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A Chinese Village in Transformation

When Occidental Petroleum chairman Armand Hammer visited China in November, 1984, he presented Vice Premier Deng Xiao-ping with an oil painting titled *Memory of My Hometown* by Chen Yifei, then a young Chinese art student in the United States. The painting used Zhouzhuang's Shuang Qiao (Twin Bridge) as its focal point.

At that time, Zhouzhuang, a small fishing community some 20 miles southeast of Suzhou, was virtually unknown to the outside world. Premier Deng had no knowledge of this place and, in fact, very few Chinese who lived outside the area had ever heard of it. Hammer's visit, and his gift, were a turning point in the fate of this fishing village.

The occasion became national news; Zhouzhuang was then visited by scholars, celebrities and high-ranking political leaders and was declared to be one of the few remaining well-preserved historic villages in southeastern China. A faculty-student team from the urban planning department of Tongji University, in Shanghai, prepared plans for preserving, restoring and re-designing the town. With its steady increase in national and international visibility, Zhouzhuang has become one of the most popular tourist spots in the Shanghai/Suzhou region, boasting from four to five thousand visitors each day during the tourist season.

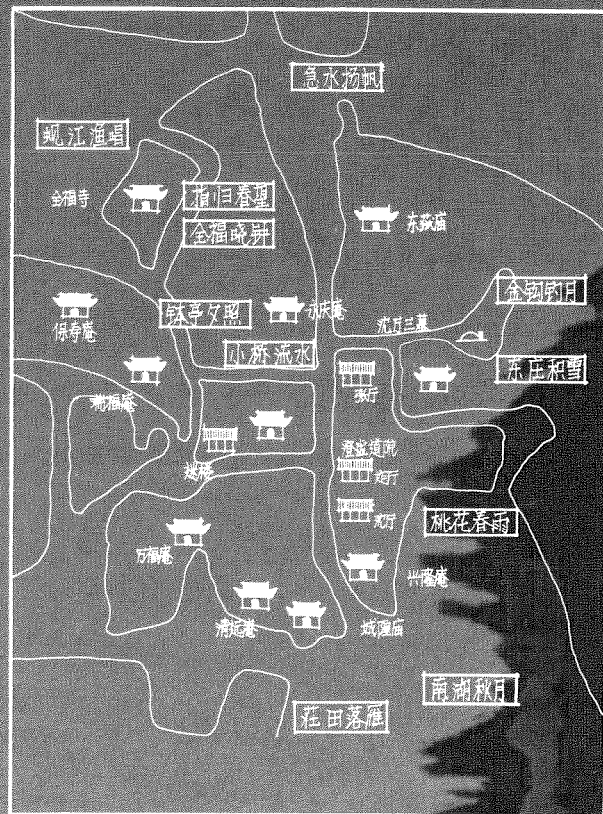
Ruan Yisan, an urban planning professor at Tongji, has been a leader of the preservation effort. Alerted by the alarming rate at which Chinese vernacular towns and villages are being spoiled by the country's modernization movement, Ruan is working on saving remaining, well-preserved historic townships. He identified Zhouzhuang as a test case and mobilized, almost single-handedly, resources and enormous support to advance his cause.

