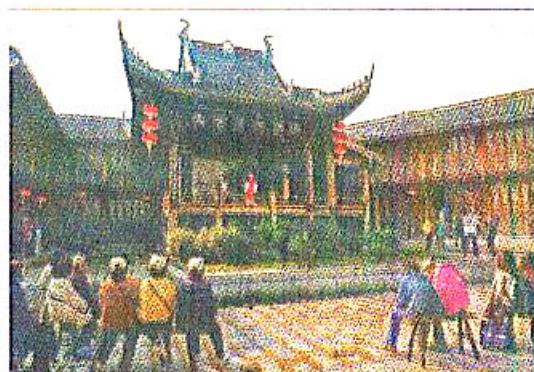




CHINA Longmen ancient village

THE only sound was my footsteps. I was lost in a strange, ancient world – a world that does not belong to modern China, yet it exists. I was at Longmen village in Fuyang, Hangzhou of Zhejiang Province. It is the hometown of Sun Quan (182-252 BC), the King of Wu, during the Three Kingdoms Period (220-265 BC). It is also the place where Sun Quan's descendants have continually gathered until the present day.



More than 100 of his descendants are still living here. The cobblestones were laid along the narrow snaking alleyways. Two persons could hardly squeeze between the two stone walls. I had not met

any soul yet and I shuddered to think on this cool winter morning if this was a village that never existed, if I was actually submerged in a foggy dream.

I found an age-old cart wheel leaning against a half-eroded wall. Morning dews still hanging from the worn down wooden spokes. A half-broken earthen pitcher. An earthen jar, collecting rainwater. Fine embroidery of cobwebs on its mouth.

Then I passed a narrow archway and entered a hall room like structure with open doors and windows showing the alleys beyond. I took in the faint dust smell and the smell of wood and earth as my eyes adjusted to the light. Then I found the first man of the Longmen village. An old man sitting close to a window, his back turned to me. A shaft of sunlight has slanted on the newspaper he is holding. The cigarette in his mouth smoking slowly and I could see the rolling pattern of thin blue smoke simmering in the light.

"Good morning," I said. The man ignored me and kept on reading. May be he is deaf, I thought. May be he does not want to be disturbed.



I scanned the hall, in the corner I found a plough, and a machine that is definitely used to reap hay.

I left the old man and stepped outside again and started walking. The sunlight does not enter here, the alleys are so narrow. Now I started meeting people. A child standing on the doorway of a house and eyeing me without interest. His mother just a step behind. Then came another old man carrying two earthen bowls balanced on a bamboo pole on his shoulder. A young woman, brilliant in a yellow long dress comes carrying a plastic bowl with washed clothes. The dresses were still twisted from severe rinsing. The woman smiled brightly and said something in quick



bursts. I could only nod my head and smile back.

In another ally I found more activities – some men and women are sitting right on the path and making badminton rackets. The men are scrapping the aluminum frames and the women weaving the strings. A little away I find a waterhole, a well to supply water to the village.

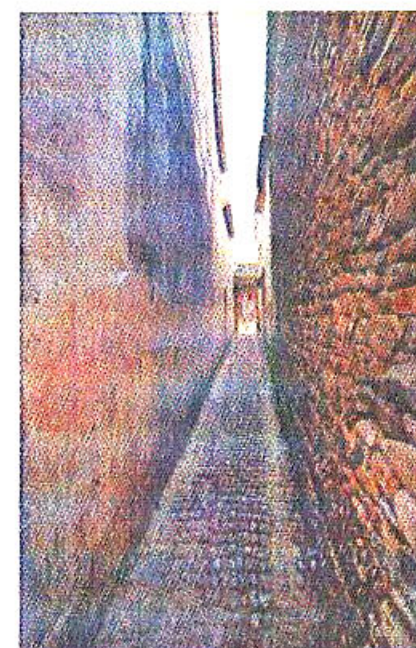
I now realized I was lost in this strange world of China, a beautiful, romantic reminder of China's yesteryears.

I now should return to the car, but I was lost in the labyrinth of the village. I could not see the sun because of the narrow alleys so that I could feel which way I am heading. I was now walking for about half an hour without finding

the edge of the village, and I asked almost every soul I met about the way out. None of them could understand me. I mistakenly stepped on a courtyard again and a mangy brown dog vigorously barked. That young woman in her yellow dress was feeding chickens. She smiled again. Then our conversation embarked in sign language. I showed her that I want to get out of here and that I am lost. She understood, shook her head and took me to the end of an alley. She then showed me how many turns I have to take. I thanked her, holding her delicate hand in my palm, and walked on. In 15 minutes time, I was again out of the village.

I looked at the white walled houses that make the fringe of the village. These houses are built high; a double-storey house looks like a triple-storey structure. From here the village still looks like in a deep slumber. A history in slumber. Across the village runs a long mountain range and cool breeze blew in, chilling up my bones. I suddenly catch a face – a middle-aged woman looking through a small window of a high walled white building. A perfect frame to describe the village. Our eyes met and I tried to smile. She did not.

I turned and walked back to the car.



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