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# The Soochow Complex and modernisation

## **Abstract**

Extract:

Soochow is a city with over 2500 years of history. Living in this city for many years, the local people have developed a sort of Soochow Complex with distinctive characteristics. Now, at the turn of century, what kind of role will the Soochow Complex play in the process of modernisation?

## **Keywords**

Soochow, Suzhou, modernisation, environment, culture, construction

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## *Regions and Cities of China:*

# **The Soochow 'Complex' and Modernisation**

*by Fan Qi and Ma Boling (residents of Soochow)*

Soochow<sup>1</sup> is a city with over 2500 years of history. Living in this city for many years, the local people have developed a sort of Soochow 'complex' with distinctive characteristics. Now, at the turn of century, what kind of role will the Soochow Complex play in the process of modernisation?

## **The distinctive characteristics of the Soochow Complex**

The Soochow Complex refers to the collective attitude which has developed from the Wu culture and accumulated over centuries. This collective attitude will neither die out because of passing generations, nor be suddenly changed because of social reform. As a principal part of traditional culture, the Soochow Complex has a perpetual and profound influence on the local people's life. As time went by, the Soochow Complex might have been changed slightly, but the fundamental characteristics and the core structure have been well maintained, and thus handed down generation by generation. Therefore, to probe the Soochow Complex, in fact, is to explore the central importance of traditional culture in the Wu region. The extraordinary features of the Soochow Complex can be generalised as follows:

### ***1. The mood of the wealthy city***

Rich in natural resources, Soochow achieved a superior position in competition by its economic strength, which allowed the Soochower to develop a pleasant, confident, and agreeable personality. According to recorded history, 3000 years ago, Taibao and Zhongyong, two princes of the Chou Court, went to southern China, thus establishing the "Gou Wu" kingdom, i.e., Wu County. They promoted agriculture, which made their countrymen rich. Later, when the descendant of Chou, He Lü came into power, he adopted Wu Zixu's advice of stressing the importance of agriculture and irrigation works. Later he established Soochow city. Thereafter, Wu became a very strong and influential state. Now, the Wu region as an independent state has died out, but the spirit of "making one rich by working hard" has been well preserved. For thousands of years, there have emerged a great number of respectable people who attracted society's attention by their intelligence and diligence, e.g. Fan Li became a successful businessman after retiring from political life. Another example is Shen Wanshan, who was the wealthiest businessman in southern China during that time. All of these continuously contributed to the development of the people's character.

### ***2. The consciousness of the commercial city***

For centuries, Wu people worked hard and constructed this kind of consciousness. In fact, during many years of trade and cultural communication with other counties, Southerners had always taken an active role in doing business. Especially in recent years, the economy of towns and counties of Southern China have been growing rapidly, largely as a result of the people's commercial consciousness.

### ***3. The influence of the famous city***

With an adaptive personality and hard work, the Wu people created an abundant material civilization. Meanwhile, they were adept in learning new things, and always were good at making their dreams come true, consequently creating a splendid spiritual civilization. This made Soochow a famous historical and cultural city. Circa 500 B.C., the Southerner Yan Yan became one of Kong Zi's (Confucius') foremost

students. From then on, the Wu people attached great importance to education and other cultural achievements. In this regard, an examination of Soochow embroidery is in order. During the Three Kingdoms period, a certain Madame Zhao was known as a first class artist in the embroidery circle. After that, Soochow embroidery kept on developing and taking shape until the Song dynasty. The daily trade of silk embroidery was very popular. When it came to the Ming Dynasty, the craftsmen adopted many experiences from the artists of that time which greatly improved their works to the point of perfection. In the later period of the Qing Dynasty, Shenshou, an embroidery artist, used the skill of western oil painting as a reference by taking the material's light and shadow into consideration, creating the famous "imitation genuine embroidery". She opened a new channel for Soochow embroidery. Recently, artists of Soochow embroidery have learned a lot from many other arts and crafts, thereby gradually enriching the techniques of Soochow embroidery.

Finally, we should not forget other well-known Soochow personalities. For instance, Zenghai, who was born in Changshu, after several promotions, became the Prime Minister of the emperor Song Xiaozong. And Lu Xun, who also came from Changshu, had been regulating rivers and watercourses for many years, and had prevented floods as well as drought by water control projects. Hence, he was highly respected by people and his statue was placed by the side of Libing who was the most famous engineer of water control in ancient times. Apart from them, there was an architect in Wu county named Bengxiang who was the designer of the Forbidden City. When the great architectural work was completed, Bengxiang was honoured by the emperor by being given the name "Beng Luban".