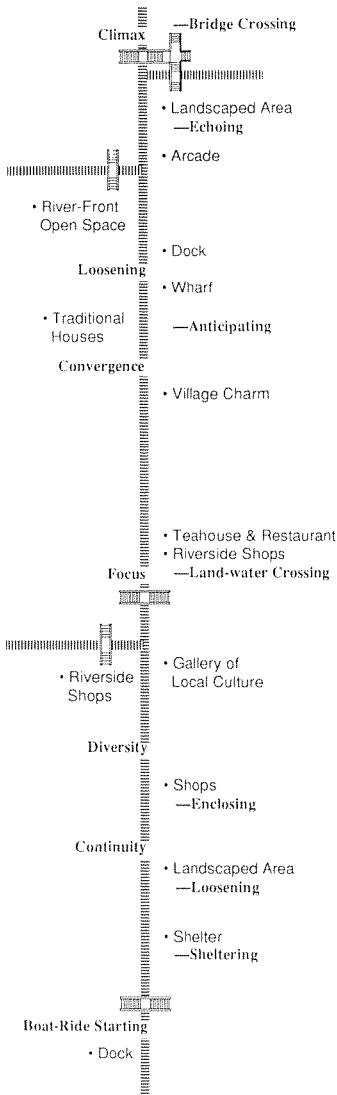
Joseph C. Wang

**An ancient map of
Zhouzhuang's historic scenic
spots, temples and famous
mansions.**

**Fishing in Nan Hu (South Lake),
south of Zhouzhuang.
Photo by Dan Redmond.**

周莊歷史景點·寺廟·名宅分布

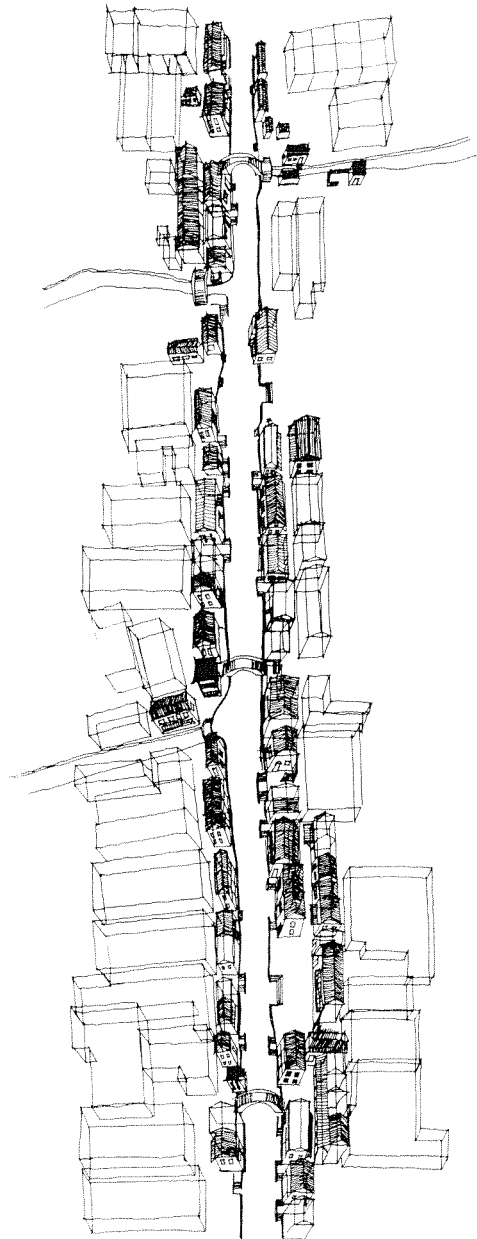




(Left) The Redesign of Nanshihe-Beishihe Waterway and Planning Ideals. Redrawn by Men-chou Liu.

(Right) A birdseye view of Nanshihe-Beishihe Waterway looking north. Fu-an Bridge, the center of the old town, is in the middle.

Sketch by Janey Chan.



All drawings have been redrawn from the Tongji University study of and plan for Zhouzhuang.

In 1985, as now, there was no legislation for protecting historic places (as opposed to monuments) in China. The only official acts promoting cultural and historic awareness in the physical environment came in 1982 and 1986, when the government issued lists of “Famous Historic and Cultural Cities” and called upon people “to take actions to protect, rebuild and administer these cities.” A report accompanying the 1986 list suggests that “people’s governments at the provincial, municipal, or county level should identify the historic and cultural sites in their jurisdiction; local rules should be enforced to protect and maintain the historic sites while non-construction zones should be defined.” These statements contain implications for preservation policy but provide no specific details.

Working within this ambiguous climate, Ruan managed to obtain a small grant to conduct field studies in Zhouzhuang, to publish a significant survey report and to hold, within the village, a conference on the theme of preserving and protecting historic townships. Celebrities and local and provincial politicians participated in the conference, which was given wide publicity in newspapers and on television.

One of the greatest obstacles Ruan encountered in his push for preserving Zhouzhuang was the village chief. “Chief Gu Genyuan was a staunch believer in modernization. He ridiculed the notion of historic preservation and refused to see me when I first visited the village,” Ruan recalled. “In the end, we became the best of friends.” Gu was interested in Zhouzhuang’s economic growth, and as he became convinced the town could have both new industry and preservation, he became a supporter of Ruan’s efforts.



A Tour of Zhouzhuang

I visited Zhouzhuang on a cold day in November, 1986, with Ruan and his Tongji colleagues. After a three-hour ride from Shanghai, we stopped at the bank of the Jishuigang (rough water harbor), an important shipping lane north of the village, and crossed it by ferry to reach Zhouzhuang.

