



WUXI

# Wuxi: The “Little Shanghai”?

Wuxi’s rapid industrial development has earned a spot on China’s top 50 cities, as well as the nickname – “Little Shanghai”. Yet amidst such impressive economic growth, the city has maintained its cultural and historical identity, and its charming natural beauty. What does the future hold? *By AMANDA LI*

**W**uxi’s uniqueness lies in its ability to offer culture, history and nature alongside with its developed urban centre, an element of individuality that has propelled the city into China’s top 10 tourist cities.

Wuxi’s origins can be traced back to the end of the Shang Dynasty, with its name Wuxi (meaning “a place without tin”) emerging at the end of the Qin Dynasty, when its previously rich deposit of tin was depleted. Wuxi’s history spans a spectacular period of 3000 years, during which it claimed the title of “the Pearl of Tai Lake” due to its role as the economic and political centre on the south of the Yangtze River. Before the 19th century, for example, Wuxi served as an important city, boasting the busiest rice and cloth market in China at the time. Development in Wuxi continued into the early 20th century as it became a hub for the textile (especially silk) industry, and continued to grow as the People’s Republic of China was established.

## Art and Cultural Centre

Wuxi occupies a crucial role in Wu culture, with its distinctive cultural characteristics manifested in the area’s



Wuxi New District

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architecture, dialect, waterway transportation and in art. In particular, Wuxi is recognized as the art and cultural centre of Jiangnan, serving as the hometown and birthplace of artists like author Qian Zhongshu (1910-1998) of *Fortress Besieged* and artist Chen Chi (1912-2005).

More recently, Wuxi has fostered cultural figures like erhu and pipa musician “Blind Abing” (瞎子阿炳), and Liu Tianhua, famed for pioneering the technique of compiling folk music using staff.

Another unique artistic and cultural offering of Wuxi is its handicraft specialty of Huishan clay figurines and Yixing



Wuxi's Canals

teapots.

Another one of Wuxi's most distinctive elements is its waterways, with the ring of canals surrounding the city supporting a flourishing industry of agriculture and fisheries, while simultaneously contributing to Wuxi's unique regional transport system. This transportation system serves as a convenient means of transport for not only locals, but also for travelers and cargo.

### Sweet Touch

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There are three main aspects of Wuxi cuisine: Wuxi dishes, boat dishes and Capital dishes. Wuxi's food is famed for its heavier emphasis on sweetness, with a definite must-try being the Wuxi-style xiaolongbao, which is sweeter than those of other regions. Wuxi cuisine also

tends to highlight seasonal ingredients. Seafood is also an important ingredient, generally cooked with simplicity in order to underscore its original flavor.

### Rich Roots

Wuxi's tourism trend is strongly tied to two main elements, its cultural and historical attributes, and its nature and natural beauty. Often, we see interplay between these two elements, resulting in unique tourism attractions. Namely, Lake Tai serves not only as Wuxi's founda-

tional cornerstone, but also as a rich tourism resource. For example, some of the Wuxi's most recognizable landmarks include Yuantouzhou (Islet of Turtlehead) and Taihu Xiandao (Islands of the Deities), both of which are located in Lake Tai. However, within the scenic attraction

of Lake Tai, tourists can also experience Wuxi's culture through the Yuantouzhou Park, which was built in 1918, containing a mansion, villa, garden and pagoda.

A few other sites of cultural tourism near Lake Tai include the Tang City, the Three Kingdoms outdoor film sets and a



Huishan Clay Figurines





Yixing Teapots

park featuring the world's tallest Buddha statue. Another source of tourism that is rooted in Wuxi's nature is Mount Xi and Mount Hui, with the cultural attraction of the classic royal Ji-chang-yuan Gardens located at the foot of the hill. Another appropriate example is the Park of Wu Culture, which incorporates its natural surroundings into its artistic creations. The park is divided in six sections, with the first focused on Wuxi's primitive communal life, the second devoted to local culture, the third to modern economic development, the fourth to customs, the fifth and sixth to religion. Therefore, not only does the park embody the intersection between culture and nature, but also the city's interplay between tradition/culture and economic development.

## Open for Business

Historically, Wuxi's economic reliance has been focused on its agricultural sector. Over the years, however, the industry's importance has been significantly reduced. Now, only 2% of Wuxi's total GDP is attributed to agriculture.

In recent years, Wuxi has been designated as an investment grade city, accompanied by the development of two large industrial parks committed to supporting the growth of new industries. In particular, the Wuxi New District (WND), established in 1992, has since evolved into one of the most important industrial parks in China.

In fact, by the end of 2008, 1200 enterprises have been registered in the WND, some of which have been crucial in producing a wide variety of components, sub-systems and original equipment.

Thus, recently, Wuxi has moved beyond industrial sectors such as textile and manufacturing into more high-tech industries such as electronics and other consumer products. At the same time, Wuxi possesses a considerable heavy industry sector, which includes iron, steel, IT, high tech and (recently) solar

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energy equipment industries. Specifically, Wuxi has recently surfaced as a hub for solar technology due to the two major photovoltaic companies (Suntech Power and Jietion Holdings Ltd) that are based in the city.

Another recent economic growth can be observed in Wuxi's microelectronics and semiconductors industries. Based on Wuxi's strength in this area, the city has aspired to establish itself as the first “sensor city” in China, in addition to plans of launching demonstrative projects for sensor networks devoted to monitoring environmental conditions, transportations and public safety.

## Issues Needing Attention

In 2007, several investment projects along the shores of Lake Tai prompted issues of environmental pollution. Namely, it triggered the blooming of blue-green algae, which disrupted water supplies and forced up to 5 million people to rely on bottled water.

Considering the city's rich history, culture and nature, which serve

as important sources of tourism, the government must consider the implications of economic and industrial growth. Indeed, the local government has recently drafted a protection plan for the lake and its surrounding area. The plan estimates that approximately USD\$50 billion will be spent in order to address the problem, while shutdowns, bans and relocations will be imposed on polluters in the near future.

However, as Wuxi's becomes an increasingly important centre for manufacturing and high technology, clashes between these two defining characteristics of the city will conceivably be inevitable. ■

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*Photographs Courtesy: Wuxi New District: Archinect Firms, Wuxi's Canals: Unbravegirl, Huishan Clay Figurines: 500px, Yixing Teapots: China Tour, Lake Tai's Yuantouzhou Island: China Economic Net*



Lake Tai's Yuantouzhou Island