For the reasons mentioned above, the Wu people have always put great importance on education and thus have nurtured a great number of talents and cultivated the general mood of Soochow, which has radiated an influence onto the whole society.

#### ***4. The interest of the classical city***

With 2500 years of culture and economic strength, the daily life of the Soochower appears to have a special sort of temperament and interest. Soochowers are particular about their quality of life, so whether dressing, eating, travelling or communicating, they all pay great attention to their daily activities. So, their dress and personal adornment, food and cuisine, gardening, lute-playing, chess, calligraphy, painting, opera, and even their institutions show ingenuity. For example, Soochow silk, Soochow-style cuisine, Soochow-style gardens, storytelling and ballad singing in Soochow dialect, Kunqu opera, Wu style painting, and all kinds of other arts reflect these impressive attributes.



*Suzhou has a unique traditional culture*

It seems that every month has days celebrating special festivals that colour the life of Soochow people. There is even an old Chinese saying that "the Winter Solstice is more important than the Spring Festival". So the Winter Solstice festival is highly valued by local residents. On this festive occasion, the whole family should be united together to dine with the special wine fermented from osmanthus

flowers, and offer sacrifices to gods or ancestors. According to the Chou calendar, the winter solstice is the beginning of the new year. Given that a descendant of Chou founded the Wu kingdom, it is no wonder that Wu people regard the winter solstice as the beginning of New Year, but it really surprised us that the custom could be sustained down through thousands of years.

### ***5. The view of the little city***

Even though Soochow was both wealthy and famous, it did not cover a large urban area. It used to be the capital of the Wu kingdom, but the ancient urban area only covered eight square kilometres with many counties and towns scattered around it. There were many small rivers, little bridges, and local lanes crisscrossing over the county, leaving the impression of the ingenious and delicate. People living in this little city developed a kind personality with a local perspective. They are tolerate and kind to others because they think people should be friendly with each other especially in the close living spaces of the city. They are also generous to nature, because they believe that nature and humans should live in harmony. This kind of personality also shows itself in the local people's daily life, language, literature and art. Soochowers are fond of using diminutives such as 'little Soochow', 'little exquisite', 'little family', 'little girl', and 'little friend'. The word 'little' carries implicit significance, not only showing their deep love and reverence to nature, but also expressing their satisfaction with the residential environment, quality of life, and harmonious relationships between neighbours. It is not an exaggeration to say that the character 'little' typically reflects the view of the city.

The Soochow Complex is the deposit of collective attitudes formed during the centuries experiencing Wu culture. It is also the manifestation of psychological features of the Soochower.

## **Conciliation between the Soochow Complex and the modern cultural spirit**

Just as Wu culture cultivated the Soochow Complex, this, in return, has had some influence on the development of Soochow. We have discussed the positive side of the Soochow complex, now it is time to look at some less healthy side-effects of the Soochow Complex. Turning the coin over helps provide the whole picture.

### ***1. The extension of pride***

Wu people are very proud of the scenery, abundant resources, and advanced culture of Soochow. Since Soochow is a wealthy city with a developed economy, a busy trading city, and a well-known tourist attraction, local residents feel even more pride. With such a sense of pride, people will be motivated to work energetically. But taken at the extreme, people will be self-satisfied, and remain content with things as they are.

For example, in the planning of city construction, many enterprises and institutions and even the municipal government moved to the New District, but there were still many Soochowers who preferred a bed in the old urban area rather than an entire apartment in the New District. Apart from the economic factor, Soochowers felt reluctant to leave their familiar place, which reflected profound, psychological features. According to a survey organised by the Communist Youth League of Soochow in the later part of 1997, to the question "What kind of life will you look for?", 48.1 percent of young people choose the answer of "depends on personal interest", 10.1 percent of subjects choose "live leisurely", 24.1 percent of people choose "doing everything honestly, take care of one's own business", 6.1 percent replied by "devote oneself to public service", and only 6.1 percent people chose "to work hard and then become rich". The remaining 3.4 percent responded with "do one's best to become an intellectual and important person". Another investigation made among middle school students showed that 52.6 percent of people prefer to work in "Soochow, Shanghai, or the coast cities in southeast area"

rather than in the rest of China. The phenomenon suggests that the pride of Soochow should not go to extremes. We should encourage the spirit of the pioneer and the spirit of forging ahead to tackle modernisation in a culturally sustainable and human fashion, while standing firm against the idea of sitting idle and enjoying the fruit of others' work. We need to remain the authors of our own continued progress. This leads to the next issue.