As we headed south after landing at the village proper, my attention was drawn to a vast expanse of farmland to the west, dotted with low-rise farm houses on the distant horizon. The flat, featureless landscape, which had been readied for the next planting, gave a clue to the socioeconomic character of this rural community, whose residents are lower-income, not well-educated and engaged in manual labor, such as farming and fishing.

Following a straight, narrow road of pounded earth in the middle of the open field, we arrived at a hostel — a modern looking, two-story building of reinforced concrete construction.

Chief Gu greeted us warmly; he and his staff briefed us on the history and status of the village. They were proud that Zhouzhuang, unlike more enterprising townships in the area, had boosted its economy while preserving and maintaining the original Ming-era (1368-1644) and Qing-era (1644-1911) appearance of the village and its architecture. The village's natural setting contributed to its uncontaminated state, they pointed out. Surrounded by water, Zhouzhuang owes its integrity to its physical isolation from the outside world.

Zhouzhuang, located on the lower reaches of the Yangtze River in Jiangsu province, is one of 264 townships and villages scattered throughout this “water country.” Because of the network of lakes and rivers, fertile land and abundant products, the area has long been known as the “land of fish and rice.” The region attracted wealthy merchants and retired govern-

Riverside houses built on revetments are mirrored in Qiangangshihe, the east-west river in the old town.
Photo by David Sunkel.

ment officials who established their households in this prosperous “land of brilliant mountains and graceful rivers, and also the homeland of exceptional people,” as an old Chinese saying goes. Some of their residences, built mostly during the Ming and Qing periods, have survived the turmoil of historic disasters and are well maintained and still actively used.

A wealthy landlord named Zhou Di first established the village for farming in 1086 and donated land to build a temple complex for the community. In appreciation, the villagers named the community Zhouzhuang, or (Zhou Village). Not until the millionaire Shen Wan-san set up his headquarters in Zhouzhuang near the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), the village enjoyed the biggest expansion since its founding. It was during this time that the Nanshihe-Beishihe, the north-

south main waterway, established itself as the village center with Fu-an Bridge (1335) as its focal point.

The population in 1986, according to the Tongji University survey, was 1,838 persons (in 707 households) of which 802 were farmers. In addition, more than 3,000 transient workers commuted daily to Zhouzhuang from nearby communities to fish in the surrounding lakes or to work in the village’s 15 factories.

The village consists of seven islands linked by 19 stone bridges, many of which are arched and were built during the Ming and Qing periods. Zhouzhuang’s waterways are natural in form and vary in width. Main streets in the village are laid parallel to the waterways, which carve the land into small, intimate groupings of bridges, houses and shops. Bridges, the places where water and land come together, are

**Looking south along Beishihe
from Shuang Qiao; Fu-an Bridge
is visible in the distance.
Photo by David Sunkel.**

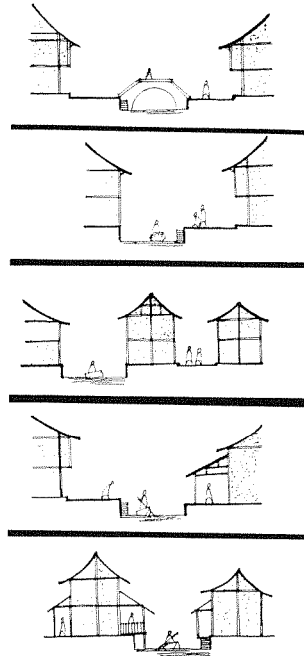


more than circulation connectors. Historically, the placement of a bridge marked a focal point in the social, economical and artistic life of the villagers. Usually, a bridge is near a tea house and a wharf that provides access to the water.

The physical shape of the village is influenced by *Zhou Li* (*The Book of Rites*), a predominant method of making places in China. *Zhou Li* contains an implicit prescription that a Chinese city should be planned as a gridded square, oriented north-south and enclosed by a wall. These “genes” have been followed over the centuries, not only in cities of all scales and types but also in the planning of urban and rural dwellings. In Zhouzhuang, the main waterway runs north-south, and traditional village houses, both large and small, are designed as miniature cities.

