

Suzhou

*Tuesday, March 21st*

On Tuesday we rode the high speed train to the garden filled city of Suzhou!



*Spring in the Lion Grove Garden*

Part of our wanderings earlier in the week had been to pick up our tickets (I had to be there

in person because they need IDs from all passengers). This led us to a very different experience of China: ticket lines at the rail station. The Metro (subway) is super easy for foreigners; everything is in Mandarin and English. The trains are a much more native experience! Most signs and announcements are only in Mandarin, which only adds to the ticketing excitement. Think several big lines (Christy successfully managed to get us in the right one every time by asking around, her ability to speak enough Mandarin was tremendously helpful), all a mix of people anxious about the train they're about to miss and a high frequency of people who just walk past the queue and try to get service at the window. The people behind the windows are pretty good at ignoring this and telling them to get back in line, but there is clearly a culture of pushing yourself first to get what you want. Only a minority try this, and again it seems a bit generational with older folks more likely to jump the queue, but it's frequent enough to make standing in line a constant struggle. People also tend to just try to slide into line, and everyone stands very close to one another with elbows out trying to guard against this. This is one of my least favorite parts about China, and it manifests itself in daily life like waiting in line at the grocery store. I'll be curious to see if this fades out in another decade but for now it very much leads to part of the "wild west" feel of China. I expected a communist country to handle communal activities better than the every-person-for-themselves capitalist countries, but instead I suspect the recent history of desperate scarcity followed by very unequally distributed massive increases in wealth have led to a lot of folks feeling like if they don't put their own interests above those of everyone else, they'll lose out. In both cultures this behavior is rewarded and often disapproved of at the same time. Anyhow, that's all speculation on my part and a giant rant in front of what's already going to be a big post of photos.

The train ride was a high speed rail to nearby Suzhou. These trains are super smooth and have fun readouts that scroll through different messages including the speed. I believe we hit 300kph on the way there (185mph), although that rate of speed was only briefly sustained. Our first stop in Suzhou was the beautiful Suzhou Museum.



*Pottery animal-shaped figures (tiger, ram, rat), Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.)*





*Servant Figure with Birds in Hands, Han Dynasty.*



*Pentad Jars, Three Kingdoms - Wu (222-280). Excavated in the Sunjian and Sunce tombs.*





*Canal in Suzhou*

Suzhou is famous for its gardens, which feature a lot of water features made easier to maintain by the many canals flowing through the city.

The first garden we toured was the Lion Grove Garden:



*Lion Grove Garden Guardian*





*Most of the gardens are a mix of indoor spaces (buildings typically with one or two large rooms (though some are larger), often very open to the outside) and very sculpted outdoor areas.*



*Layers and wear.*





*An entrance to the Lion Grove Garden's famous intricate rock labyrinth.*





*We're lost in the stone labyrinth of Lion Grove Garden!*



*Not the way out...*

Christy visited this garden earlier during a holiday and said it was a total zoo. The rock maze is pretty tight going, I can't imagine how nuts it'd be when packed with people attempting to wander in all directions. It's interesting how places built to be explicitly contemplative lose that feel if enough people are there at once. The national parks in the US have similar struggles and it's hard to know how to balance an increasing population able to play tourist and the same (or decreasing) number of popular sites. Our visit to the gardens was during a normal week day and, while we were certainly never alone, it was easy to wander and enjoy the gardens.





*Pathways and waterways.*



*Christy explores this Top Secret passageway.*



After Lion Grove Garden we wandered the streets a bit and meandered towards the even larger Humble Administrator's Garden.