## ***2. The mistake of meeting emergencies too easily***

Wu people can deal with new contingencies successfully by reflecting on past experiences. But if they always do so, they will remain essentially passive. In the process of China's reform and the opening up to the outside world, the Soochow should use an active mind to catch opportunities. This is a serious issue.

We can say that great changes have occurred in Soochow since 1978, when the policy of reform and opening up to the outside world was carried through. The New District and the Industrial Park have been established respectively in the west and the east of the city proper. It seems that they are like the two wings of the old city, and will carry us to a bright future. Meanwhile the counties and towns have developed remarkably. However, there are still many problems today. For instance, there are many enterprises following the fever-pitched trend of city construction, commodity promotion, contracting to take charge of an enterprise and some rental services. They rushed into this kind of business blindly, and consequently many failed. Indeed, reform itself is not the goal of development but the means. The realistic destination of reform is for the better life of people, and the earlier realisation of modernisation. Some appropriate changes can make the regional economy flourish and cultivate folk culture. But if changes are just for the purpose of change, a passive response to some contingency, that is not what we are in favour of. Blind development is not the point.

## ***3. The distortion of the astute***

It is well known that the Soochow generally has some sort of inner brightness. But without a broad-mind, brilliant people will become shrewd misers. In personal relationships, Soochowans are too sagacious. They don't care about other people's trouble. If the other person's problem doesn't associate with their interest, they would rather turn a blind eye to it even if their help is critical. Disregarding the fact that a great sum of money has been invested in the protection of the water environment, there are still some people who throw rubbish into the river or canal for their personal convenience. With its beautiful scenic spots and classical gardens, Soochow is one of the most famous tourist cities in China. But some people hold the idea that "we should make full use of the resources", so they even set up a payment box in the W.C., charging people who go in, damaging the visitor's impression of Soochow.

## ***4. The dissimulation of the refined interest***

Wu culture is highly refined. It has a close relation with tradition. And pursuing refined interests became the general mood, which forged the culture and gave the Soochow a sense of advantage. The superior culture encourages people to get to know their hometown and love it, but it also causes people to indulge in the civilisational past. The sense of superiority even carries the function of "comforting the spirit". When one encounters some difficulties in political life, one can live a simple life and enjoy oneself in the beautiful city by taking Soochow as the "ideal heaven" or "haven". In ancient times, many Soochowans were distracted by the beauty of the city and its environment, instead of facing hard work. Presently, there are many people who have no idea of improving themselves or caring about the environmentally and culturally sustainable construction of modernisation. They are busy in the trade of pictures, stamps, currency, and antiques. It is true that they gain much pleasure in doing those things, but it has nothing of consequence to do with the development of our society.



*Suzhou is famous for its refined gardens*

Ambivalence is a feature of everything. The Soochow Complex is no exception. The wealth, development, fame, history and beauty of Soochow to some extent makes the Soochower conceited, passive, narrow-minded and leisurely, as well as proud, confident, competent and flexible. Therefore, some of the passive factors of the Soochow Complex have been conflated with the modern spirit.

Therefore, Soochowers should hold an appropriate attitude towards the Soochow Complex. They should carry on the merits, and get rid of the demerits, of this tradition. At the same time, they should improve themselves. In this wealthy city, they should generate a pioneering spirit. In this commercial city, it will be better for them to pay more attention to the development of culture. Living in this famous city, they should advocate the notion of equality, freedom, universal love and tolerance. Finally, in this traditional city, the Soochower should encourage the independence of individuality, and the liberation of mind. And in this little city, they should develop a broad outlook and encourage a comprehensive viewpoint.

### **Footnote**

*1. Editorial Note:* Soochow is the traditional transliteration. Pinyin transliterates the name of this ancient but still vigorous city, not far inland from Shanghai, as 'Suzhou'.

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