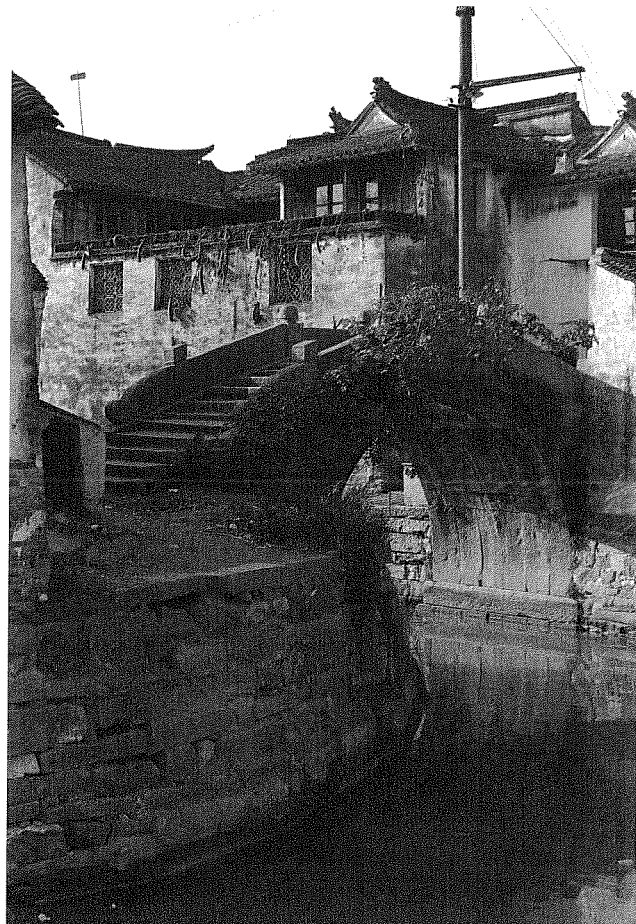
The design of buildings in Zhouzhuang evolved from local conditions and in a scale appropriate to its character and setting. Most are designed to face streets on one side and water on the other — watertowns traditionally rely almost exclusively on water for transportation, trading and domestic activities. Most houses are two stories; the ground floor is used for workshops, storage and shops, and private living space is upstairs.

Most buildings in the village are one- or two-story timber-framed structures with grey tile roofs and white-washed exterior walls. Following traditional Chinese building principles, all houses and public buildings in Zhouzhuang used post-and-lintel construction, with timber as the skeleton and brick or masonry walls as non-load-bearing enclosures and partitions. Anonymous carpenters and artisans carried out the “design” and construction of buildings, conforming mainly to age-old conventions.



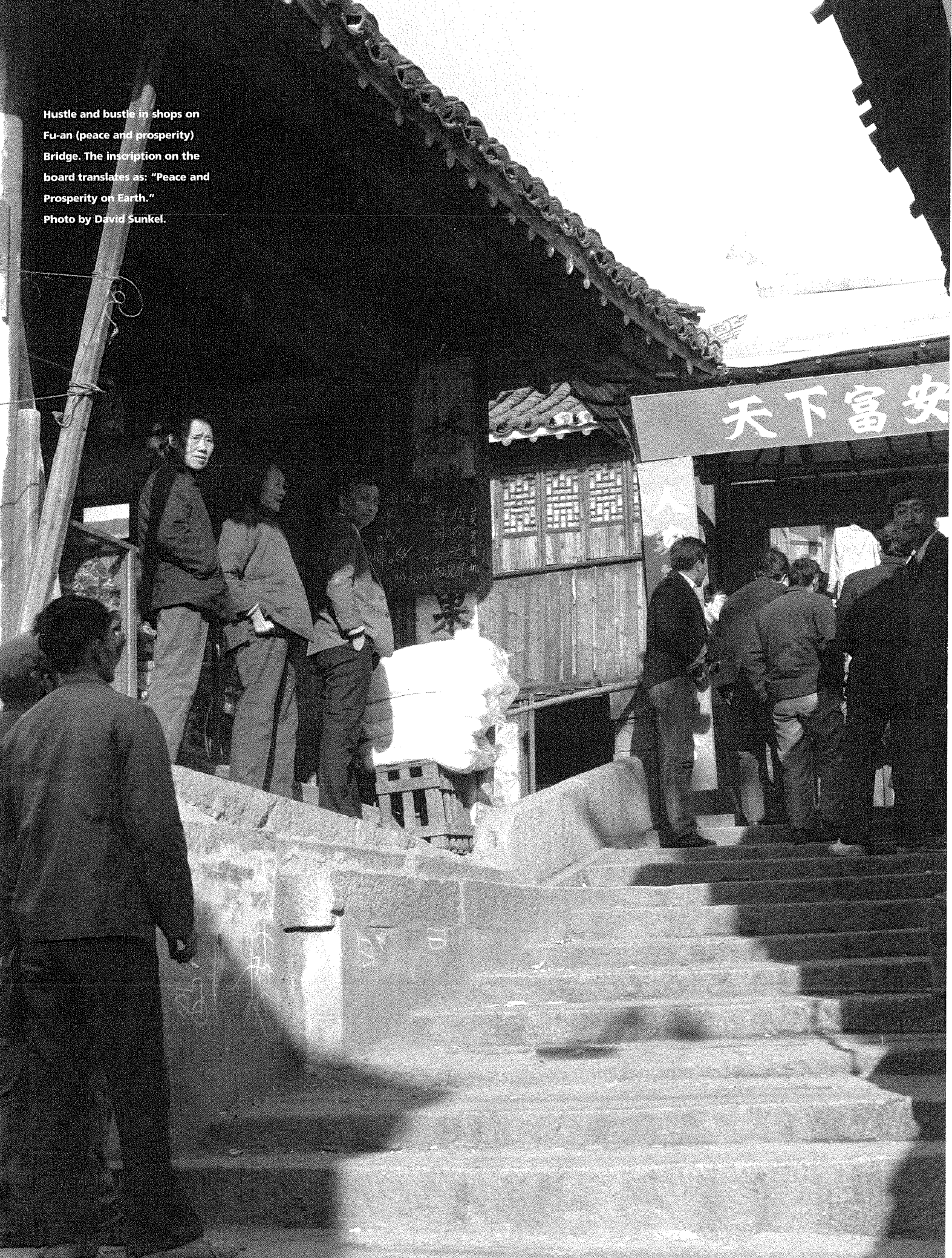
Typical river-street-building relationships found in Zhouzhuang. Redrawn by Ryadi Adityavarman.

