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Sticks & stones

INTOUCH WADES THROUGH THE NANXI RIVER -- AND BEYOND

by Jack Cameron and Serene Li

Located in Yongjia County of Wenzhou, the Nanxi River is regarded as one of China's global geo-parks, and is one of Zhejiang's national-level scenic spots. With a total area of 671 square kilometers and eight major scenic sections Grand Nanxi, Shiwei Rock, Daruo Rock, Taiping Rock, Yantan River, Zhen River, Sihai Mountain, and Yuantou), the Nanxi River is the only tourist attraction in China that is reputed for idyllic features that cannot be seen anywhere else.

Apart from its gorgeous scenic beauty, the river and its reaches are a unique civilization and are of great value for architectural, cultural, and anthropological research. The lower reaches of the river are close to Wenzhou City, and therefore has more developed and modern elements. The villages in the upper reaches are less developed, ranging from the antique to the positively primitive.

There are more than 200 villages scattered in the middle zone of the Nanxi River. All villagers of each village are consanguineously related, and every village is a quasi- autonomous tribal unit. In many cases, and in many ways, the life of the villagers has remained unchanged for centuries.

The Nanxi River has a kind of beauty that is at times almost overwhelming, the underlying implications of which cannot be truly appreciated unless one can see how the people of the river identify with the nature. The aesthetic taste of the indigenous peoples is also reflected strongly in the local architecture (see below).

The Ancient Villages of Nanxi River Culture— laboring and learning

It takes a sensitive heart to perceive the WOW factor of the Nanxi River culture. While I was walking in the broiling June heat of Jiang'nan, my gut feeling was that I was searching a lot more beyond its awesome rivulets, rolling hills and mountains, and rocks of Nanxi. There was room in my mind that was set away for something else beyond the picturesque waters and woods that make a larger-than-life imitation of a picture postcard in every direction.

The rooted ideal vision of locals in traditional Chinese villages (like as those in the Nanxi River zone) is 'laboring and learning'. Laboring ('geng'(∏˚) in Chinese) is the basic policy of an agricultural lifestyle. Learning ('du'∂¡) is considered the only way for anyone to climb up the social ladder. Study is of such importance that it is the shared responsibility of the whole village, and the highest priority among the concerns of the village leaders. The Nanxi River has always been top on the agenda of almost every governor in the history of Yongjia. The philosophy is that the promotion of academic awareness is the best remedy for the region's excessively barbarian folkways. The efforts and achievements in highlighting scholarship can still be felt strongly today. Even a desolate village hidden in the wild has a private school building located in a carefully-selected location. Intelligentsia plays an important role in the management of the villages, and is at the highest in the hierarchy. It is no exaggeration to say that every respect of the Nanxi River civilization is closely related to its extreme focus on academic learning.

Top - traditional tiled roof. Above - traditional fabric made with the clamp-dyeing method, a method particular to this region and increasing difficult to find.

Cangpo Village

Cangpo Village is the origin of some of the most enchanting anecdotes about the Nanxi River. Built in 955 AD, the village is home to two mysterious ponds (West Pond and East Pond). Water from the Nanxi River runs from the northwest through the village and meanders to the southeast corner where there are the towering village walls. The grand village gate stands in the middle. Legend has it that the ponds were cultivated to ward off the evils from a neighboring village called Xiamei, and to fight the intangible war between the two tribes Cangpo enlisted the services of feng'shui.

Seemingly everything in the village has some associative imagery, and names that dignify that imagery. For example, there is a mountain with three parallel peaks to the west of the village. The peaks are referred to by the villagers the brush holders. The two ponds are the ink stick. The main street of the village is called 'the street of writing brushes' (the street is narrow and long, like a calligraphy brush), and the street network of the village (all at right angles) is said to resemble a piece of calligraphy paper. Thus the village is blessed with 'the four treasures of the study' (the implements used in calligraphy), a theme that represents the typical architectural aesthetics of all ancient villages in Yongjia district. Shui'yue (water and moon) and Wang'xiong (watching the brother) are two pavilions that represent two values highly esteemed by the locals — fraternal love, and mutual care for each other.

A statue of Zhou Kai, a hero who is said to have tamed the flood in the West Jin Dynasty, is shrined in the water-surrounding Renji Temple — a vivid illustration about how the locals humanize the spirits. The temple looks like a garden, providing a green, fragrant retreat for worrying souls.

Furong Village

The Chen Yuzhi tomb is a mossy stone hidden in the weeds. A winner in the imperial examination, Chen Yuzhi was from Furong Village and is remembered as a hero in resistance of the Yuan army's invasion in the Southern Song Dynasy. More than 300 locals joined the brigade under Chen's leadership - they all met their end at Furong Peak. A new village was built after the wholesale destruction of the place by the invading forces. There is primary school in every corner of the village, ad the village rules emphasize that teachers be paid respect and students be cared for by the public.

