

Into The Heartland

a trip across hubei province - part I
by Maren Ziechmann

IN OCTOBER OF last year, we visited Hubei Province. Hubei 湖北 is situated in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River. It is bordered by Henan Province in the north, Jiangxi and Hunan in the south, Anhui in the east, Sichuan in the west and Shaanxi in the northwest. The Province covers an area of 180,000 square kilometers with a population of 60,280,000. Its capitol is Wuhan.

We began our journey in Xiangfan 襄樊. From there we took the train to the famous Taoist Wudangshan Mountain 武当山. The next stop was Yichang 宜昌 with its "Three Gorges Dam Project" 三峡大坝 and the Gezhou Dam 葛洲坝. Our journey concluded in the ancient city of Jingzhou 荆州.

Xiangfan

Our first destination we reached by plane from Guangzhou after about 1 hour and 45 minutes. Xiangfan with its population of around 5,800,000 lies along the middle reaches of the Hanjiang River, a major tributary of the Yangtze, or Changjiang, River, in Hubei's central Northwest.

From the little airport, we took a local bus to the city center. Throughout the entire trip, the locals were always very helpful in finding a place to stay. The people in the bus gave us directions and the police was already waiting for us. From now on, all our steps were officially observed.

As in many other cities across Mainland China, not all Xiangfan hotels are authorized to host foreigners. Some hotels around the train station offer higher-standard accommodation, however those directly opposite the station are subject to the noise of the heavy traffic that continues throughout the entire night and makes it impossible to find a peaceful rest.

Xiangfan is one of China's oldest cities and carries the nickname

'Pearl on the Han River'. It is famed for its splendid history and culture. First, we went by rickshaw to the historic part of the city with old buildings surrounded by the ancient city wall that is backed by a moat.

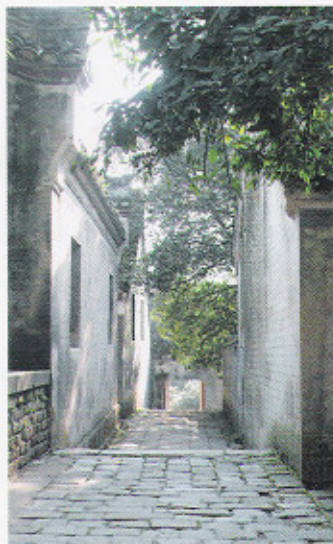
A very nice and interesting place is the Temple of Mi Gong Ci in the southwest of the town. It was built in memory of the calligrapher



Mi Shi (1051-1107), whose work is displayed there. On the other side of the Hanjiang River, the small settlement of Furencheng is located. It commemorates the mother of Zhu Xu, a Jin Dynasty General who was responsible for the protection of the city.

The next morning, we went to Longzhongshan, West of Xiangfan. My suggestion is to go there early in the morning to avoid the crowds. Zhuge Liang, a famous General and scholar lived here from 198 to 207. This area is completely tourism-oriented; it can get pretty expensive because aside from the initial admissions fee, they charge additional fees for the various exhibits and tours within the large park area.

We spent nearly two days in and around Xiangfan, but it wasn't nearly enough to visit all the historical places. To reach our next destination, we took the train heading west for about 2 hours to Wudangshan.



Wudangshan

Mt. Wudang is one of the sacred mountains of the Taoists. It is 400 km in circumference and offers a variety of natural sceneries. The ancient architecture complex is famous all over the world and today it is a world heritage site that is protected by the government and well-organized for tourism.

At first one suggestion: If you want to visit Wudangshan, avoid the time around the National Holidays to ensure a peaceful time to enjoy the temple and the surrounding nature.

The entrance fee for Wudangshan Mountain is 180 RMB per person. Within its huge area, you can travel for free by tourist bus between the temple, mountain, caves and valleys. We stayed there for 5 days and it wasn't enough to see even half of what was offered. Food and accommodation can be very cheap if you like it simple and don't require a high standard. We stayed in a small pension in Nanyan, about

10 km from the entrance, for 160 RMB per night. Nanyan is the last bus station at the east road.

Two very nice places that I can recommend are the Tai Zi Po temple complex and Zi Xiao Palace that houses female monks in separate living quarters.

One famous monk was a lady named Li Chengyu who lived to be 140 years old. She just recently passed away. According to the Taoists, her high age was the result of the regular practice of Fang Shu, which in our western culture is simply called sex. Specifically for this purpose, the chambers of the female monks are much more comfortable than those of the male monks.

From Nanyan, we walked up to Tianzhu Peak (1612 m), past the Jade Palace and then on to the Golden Roof, something that no-one should miss. It took us three hours to climb up the steps and we enjoyed the hike. Of course, if you are in better physical condition, you can make the whole trip in about 2 hours. Once again, to avoid the crowds, start very early in the morning, around 5 or 6 AM.

The images show the Jade Palace at Mt. Wudang, a statue of calligrapher Mi Shi, a cobblestoned alleyway at Longzhongshan, and a busy day at Furencheng.



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