Taiping Bridge, built during the Ming Dynasty. Photo by David Sunkel.



Hustle and bustle in shops on
Fu-an (peace and prosperity)
Bridge. The inscription on the
board translates as: "Peace and
Prosperity on Earth."

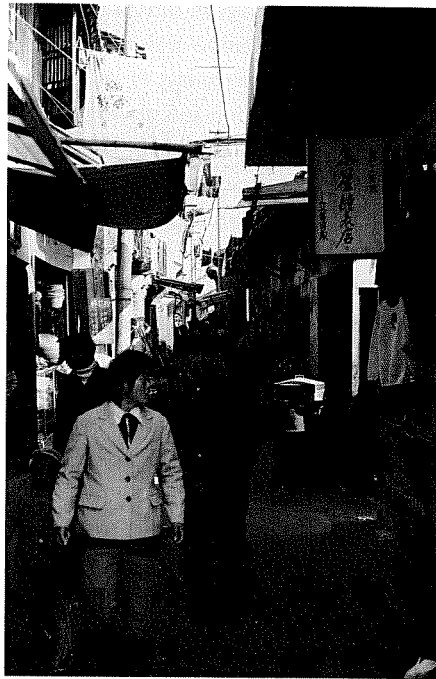
Photo by David Sunkel.



The predominantly black-and-white color scheme is highlighted in spots by dark brown woodwork and deep red window frames on the building facades. This plain color scheme derived from the construction materials that were available locally and from a traditional deference to the more exuberant color schemes used for royal buildings. Recent construction has used reddish-orange roof tiles, a sign of assertiveness and modernity.

The Tongji plan and study included detailed observations about the relationship between rhythms of village life and its public spaces. At daybreak, rivers, water squares and wharfs provide the central stage for the hustle and bustle of shipping and trading with farmers as main players. Activities gradually shift to the land near mid-morning, when streets become the setting for social interactions, business transactions and leisure.

Rivers play a dominant role in the community as the day goes on. When



A shopping street in Zhouzhuang.
Photo by David Sunkel.