*Canal in Suzhou*



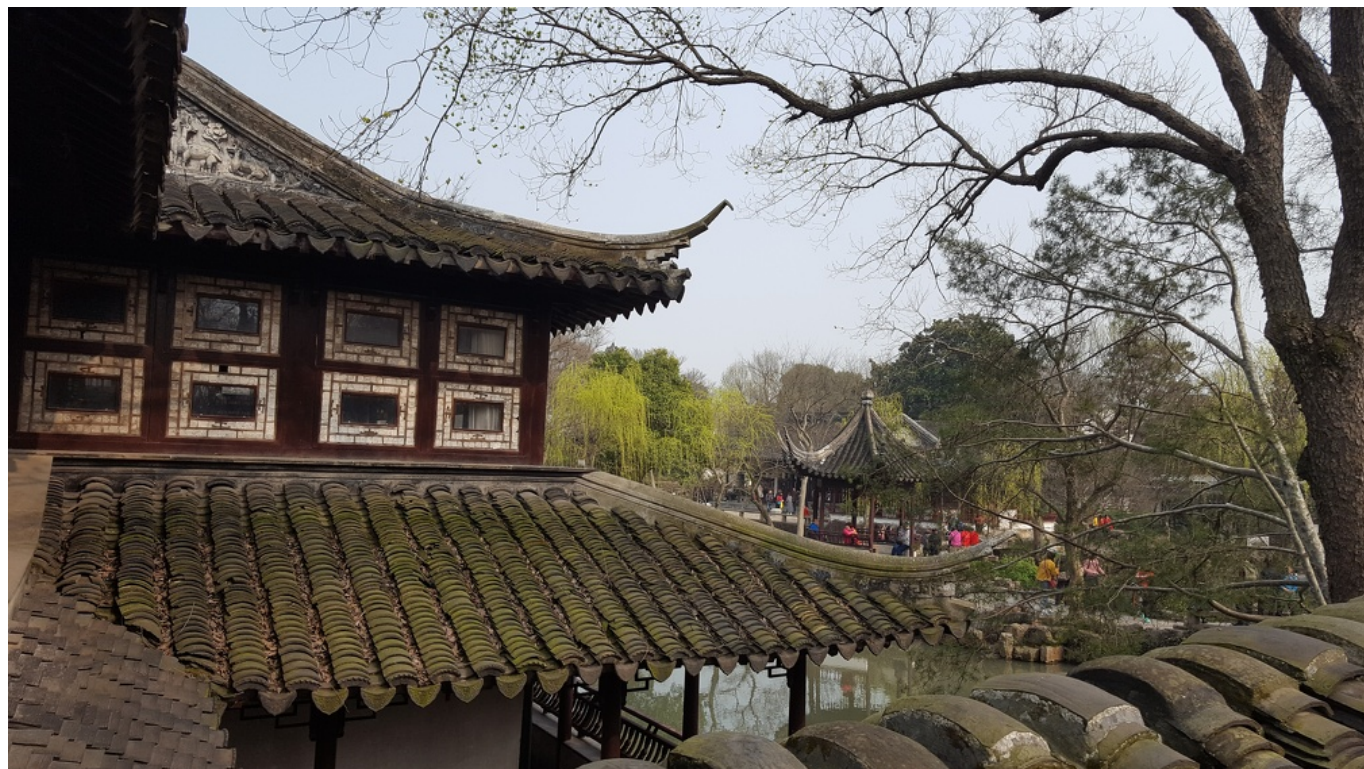


*No post is complete without a picture of me eating some random thing. Lunch of fried dumplings in this case!*



