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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

Jiangnan: Views of a Contemporary Chinese Water Town

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The inspiration for these striking photographic images comes from deep inside George Zhijian Qiao, a Stanford graduate student from Jiangnan. Near the famous historical cities of Suzhou and Hangzhou, his hometown of Shengze is not so well known, though it, along with hundreds of other small cities and towns, is mightily contributing to China's economic boom. Now a site of textile production, Shengze is rapidly changing, with its traditional physical appearance transformed by power lines, factories, cars, and modern conveniences. But much remains the same: the solidity and scrabble of everyday life, the grime of old houses and buildings, the presence of the elderly at home. George is both an insider and outsider to this life: he is deeply connected to it still, though he lives here in California, but he also can see it afresh. He sees the colors of the old and faded but also the geometry of architecture and new juxtapositions of people and things. He sees the enduring beauty of the water and greenery for which the region is well known. He sees the self-satisfaction and anxiety of the entrepreneurial generation. Some things in George's images look like they will never change, while others are ephemeral, waiting for destruction, reconstruction, and transformation. Does he want us to sing or sigh?

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Jiangnan, meaning "South of the River," refers to the Yangtze Delta region in East China. For the last millennium, this region has been at the heart of the most dynamic and sophisticated area of the country. The mere mention of Jiangnan evokes lyrical images of a Chinese water town, with white houses and willows growing along riverbanks, where poets wandered and romantic encounters took place. This photo essay documents the contemporary urban and human landscape of my hometown, Shengze, once a quintessential and prosperous water town of Jiangnan. In doing so, I hope to show what has become of Jiangnan—its space and its people—at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Before you plunge into the images, let me first

introduce the history of Shengze—a history that resonates well beyond the confines of this small town.

Shengze: A Brief History

Today, Shengze is a township under the jurisdiction of Wujiang District of Suzhou City, Jiangsu Province, with Shanghai to its east, Suzhou to its north, and Hangzhou to its south—in other words, in the core area of Jiangnan. Surrounded by water and built across rivers, the original town was founded as a marketplace for the silk industry in neighboring villages in the late Ming, when commercialization gathered pace in the Yangtze Delta. Students of Chinese history are likely to be familiar with the case of Shi Fu (from Feng Menglong's collections of vernacular stories), often quoted in history textbooks to illustrate the sprouting of capitalism in China during the sixteenth century. Shi Fu, a local resident of Shengze, made his fortune by organizing workshops for silk production and employing workers as wage laborers—a new capitalist relationship of production, as Marxist historians would like to point out. From that point on, Shengze's significance in the silk industry continued to grow. With its crisscrossing rivers providing convenient conduits of transportation, Shengze emerged as one of four silk centers in the country, the other three being Suzhou, Hangzhou, and Huzhou, all prefectural-level cities. By the late Qing, Shengze boasted a sizable and densely populated urban area that encompassed thirteen elegant stone bridges, seventy-two alleyways, dozens of merchant guild halls, many beautiful Huizhou-style townhouses along the river, and numerous temples, including a glorious one dedicated to Lord Guan that was the envy of neighboring towns. Local elders with long memories often lamented that the remaining Jiangnan water towns—such as Wuzhen, Tongli, Zhouzhuang, and Xitang, all popular tourist destinations today—could never rival the grandeur of old Shengze.

Like many other places in China, Shengze witnessed a contentious and wretched modernization process that brought about as much destruction as prosperity. In the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of forward-thinking entrepreneurs—or national capitalists, as they were later labeled by the Communists—established modern weaving and dyeing factories that not only formed the industrial basis of the town but also introduced large chimneys and factory buildings into an expanding urban space. After the Communist takeover, these modern factories were nationalized in the 1950s and became the work units in which most members of the urban

population were employed and lived their lives. Industrial workers dominated the town during the Mao era. The early decades of the People's Republic of China also witnessed a series of modernization projects **and** political movements that forever altered the water town. On the one hand, the market river was converted into a walkable street, and the lakes outside the town were transformed into arable land in the aftermath of the great famine (1958–1962). Wheeled vehicles began to replace boats as the primary means of transportation. On the other hand, the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution not only led to an armed civil war between rival factions of young rebels, but also led to the destruction of temples and shrines and forced the traditional elite families of the town to burn their cherished collections of cultural treasures. In the early 1970s, hundreds of teenagers were exiled to the coastal farms of northern Jiangsu hundreds of miles away to dig irrigation trenches. In other words, Shengze had its fair share of “sent-down youth.” On the eve of Deng Xiaoping's reform era, Shengze was no longer what it had once been. Families had been shattered, scars abounded, and trauma lingered.