A PROFILE OF VILLAGE LIFE

	4:00-5:00	5:00-6:00	6:00-7:00	7:00-8:00	8:00-10:00	10:00-12:00	12:00-13:00	13:00-16:00	16:00-18:00	18:00-21:00	21:00-22:00
PARTICIPANTS											
ACTIVITIES LOCATIONS	· RIVER · STREET	· WATER SQUARE · BRIDGE · WHOLESALE STATION	· VILLAGE CENTER (NEAR BRIDGE)	· STREET · SCHOOLS · WORKPLACES	· TEA HOUSE · PARK · HOUSE ENTRANCE · GAME PARLOR · SHOPS · CINEMA	· TEA HOUSE · RESTAURANT · HOUSE ENTRANCE · STREET · RIVER · WHARF · HOME	· VILLAGE CENTER · PARK · FARMER'S MARKET (NEAR BRIDGE)	· TEA HOUSE · WHARF · WHARF · RIVER · HOUSE ENTRANCE	· BRIDGE · WHARF · STREET · HOUSE ENTRANCE	· STORY TELLING · "THEATRE" · RECREATIONAL FACILITIES · CENTRAL "PLAZA" · HOME	· HOME
ACTIVITY TYPES	· BOATING · CYCLING · (SOME) FARMERS WALKING TO TOWN	· WASHING · COOKING · PURCHASING · SETTING UP SPALLS AT MARKET · TRADING	· PURCHASING · TRADING · GOING TO MARKET	· GOING TO WORK · GOING TO SCHOOL	· TEA DRINKING · CHATTING · WINDOW SHOPPING	· NAPPING · COOKING · WASHING · FARMER LEAVING TOWN	· BUSINESS ACTIVITIES	· NAPPING · HOUSEHOLD WORK · FARMER LEAVING TOWN	· SOCIAL GATHERING · CHATTING · DINING · WASHING · VISITING NEIGHBOUR	· STORY TELLING · WATCHING MOVIES, TV · DATING (DANCE, EX.) · VISITING NEIGHBOURS · STUDYING · READING	· RESTING
PRIMARY SPACES	· WATERSPACE · LANDSPACE	· WATER · LAND	· LAND	· LAND	· WATER · LAND	· WATER · LAND	· LAND	· WATER · LAND	· WATER · LAND	· LAND	· LAND

farmers and their boats are gone, domestic activities like washing and socializing at the waterfront will replace them. The day ends early as the only night spots in the village are a cinema and a few game parlors where ping pong, billiards and video games are available. Zhouzhuang's social life primarily involves visiting neighbors, the traditional lady's afternoon *ab pou* tea party and watching television.

In order to accommodate the variety and density of human activities, village spaces by necessity are multi-functional. For example, very few residents have moved out of the old town since its designation as a preservation district. For them, life goes on as usual as they run their shops or simply enjoy their retirement. There are only a few open spaces in the old town, but they

function efficiently in turn as the farmers' wholesale station at dawn, retail market by mid-morning, drying plaza for laundry at noon and playing field for children during evening hours.

Streets in these neighborhoods have become a natural extension of living rooms. Since there is no vehicular traffic in the area, domestic activities take place freely in the streets. In such cases, the division between private and public is ambiguous and the definitions of dwelling and street are flexible.