Li'shui Jie (Beautiful Water Street), Yan'tou Village.

Yantou Village

Founded in the first years of Southern Song Dynasty, Yantou is the only village in the middle reaches of the Nanxi River that boasts a store! Turn left at the entrance (Xianyi Gate), and you'll feel at once the unique commercial atmosphere of the village. By the pond (Lishui, 'beautiful water') is the 300-meter-long business street.

It's called a mei'ren kao, which is translated as 'beauty bench'. If you're under fifty years old, that might not strike you as funny; but if you're old enough to have seen one first hand (or maybe listened closely to your grandparents' stories), then you know that early 20th and late 19th century America had them too -- and were known by the same name into which mei'ren kao is translated: beauty benches.

The mei'ren kao are distincive of South China water culture, and you're unlikely to find in China anything known as a mei'ren kao that isn't by the banks of a river or canal. The bench gets its name from the fact that shopkeepers along a waterway hoped tired beauties (mei'ren) would park their pi'gu in front of their shops to relax a bit between shopping. The women would attract men, and hence improve business. The Yankees' 'beauty benches' acquired their name for the same reason.

Music suddenly came out of the background. It was very martial, very national — lot's of brass. I didn't have a chance to find out why it was on, or where it was coming from, and at first it seemed to intrude, splitting the air like a bullet, unwelcome to my ears, like the shouting of gaming drunks sitting next to you in a restaurant. But on the other hand, it was the perfect score for the scene. This is, after all, a rural paradise, just like the revolution promised. That was the plan, wasn't it? Clean water, flowering bushes, birds flitting from tree to tree, dogs sleeping in the shade, old men swapping healthy stories and innocuous gossip, and generations living and learning together in a seemingly self-sustaining countryside idyll with enough electricity for the lamps but not enough for the Playstation or the DJ. Enough ancient architecture was spared the other revolution to locate this village in time, and keep it not only charming but distinctly Old World. The free-range chickens had much the same effect. The music faded - perhaps I noticed it only as it was ending - and my eyes caught a portrait of Jesus of the Sacred Heart on the door of a residence. It was part of a calendar showing Christian feast days. Somehow I don't think that was part of the plan.

Bush food

We've often commented that one of the best parts of our trips into the hinterland is the soul food whipped up by the locals. We're rarely disappointed, and this time we were overjoyed.

One of the best meals we had has at Shan Li Ren Zhi Dian (山里人之店), which as its name implies was on a mountain. The main dishes consisted of alpine vegetables worked into a number of dishes, including a tofu dish, a dumpling dish, and simmered mountain goat meat. The featured fish was a tian'yu, which appears to be in the carp family (surprise surprise) and looks broadly like big goldfish. Over the course of our stay in Yongjia we found meals concluding with lightly-fried noodles rather than boiled rice — a meal in itself, and worth remembering if you come to these parts. At other times we dined on di'gua (a kind of squash) and foodstuffs prepared with di'gua fen, the flour made from this gourd. It has a consistency sort of like the scum that forms on the top of Jello, or chocolate pudding — its chewy, and slightly rubbery, but has a very agreeable mild, semi-sweet taste that makes it difficult to determine whether it is animal or vegetable matter.

Want to eat here? Phone them on (0577) 6719 8024, or 13588 933 786 for the exact coordinates.

Mingao Village:

Terraced farming and plantations:

Mingao is a small village that belongs to the 'Little Nanxi' area. The place is a typical Jiang'nan mountain area with numerous mountains covered with a sea of trees and terraced plantations. It boasts amazingly rich agricultural and forestry resources, and because of its large expanses scenery terraced plantations has now become one of the most tempting spots for photographers all over the country. Numerous photographers have become addicted to the ever-changing picturesque scenery of a sea of crescent-shaped fields — 'sculptures of the land'. But don't be fooled - it's not as easy to photograph as you might think - no, it's not just point and shoot - and it takes a combination of luck and skill to capture the transient beauty of the ti'tie (terraced plantations). Getting the right vantage point, choosing the best angle, and having favorable lighting conditions makes photographing these ancient fields a challenge.

Terraced plantations are to Mingao what gardens are to Suzhou, what pine trees are to the Yellow Mountains, and what the causeways are to the West Lake of Hangzhou. The awesome scenery is very likely beyond imagination of anyone who has never been to this place. The plantations have evolved over the course of more than one thousand years, and are evidence of the power, diligence and the determination of generations of the local farmers. Historical records show that the plantations were first carved from the earth in the Tang Dynasty, and prospered thereafter — especially in the Northern Song Dynasty, when there was a significant increase in the population in the south of the country. Apart from its aesthetic implication to tourists and photographers, terraced farming best exemplifies the wisdom of generations of people in building such a highly sophisticated irrigation system, and the courage of human beings to defy natural adversity.