But greater changes were about to take place. Beginning in the 1980s, market-oriented reforms, together with the loosening of state control over the economy and society, unleashed an unstoppable gush of entrepreneurial energy that proved to be a more powerful force of transformation than anything this town had witnessed since its inception. In 1986, with support from the silk industry and the local government, an official market with the grand name of “The Silk Market of the East” was established, aimed at making Shengze the national center of the silk trade in the new age. It turned out to be very successful. Many local residents, including managers and workers in state-owned factories, and villagers and craftspeople from the outskirts of town, rushed into the market seeking opportunities to improve their modest living conditions. Silk and textile merchants from all over the country began to flock to Shengze to take advantage of the trade concentration.

Before long, many businesspeople turned away from silk and applied their expertise and knowledge of the ancient cloth to producing and selling a more modern textile: petroleum-based synthetic fabric. A group of new weaving and dyeing factories, first created by rural entrepreneurs and nominally owned by their village collectives, began to pop up on the outskirts of Shengze. These factories were a defining feature of the much-touted Southern Jiangsu model of industrial development. In the late 1990s, the state promoted a policy of privatization that transferred state-owned factories into the hands of their managers. At the same time, a wider

wave of industrial development took place as traders who had accumulated enough money and social capital took advantage of favorable state policies to buy land and build factories of their own. Luckily for them, the market exploded after 2001, when China entered the World Trade Organization, and the wealth of these factory owners multiplied, leading to an upsurge in new factories. While the Mao-era Shengze boasted five large silk-weaving factories and three major dyeing factories, today the town and its rural hinterland have managed to squeeze in over two thousand textile factories and six thousand trading firms. While traditional Shengze boasted a productivity rate of ten thousand bolts of silk per day, its factories churned out over 10 billion meters of synthetic fabric in 2012 alone, an amount equivalent to nearly 30 million meters of synthetic fabric every single day.¹

As a result of such growth in the textile industry, the town has become unrecognizable. Among other things, the thousands of factories require a substantial workforce, but few locals are content with working on the shop floor anymore. Migrant workers, mostly from the poor Anhui and Henan Provinces, have flooded in to sell their labor. In the early 1980s, Shengze had an urban population of roughly thirty thousand; even including its rural hinterland, the total population of the area under the administration of Shengze amounted to no more than one hundred thousand. By 2013, however, official statistics suggest that the town housed close to half a million people, including over three hundred thousand migrant workers who had arrived within the last three decades.

The population explosion went hand in hand with the uncontrollable expansion of urban space: rice farms have all been transformed into industrial and urban land, while villages are being incorporated into the town. In the last fifteen years, two smaller neighboring towns have even been annexed. Maoist-era destruction partly altered the outlook of Shengze as a water town by filling up some rivers and lakes. Now, three decades into the reform era, only a very small area of Shengze is faintly redolent of a traditional water town. Outside that small area, Shengze has become a dusty site of continuous construction for new apartment compounds, new market districts, new roads, new shopping streets, new restaurants, new karaoke joints, new gyms, and, most ironically, new swimming pools—not that dissimilar from any other poorly planned and ill-managed third-tier city in modern-day China. Even the old quarter of the water town has forever changed. As all but the very elderly in the local population have moved away from the traditional riverbank houses where they grew up to modern apartments, the older district has become the

area where migrant workers are concentrated—the dilapidated conditions and unmodernized facilities of the old houses mean low rent. Consequently, the local dialect can rarely be heard anymore, even in the most traditional part of the town. Along with the fading of the water town, boats have receded into history, and cars have taken over. In today’s Shengze, cars of all styles and brands—from Bentley, Ferrari, and Lamborghini to Toyota and Ford—along with motorized bicycles and human-powered tricycles, all cram the same busy and noisy streets and occasionally bump into each other. It is, as the well-known slogans say, a “harmonious society” with contemporary “Chinese characteristics,” but it is no longer the water town of Jiangnan brimming with romantic elegance.

