

Incidents (of Travel)
Yu Ji and Xiao Kaiyu
Wuzhong District, Suzhou
Jiangsu province, China
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Itinerary by Xiao Kaiyu

Yu Ji invited me to hike on Dong Shan (East Mountain), which lies 130 km west of Shanghai, on a peninsula stretching into Tai Hu lake near the city of Suzhou. We took an early train from Shanghai and then a taxi from Suzhou station. We first stopped at the ancient Zijin An (Purple Gold Temple). The architecture takes full advantage of the landscape; it is humble yet grand. It renders human activity somehow natural and appropriate. The name of the temple pertains to the gradation effect found on sixteen clay statues that are found there and that were made between the Song Dynasty (1127–1279) and the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). As time passes, these figures of folk art become lively, and the fading of their colors supplements their expressive forms in a way that suggests maturity and subtlety.

The rear chamber of the temple has been converted into the studio of a craftsman making inkstones—slabs used to grind ink sticks for calligraphy. He is an honest man, carrying on a tradition that had long run in his family. He has transformed valuable rock into a great number of sophisticated shapes and incredible forms. He is no pathetic victim of the distractions of [Dragon](#) or [Phoenix](#) Television—he is mindful of developing a legacy, following a tradition. On hearing our comment that inkstones should still be able to serve those who write, he anxiously asked us what we thought a true inkstone should look like. He was in his fifties—if he were to only make inkslabs for a clientele of ink brush users, instead of for wealthy collectors, he would very likely starve. We had gone too far, where humble requirements can be harmful.

It rained frequently that day. We climbed up the hill as planned, but the road was tedious. I stopped at the first shelter on the way, while Yu Ji continued on resolutely into the forest despite the rain. We met a young man, a middle school security guard, who had come to the shelter specifically for the view, and we had a chat. He said he had studied mechanical production, and after a bad couple of years working in a factory, had come to Jiangsu from Shanghai province in order to start a new career. Eventually he had realized his training was useless, and that he only had the body gifted to him by his parents to make a living with. He suddenly became emotional, he said that he had not forgotten his dream of inventing “explosive things” to put onto beautiful missiles. I inquired about the use of the missiles yet he said he never thought about it. Maybe it was better to go back to his village to keep chicken and sell eggs, he thought. In comparison, eggs are better than bombs.

The rain got heavier, and the young man stayed in the pavilion. We retired from the mountain under umbrellas, ate dinner at a restaurant by Tai Hu lake, and then traveled back to Shanghai.