Terraced plantation, Ming'ao Village.

We were looking at an old timber-framed house (said to be 600 or so years old) in Ming'ao Village, and were studying a well guardian deity nearby, when a gentleman seemingly in his retirement years joing the conversation. His Mandarin was markedly better than many of the village folk we'd so far chatted with, and he discussed the date and mythology of the local well god with an ease and confidence that suggested he wasn't your typical farmer.

He wasn't.

Chen Fadi, the man's name, later surprised us by showing up at dinner, which we took outside in front of a small boarding house in the village center. We learned - and none was shocked - that before retiring he was a music teacher, and a teacher of a number of other subjects as well. Affable, informed, and charming, he told me tracked us down to bring us some seeds from a tree that was now growing in his garden but which he had transplanted from the mountainside. The seeds were from the hong'dou san tree (yew), which grows slowly and patiently.

Inside the envelope were instructions as to how to plant the seeds and care for the frond. We promised we'd follow them to the letter, and return one day to Ming'ao with photos of the seedling.

We will.

The charisma of Nanxi is not just the idyllic romance that one would surely envision about this place. There is something triumphant about it, something like a grand finale to an orchestral piece, which I felt strongly is the very indescribable thing I was running to. The ambiguous feelings were not sorted out until we strolled into the Ming'ao village, which was the last leg of our journey, and were shown by the local guide the twelve stone lions that were said to have survived the honing of more than one thousand year. The lions are mischievous-looking and self-content, antique but post-modern at once. The beauty in their expression defies mere words. Standing in front of them under the cobalt-blue sky and surrounded by sprawling weeds, I was speechless, intimated and eclipsed. All adjectives were twee and inadequate. The lions were the last pieces to complete the puzzle of Nanxi, and the incarnation of the local civilization.

I am dying to be there again when the place is enveloped in the aroma of the autumn, woods blazed in the full warmth of fall and red as henna.

Your bing? No, mai'bing!

You won't want to leave Yongjia without trying the *mai'bing*, a kind of nan bread stuffed with pickled vegetables, and possibly bits of tasty pork fat — individual families and vendors vary the recipe (and the prices) slightly. You've probably had something like this before - they're often flogged on city streets, probably one near you.. But the Yongjia *mai'bing* can perhaps claim justifiably to be unique, and possibly the granddaddy of this type of rural cuisine. They make a great breakfast, and a super lunch if you're on the go scampering up terraced fields, fording streams, and riding bamboo rafts. They're served hot, and stay hot for a while — bite with care. They're also flat, and fairly thin, and therefore quite portable. Toss a half dozen or so in a paper bag and keep them in your back pack.

About Yongjia County

Located in southern Zhejiang, Yongjia County belongs to the lower reaches of Ou River. The county government is in Shangtang Town. Yongjia is dubbed 'Home of Pump and Valve', 'Home of Wuniuzao Tea', and 'the Oriental Capital of Buttons'. Yongjia is blessed with a mild climate with ample rainfall and an annual average temperature of 18.2 centigrade. Yongjia boasts a history of 1,400 years. The place is worth touring also because of its numerous celebrities in ancient times, such as the famous calligrapher Wang Xizhi and the poet Xie Lingyun. Its cultural heritage includes the Yongjia School, which is one of the major philosophical schools in China, and the Yongjia Kun Opera.

楠溪江旅游景点图 Nanxi River Scenic Map

Gangyao Street: Pottery

It was hot, bordering on hotter-than-hell hot, and I was happy that I'd shaved my head before we set out for Yongjia. But heat, like about everything else, is relative. On one of Yongjia's main drags - there are only a few, and even the good ones have stretches that are pockmarked, bumpy, and in the midst of repair - we found a place that specializes in making large earthen pots known as gang. Smaller vessels like this are used for storing cooking oils and wines, and can be found outside the backs of restaurants. These large gang, we're told, are used for the collection of rainwater, and used in processing vegetables (xian'cai, salted vegetables, and pao'cai, pickled vegetables).

So back to the relativity of heat.

The kiln, following a centuries-old design, is about 35 meters long, and perhaps just shy of three meters wide. From its base to the top (where the furnace is) it rises to an incline of about 20 degrees. The temperature inside is over 1300 degrees centigrade, and on spine of the kiln, where a small team of sweaty, sooty labourers stuff fuel (branches and sticks) into an aperture above the furnace, we're guessing that it was over 50.

For their efforts, the furnace-stokers are paid RMB 60 per day. Their shift lasts nine hours, non-stop - they take short breaks in rotation, but no 90-minute lunches with a nap time. The kiln is not always in operation, so when the fire's on it's kept on until the process is competed.

Needless to say, they didn't have much time for chatting with us.

It was a relief to step away from the furnace and back into the blazing sun.