Shengze: A Tale of Survivors

Recounting the history of Shengze, and especially depicting the most dramatic changes that have occurred over the last few decades, has been an emotional journey, rather than a scholarly endeavor, for me. My understanding of what has taken place there since the 1980s is based not on textbook knowledge but on lived experience. Growing up in an apartment compound provided by the dyeing factory where my father worked, I strolled every day along the riverbank to go to school, passing by my grandparents’ little place—a small section of a traditional Huizhou-style townhouse on the riverbank next to an ancient stone bridge. This townhouse used to belong to a wealthy family but was confiscated, divided, and redistributed in the 1950s by the Communists. I had my lunches at their table and played with other kids in the narrow alleys paved with old yellow and blue slates—often slippery on rainy days because they were worn smooth from years of use. I remember watching older kids swimming in the river and scooping up tiny fish with bowls when I was little, but the river suddenly began to change color when I entered the last years of elementary school. Red on some days, blue or purple on others—it was a spectacle for the eyes, but one that often came with stinky smells... and no more fish. All of a sudden, a gigantic metal pipeline appeared along the river, and even ran across the stone bridge. It was used to transport steam from the thermal power plant to factories. Since then, the color-changing river and the pipeline-laden bridge have stayed in my memory. In many ways, that juxtaposition of the ugly modern and the elegant past shaped my life: the ugly modern pushed me away from Shengze, while the elegant past became a fascination. After high school, I left Shengze to pursue my interest in classical Chinese literature in the modern metropolis of

Shanghai, eventually leaving China altogether to study imperial Chinese history at Stanford.

After many years away from Shengze, making this series of photographs marks the first time I have been able to engage with my hometown. This ability did not come easily. In the summer of 2013, I survived the Asiana plane crash at San Francisco's airport, sitting three rows in front of the three girls who were killed in the accident. Death passed me by, but trauma stayed. For a long time, I struggled with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder: frequent flashbacks to the scene of the disaster, constant fears of death, and an inexplicable feeling of sorrow that silently permeated my days. Unable to concentrate on my dissertation research, I picked up photography, a long-standing interest of mine, but one that I had never seriously pursued. As it turned out, the cathartic power of art became an effective tool for exorcising the demons of trauma. Roaming around the Bay Area to shoot, my photographs of those days were all black and white, with a dark, moody, and grim overtone.

Then, a desire began to grow in my heart. I wanted to photograph Shengze. My hometown kept drawing me back as I was healing from the mental scar. In therapy, I could not help crying whenever I talked about my family, especially the lives of my grandparents in Shengze. "You have their blood," my therapist would remind me. "You are not a lone survivor, but a member of a family of survivors."

The beautiful Shengze of the past can be a cruel place. While I see it as my home, my grandparents were northerners who spent most their lives struggling in this alien water town. The eldest son of a merchant-landlord, my grandfather followed the Communist army to the south as a college student in 1949 and was ordered to stay and work in the local government of Shengze. Before long, he was put in jail for his past association with the Nationalist Youth League and was labeled as a "historical counter-revolutionary." First imprisoned in the mid-1950s, he spent more than twenty of his best years in labor camps reserved for class enemies, far away from Shengze. My grandmother, an illiterate daughter of a landholding scholarly family, followed her husband south. She had not only a husband in jail now, but also two brothers fighting for the Nationalists—one was caught and sentenced to life imprisonment, the other fled to Taiwan. Burdened by the stigma of the counter-revolutionary class, in an unfamiliar water town that spoke an unintelligible dialect, my grandmother faced adversities that I can barely imagine. But she survived. Learning how to read and write, she worked in one of the town's silk-weaving factories and almost single-handedly brought up three sons—my father and my uncles—in the

tiny old place on the riverbank where I would come to have my lunches every day decades later. The family survived because of her.

On the same riverbank, my father and his brothers grew up in poverty and shame. In the case of my father, he was not allowed to continue school due to his class background and spent eight years on the wild coast of northern Jiangsu as a sent-down youth. It was only Deng Xiaoping's reforms at the end of the 1970s that enabled him to come back home and resume normal life. My grandfather returned, too, and spent the last fifteen years of his life in peace in the company of his family. At home, he never spoke of the sufferings he had endured in the labor camps, but those things left a sorrowful heart beneath his lanky but elegant appearance that I could feel even when I was still a kid. He died of cancer in 1995 at the age of seventy. The river of no return flows without mercy.

Ironically, it was the changing color of the river and the installation of pipelines on the stone bridges of the reform era that altered the fate of our family. During the rapid development of the textile industry in the 1980s, my father first worked on the shop floor in one of the dyeing factories, and then was reassigned to the marketing department. He became a skillful salesman, and his sales pitches probably contributed to the growth of the dyeing business of the town, which polluted the river and changed its colors—the very phenomenon that repelled me on my way to elementary school. After a dozen years in sales, he was able to leave the factory and start a small textile-trading business of his own. His job in the new market economy allowed many things to happen: it brought us middle-class material comfort, allowed our family to finally move up the social ladder, and eventually gave me the freedom to pursue my interests in the unpractical subjects of classical literature and history—my rebellion against the destruction and rampant materialism of the reform-era Shengze in which I grew up.

