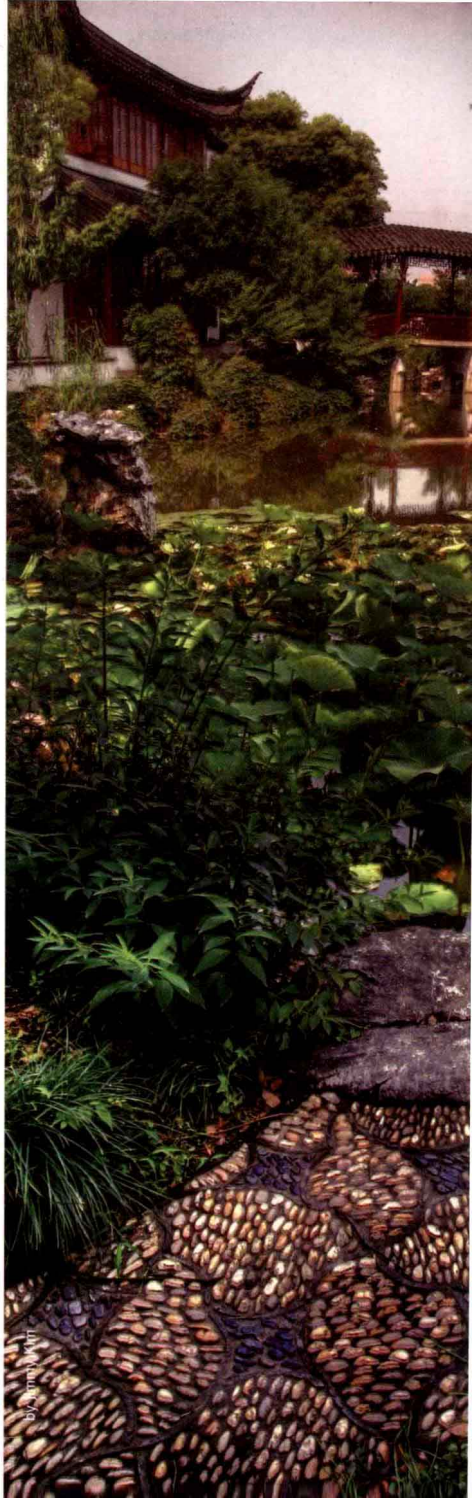
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1 The Suzhou Story



From Adversity, Prosperity

The walls surrounding the ancient city of Suzhou, with a circumference of 23.5 km, have stood for thousands of years, bearing witness to the movements of history that have shaped the fate of this ancient city. First constructed more than 2,500 years ago, the wall and the imposing gates that punctuate it were surrounded by a moat called 'The Outer Wall River'. The city wall and the moat running around its perimeter were together designed to protect Suzhou from foreign invasion, a real danger to a city that provoked its neighbors to envy, due both to its prestigious social position and its geographically strategic location. The story which the walls, gates, and canals of Suzhou have watched pass before them follows a cycle of political decline and ascent, perhaps tempting us to feel that these protectors of the city were ineffective in the role for which they were designed. To understand all the reasons for the numerous overthrows of the city of Suzhou, one must travel back in time to the founding of the city shortly after 600 BC.

Suzhou, one of the oldest towns in China's Yangzi Delta area, stands proudly today on the shores of Lake Taihu in Jiangsu Province, in the same spot it has stood for 2,500 years. In the Late Shang Dynasty (16th - 11th centuries BC), the Yangzi Basin was dominated by a tribe called the Wu. Over many centuries, the region was gradually urbanized by the Wu and neighboring tribes, reaching a zenith in ancient history under a briefly powerful Wu Kingdom. The city we know as Suzhou today served, in its early history, as the imperial center of the Wu Kingdom, and was known as the City of Wu.

Suzhou was founded during turbulent times, foreshadowing the course of the city's future over many later generations. Suzhou, from its earliest days, was a virtual magnet for invasion by foreign forces. Known even in its infancy as a town of culture and prosperity, it attracted attention from foreign kingdoms on all sides, both as a political target and as a place of interest for travelers. Tourists who visit Suzhou today join a long chain of travelers who came to tour the city over the course of its history. Suzhou's gardens and exquisite silk drew visitors to the city early on, including members of the royal class, and it was a favored holiday destination for the emperors Kangxi and Qianlong. The tomb of Helu, the city's founder, welcomed tourists centuries ago, just as it does today. During the Tang Dynasty, in

? Language Lesson

nǐ hǎo

你好

hello



825, the poet Bai Juyi built the Shantang Canal to connect the city to Tiger Hill, site of the tomb of Helu, making it accessible for tourists. Today, visitors to the city continue to fill the shops on Shantang Street, running along the banks of the canal.

