

REPORT ON NZCFS TRIP TO QINGPU DISTRICT

Thursday, Sep 5 2013

Qingpu District, 1½ hours from central Shanghai, is the westernmost district of Shanghai Municipality, bordering Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces. The surroundings of its most notable feature, [Dianshan Lake](#) have been developed for tourists.

First stop for us was the gracious garden of a salt merchant named Ma. Sometimes called ‘Ma Family Garden’ it’s also named **‘Kezhi¹ Garden’** which apparently—with admirable Chinese brevity—means ‘not to forget to till the land while learning knowledge from books’. The construction of its pavilions and pools, courtyards and pathways began in 1912 and continued over 15 years.



Tony, a guide from the area, led us through the garden with the pride, ceremony and triumphant jokes-for-foreigners characteristic of China’s inimitable local guides. Who could fail to be humbled by being addressed as ‘my dear foreign friends’ or ‘my dear ladies and gentlemen’?

His explanations of the mansion and garden took us back to the elaborate courtesies and protocols of an earlier China, when one of the concerns in designing interior space was to filter encounters between men and women, household and guests—in obedience to social convention.

The garden, with its many closely related spaces, revealed itself discreetly, as one hidden ‘room’ opened upon another. Behind such intricate spatial harmony must lie centuries of gardening discipline. Scarlet lanterns and white walls, grainy wooden rails and secretive rocky shapes, green leaves hanging still over their reflection in water—all suggested a deep internal balance. And the almost tangible contemplative atmosphere somehow survived even the presumption of our chatty tourist invasion.

In nearby [Zhu Jiajiao](#), an ancient water village, a web of peaceful canals is lined with little old houses built into the banks on brick and stone. Where age has worn away the outer facings of these foundations, the underlayers of their history are endearingly laid bare.

We took to the water in richly glossy wooden boats that wove silently among others under overhanging washing and



¹ Literally, Ke = schooling and Zhi = cultivation.

caged birds and slipped under humped-back bridges. Sometimes a view along an intersecting canal allowed us to see delicate arcs of distant bridges topped with a tracery of crossing figures. This was an intimate world, slow and dreamy.



As we wandered the narrow lanes of small shops, among the usual tourist wares we came upon goods of real originality and integrity from local artisans. Maggie, trying to muster her wayward charges for the homeward journey, showed extraordinary patience as we kept darting back into the shops for just one more look, just one more spend.

Jane Hole (Christchurch member), September, 2013

This visit was part of an NZCFS Delegation to Shanghai organised by Shanghai *Youxie* [Shanghai Peoples Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries]. Other major events were the signing of a Memorandum of Interest regarding exchanges with the Shanghai Writers Association and the possible setting up of choral exchanges for Dunedin Choral Society.