The Zhouzhuang Plan

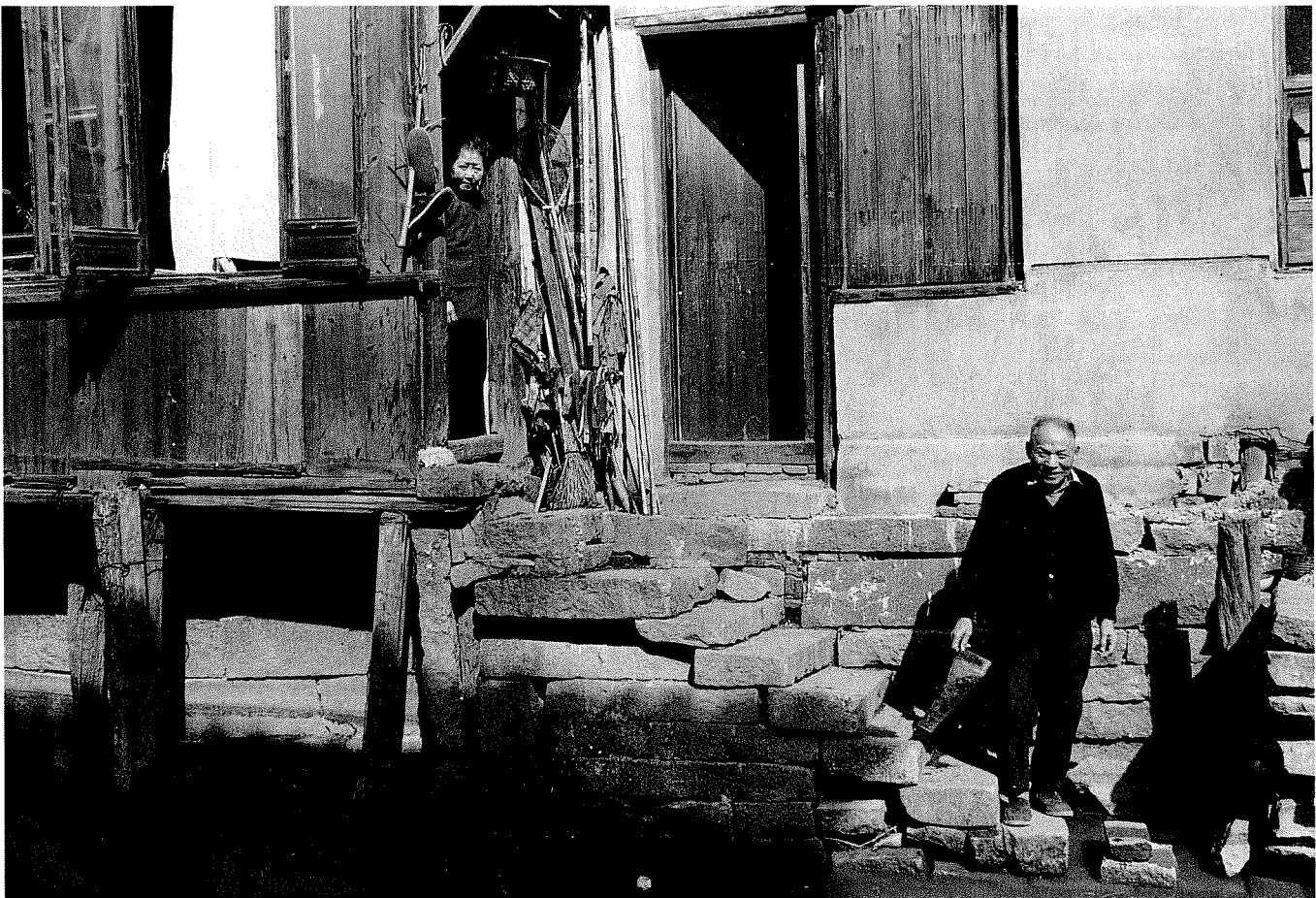
The Tongji proposal for the conservation and redesign of Zhouzhuang, finished in 1986, includes long- and short-range plans. Its guiding principles are the separation of developing

Houses in Zhouzhuang have private entrances along the waterways.

Photo by Dan Redmond.

industries from the old village center and the routing of regional highways away from the historic district, making the village core an environment that is relatively pollution-free and for pedestrians only.

So far, the short-range plan has resulted in several actions, including several government-sponsored adaptive reuse projects meant to improve prospects for tourism. An elementary school was converted into a hostel and restaurant, a "cultural palace" was turned into a hotel and the largest house in the village, the Shen Mansion, became a local history museum and restaurants. The Tongji effort also resulted in a number of economic development actions. A number of new industries, including a chemical plant and a factory that produces building



materials, were built in an industrial area north of Jishuigang.

Of particular interest to future tourism is the proposed redesign of the Nanshihe-Beishihe, the north-south waterway. Included in the design are several waterfront teahouses and restaurants, small shops, an art gallery, landscaped open spaces and docks for oarsmen-operated pleasure boats, all creating a sequence of water/land touring experiences for future visitors. These would be operated by the government or by *danwei* (work groups), but none has attracted funding.

The Tongji team also established a set of “design ideals,” a unique Chinese approach to environmental design, to enhance the experience of moving along the 400-meter long waterway. Planners mapped onto the natural terrain a semantic scheme that would allow visitors to experience a sequence of spatial variations in the scale and character of the land-water spaces along the north-south waterway.

Along Zhouzhuang’s Nanshihe-Beishihe waterway, a north-bound boat ride will provide, for example, a sense of SHELTERING security, LOOS-ENING delight, ENCLOSING comfort and ANTICIPATING excitement as the boat approaches the Twin Bridge, the climax of the tour. Also, as the tour nears its end, the design offers an ECHOING memory of the beginning section of the waterway, returning to the original theme.

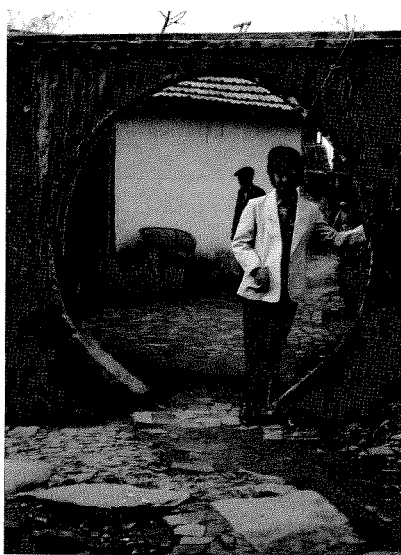
The design ideals were drawn from the planners’ evaluation of the character of the waterway. The plan called for reinforcing these ideals with selective infill construction and careful alterations to facades of buildings that face the waterway.