The same things that made Suzhou attractive to both invaders and tourists throughout its history also made its in-

habitants feel it was worth defending. As the old saying goes, “Heaven has paradise, Earth has Hangzhou and Suzhou.” The paradisaical city was decimated many times over the years, but the task of rebuilding never proved too daunting for its proud citizens. On occasions when the population was wiped out, the conquerors likewise threw themselves into the task of making Suzhou once again

THE SUZHOU CLIMATE

Suzhou's climate is generally moderate, though summers can be hot and humid. Winter can be a little on the cold side, though generally bearable if the wind is not blowing too strongly.

Month(s)	Average Temperature	Average Rainfall
January - February	2-10°C	5-7 cm
March	7-13°C	9-10 cm
April - May	12-24°C	7-9 cm
June - August	22-31°C	19-22 cm
September - October	17-28°C	5-7 cm
November - December	5-17°C	4-5 cm

Many of the classical gardens in the city have been designed with the change of seasons in mind, with different features on the grounds highlighted during different months. The courtyard of the Master of Nets Garden is dominated by four sorts of trees, each of which blooms in a different season. The view of this courtyard changes according to the time of year in which it is visited.

Rain should not be seen as a deterrent to enjoying your stay in Suzhou. In fact, many would argue that the classical gardens are at their best in rain or heavy mist.

prosperous.

The old city of Suzhou is crisscrossed by canals which earned the city the moniker 'the Venice of the East' when Marco Polo visited in the latter part of the 13th century. The canals play an important role in the architecture of the city, not only in the construction of the numerous stone bridges built across the waterways, but in practically all of the city's ancient structures. Traditional whitewashed buildings with dark gray roof tiles pepper the banks of the canals, making Suzhou appear to be almost a floating city.

It has been estimated that roughly half of the area upon which Suzhou is built is covered by water. Of the remaining area, the majority is hilly land, with only a small portion cultivated for agriculture. The natural juxtaposition of hills and water formed an attractive palette for the construction of Suzhou's famous gardens, which aim to imitate landscape paintings (called "mountain and water" paintings in Chinese). The artistry that went into the creation of these gardens (see pp. 24, 33+), made Suzhou renowned throughout China and the wider world even in its early history.

Suzhou's first rise to importance came



? Language Lesson

zài jiàn

再见

goodbye

THE WALLED CITY IN CHINESE HISTORY

China has a long history of urban living, and its walled cities have always functioned as the center of imperial administration over a given area. In fact, the root meaning of the word usually used for a city in Mandarin (城 *cheng*) is 'wall'.

The arrangement of the imperial capital, the peak at the apex of a hierarchy of urban centers, was traditionally arranged in such a way as to demonstrate central authority and the emperor's right to reign. The throne room, the structures housing it, and even the streets surrounding it all had a southward orientation, as subjects were expected to approach only from the south. The rural areas around the imperial city formed a continuum with it, and the architectural styles in urban and rural areas did not differ much.

Suzhou, first named 'Great City of Helu', was the capital of the Wu Kingdom from 514 BC. The city's arrangement is oriented southward, with the Wumen Bridge ('Wumen' meaning 'Gateway to Wu') lying to the southwest of the city at the Panmen Gate. The city is laid out to look like the Chinese character 亞 (*ya*), a shape often favored in the layout of tombs, art pieces, and architecture in ancient China. The shape of the character was aesthetically pleasing for its symmetry, and was thought to suggest a corresponding philosophical balance indicating harmony, prosperity, and magnificence. The layout of Suzhou, with its longer, narrower north-south axis intersecting a shorter, wider east-west line, reflects the popular use of the shape of the character 亞 in designs during this period. Indications are that the character's use in architectural and artistic layouts of the day was tied to an ancient tradition of sun worship. It is one of the earliest symbols of balance in Chinese design, with a history pre-dating even the dragon and phoenix motif.