*The Humble Administrator's Garden*





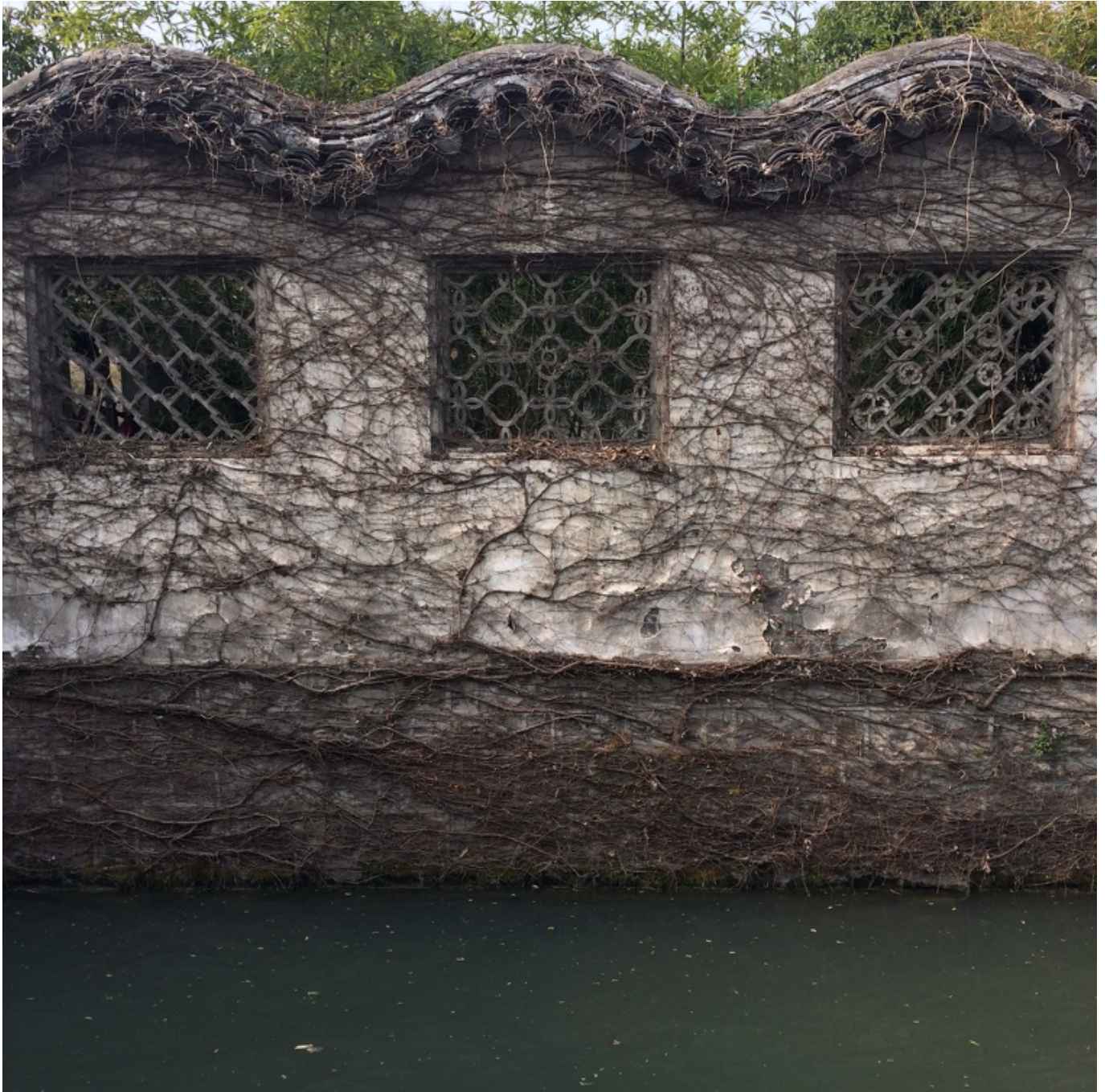




*Caution: Pool View*

Whomever is in charge of the signage: I'm a fan.





*This is a good example of where Christy and I take similar pictures and hers is visually interesting (above) and mine looks like a weird roof with silly background (not shown). She should be an artist or something.*









*Caution: Civilization*

This is in front of the bonsai tree exhibit. The sign maker is now my personal hero.





*Tower*



*Chinese gardens are very different than the more western “giant collection of pretty plants”. Here the water, stone and architectural elements are given more precedence.*





*We're at the Humble Administrator's Garden!*





*Pagoda Reflection Pavilion*



*They really do have everything here. Except smoking.*





*The Humble Administrator's Garden*



*Giant Statue*

This is outside the Suzhou rail station (which is also immense) and I've seen it referred to as "The Giant Statue." We arrived at the train station well before our scheduled return, stood in another big line and warded off queue jumpers, exchanged our tickets for the next train and were headed back to Shanghai after an amazing day trip.