Never did Shengze mean as much to me as when I was going through old memories in my post-traumatic state. To photograph Shengze became an irresistible desire. In November 2014, sixteen months after the plane crash, it was this desire that helped me conquer my fear of flying. I gathered courage and boarded my first flight across the Pacific since the accident. It was during this trip that the photographs presented here were taken.

Sifting through the thousands of images captured during those ten days in Shengze, I have realized that, despite all of its urban sprawl, dusty air, and noisy streets, the water town of Shengze has somehow survived. Of course, there is a modern twist. Strolling around the town, I

walked into a new water-themed park with a miniature Golden Gate Bridge in it. I dined at a modern restaurant built in the shape of a large traditional boat on a small lake. And, in the villages that have been sucked into the urban center, I encountered many rural riverside houses in eclectic styles that combined traditional elements with modern structures and materials. The residents still planted willow trees. Occasionally, I also encountered generic and unsightly factory buildings on riverbanks, evidence of industries that still sometimes manage to evade regulation and release dirty water into the rivers. In many ways, therefore, Shengze is still very much a water town, and its fate remains intertwined with rivers and lakes. Moreover, for all the hustle and bustle, Shengze remains a small town with a local society that weaves together networks of neighbors, schoolmates, relatives, coworkers, business partners, and acquaintances with endless cycles of banquets and rituals to mark life events, as well as quick circulation of gossip and rumors. With the camera lens as an extension of my eyes, I discovered a Shengze that I had not encountered in the past. I want to reconcile with it.

As a series, these photographs are also presented to address what I see as a fundamental flaw in the mainstream representation of contemporary China in the art photography and documentary photography worlds. Photographers, both foreign and Chinese, tend to be preoccupied with two approaches. On the one hand, they are understandably obsessed with showing the unprecedented scale of China's transformation by targeting grand scenes, as we can see in [Nadav Kander's works on the Yangtze River](#), [Zhang Kechun's images of the Yellow River](#), and [Sze Tsung Leong's photos of mass urban destruction sites](#). The resulting images often render human figures tiny, or even invisible, against colossal backdrops, implying their powerlessness before the explosive forces of modernization. On the other hand, when photographers do target individuals through portraiture, they often choose, consciously or not, to represent victims of progress: coal miners, prostitutes, or the urban poor in dilapidated quarters of prosperous cities. Both approaches are commendable, capturing a strong sense of the powerlessness and victimhood that is pervasive in contemporary Chinese society as the wheels of progress and destruction relentlessly exert themselves on every individual's life. But having lived through such colossal changes myself, and having seen my grandparents' and parents' generations bear the brunt of the impacts of such changes, struggling, navigating, and fighting through, I adamantly refuse to believe in the narratives of victimhood and powerlessness of individuals.

My images tell a different story. In contrast with images set on the grand stage of the Yellow River or the Yangtze, these photographs of Shengze depict an intimate urban space: a dynamic landscape in which people are neither overpowered by nor alienated from the proceedings around them. To the contrary, they have lived through the changes in the landscape and also acted upon it. The landscape of contemporary Jiangnan is, in my eyes, a landscape of people. The individuals portrayed here are my family and friends, people whom I have had the privilege to connect with deeply. And these photographs aim to show them in their natural habitat. They are common folks, but they are also true agents of change. Caught in the clamor of streets, the traumas of life, and the dramas of history, these people are not just following the waves of progress like water follows a river. They are the water that makes the river. And because they soldier on, it is these people who have been writing and rewriting the history and landscape of this ancient water town of Jiangnan for generations. Here as elsewhere.

George Zhijian Qiao is a PhD student in History at Stanford University. His dissertation chronicles the rise of the Shanxi merchants during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), who created the most powerful business network that China had ever witnessed prior to modern times. Prints from this series of photographs were first exhibited in 2015 in Stanford's Art and Art History Department. For an alternate presentation of this photo essay, see <http://www.qiaoimage.com/jiangnan/>. To see more of Qiao's photography, please visit his website at <http://www.qiaoimage.com>.

Note

- 1 These numbers, and the statistics in the next paragraph, are unpublished figures obtained from the Shengze township government.