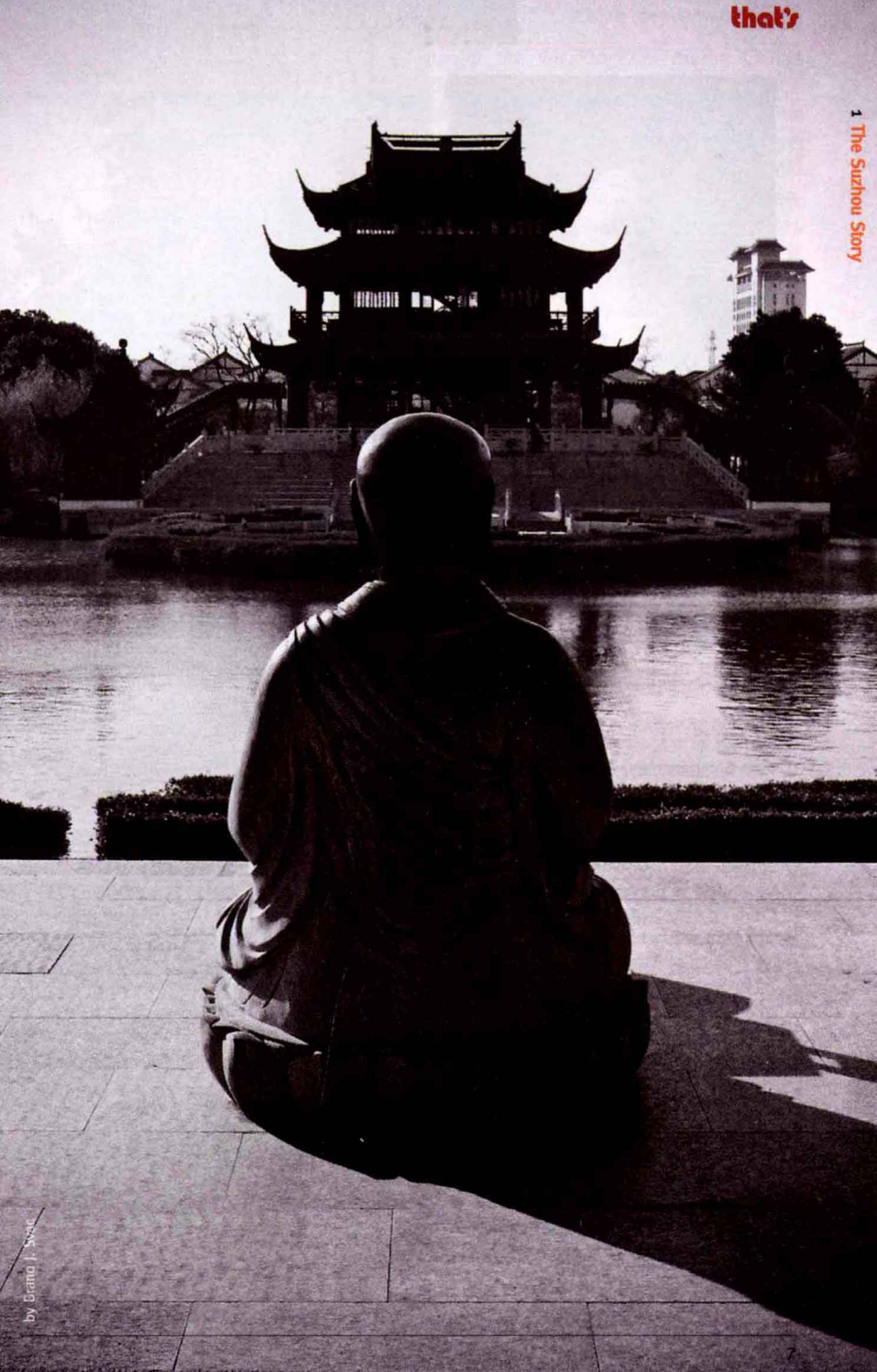
LAKE TAIHU 太湖

Lake Taihu (or Lake Tai) stretches across a large plain in the Yangzi Delta area, separating Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. The southern shore of the lake forms the boundary between the two provinces, with the waters of the lake belonging entirely to Jiangsu. Lake Taihu, with an area of 250 square kilometers, is the third largest freshwater lake in China. The lake is home to about ninety islands.

Lake Taihu connects to the Grand Canal, and the Suzhou Creek originates in the lake and flows down through Shanghai. The circular shape of Lake Taihu suggests that it is the result of meteor impact. Lake Taihu, especially renowned for its limestone formations, was the birthplace for many of the rocks that were most valued for use in rockeries in Suzhou classical gardens. Rocks from the lake were once the most expensive item in China, and many of the rock formations you will see in Suzhou's gardens today were taken from Lake Taihu.

Over the years, Lake Taihu has been a tremendous asset to Jiangsu Province. Fish and crab from its waters make up an important part of the diet of the people of Jiangsu, and are often used for trade as well. The 'Taihu Three Whites' dish, a famous part of Suzhou cuisine, is comprised of three delicacies taken from Lake Taihu — white shrimp, whitebait, and white fish. The lake also provides water to more than 30 million residents in the province, and serves as a natural water source for Jiangsu's irrigation network, making the extremely fertile region ideal for producing rice. Lake Taihu has played a major role in keeping the region prosperous for generations, protecting it from the severe devastation caused by some of the worst famines in China's history.







BAI JUYI

Bai Juyi (772-846) moved to Suzhou at the age of ten, when he was sent away from his family in the north in an attempt to spare him from the wars that had broken out there. After passing the imperial exam in 800, his career got off to a smooth start, but was interrupted when he criticized the emperor several years later. In time, he managed to recover from the setback, and eventually served as Prefect of Suzhou in 825-827, when he ordered the construction of the Shantang Canal.

Bai was a renowned poet in his day, famous both in China and Japan. He wrote over 2,800 poems, all known for their accessibility. Bai often tested out his writing on the household servants, and was prone to rewrite portions of the text if a servant found it difficult to understand. His poem 'Longing for Jiangnan' speaks of remembering Suzhou and the surrounding area ('Jiangnan' means 'South of the Yangzi').