This approach is similar to that used by ancient landscape painters to



Typical grey tile roofs and whitewashed exterior walls of traditional houses.

Photo by Janey Chan.



Homecoming visit by a Zhouzhuang native.

Photo by Janey Chan.

A view of a residential section of the village; some houses are relatively new construction in the traditional vernacular style. Photo by David Sunkel.

lay out the scenes depicted on their handscrolls and by garden designers, who manipulated landscape elements to create desired effects in gardens. The common denominator of these endeavors is the use of language as a catalyst and guide for design. Ideal states are poetically expressed in simple, yet elegant terms. The designer, or artist, is challenged to “translate” these attributes into physical realities.

Zhouzhuang Since the Plan

Today Zhouzhuang appears to be prospering. A highway bridge was completed over Jishuigang, at the northern tip of the village. New housing continues to be built in the northwestern section, and electricity and running water have been supplied to the entire community.

Tourism has increased the villagers’ wealth, yet their living conditions remain substandard. Andrew Powell, an architecture student of mine who visited Zhouzhuang in 1991, filed a report that included these comments:

An architecture professor at Tongji University gave us a lecture on the watertowns in the Yangze delta region the other day and he described a visit he had with a villager there. The inhabitant said he would rather live in the professor’s apartment in Sbanghai in the mainstream of changing culture and the professor could live in his dirt-floored watertown house in bad conditions if [the professor] felt the watertown was so wonderful. The professor confessed he couldn’t do it! How can we as architects force those people to live in such poor conditions, isolated from the new China, just so we have a nice place to visit and preserve traditional houses? ... Is the value of [historic] preservation worth the price inhabitants have to pay?

Homes have no heating and sanitary facilities. Overcrowding, poor

lighting and ventilation, and the deterioration of traditional timber frame structures threaten the occupant’s safety and well-being. Most houses are state owned and the concept and practice of maintenance are not well ingrained. Professionals and politicians have been unable to come to grips with this issue and its problems.

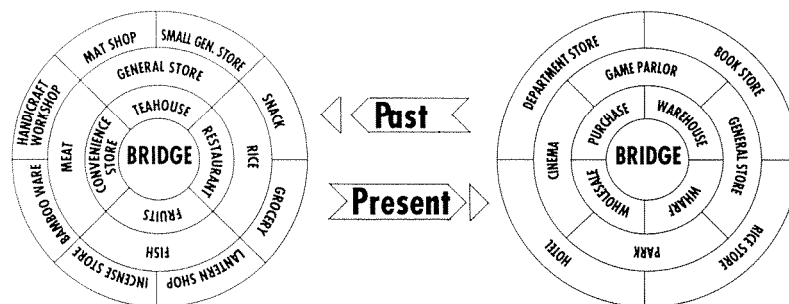
Nevertheless, the achievements of and experiences gained in Zhouzhuang’s preservation effort are viewed by many as exemplary. They are already referred to as precedents for similar programs for nearby villages.

The greatest achievement, according to Ruan, is the villagers’ change of attitude toward their heritage. “Before we got involved, the residents of Zhouzhuang felt rather ashamed of the dilapidated conditions of their village and were extremely reluctant to show visitors around and allow pictures to be taken,” he said. “Today, the residents are very proud of their little village, realizing the real value of historic artifacts and places.”

Another accomplishment, Ruan and his colleagues proudly claim, is that no new construction of modern design has occurred since 1986, and very few old structures have been torn down.

Although those successes have brought prosperity to this once humble and peaceful community, they also have brought problems. At issue is the village’s readiness for the sudden burst of tourism. Can the quantity and quality of services and facilities cope with the ever-increasing number of visitors?

Before it became famous, Zhouzhuang was a place for artists and romanticists, for tranquility and meditation, and, above all, for a taste of the simple, rustic and quiet pastoral life of the historic past. Whether the crowds of people in narrow streets and on small bridges can be avoided in the near future by skilled tourist management remains to be seen. As China is pushing forward to preserve its splendid historic places, hard lessons have to be learned. The lessons of Zhouzhuang are a good beginning.



The changing character of bridges as places for village life. Redrawn by Sam X. B. Yue.

