

LIFE

With *Game of Death*, we have an epitaph for Bruce Lee, the best known, if not the greatest, cinematic kung fu exponent of all time. And sadly, it is a far from a fitting one

POST FILM CRITIC NOEL PARROTT IN A REVIEW OF THE FILM IN 1978 • CINEMA B9

TRAVEL



Clockwise: Iriomote-Ishigaki National Park in Okinawa, Japan; a kunqu opera performance by the London Chinese Opera Studio; West Kowloon Cultural District harbourfront; Suzhou is known for its canals, stone bridges, pagodas and classical gardens.



Asia barely on the map

The region was not well represented at an international meet-up for tourism promoters, travel writers and bloggers, but destinations are busy making plans to attract visitors

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Last month, 400 travel professionals gathered at London’s Queen Elizabeth II Centre, overlooking Westminster Abbey, for International Media Marketplace UK (IMM). IMM is a two-day event at which journalists and bloggers are matched with tourism boards, travel brands and destination marketing agencies in 15-minute, speed-networking meetings. Given the realities of tourism in the era of Covid-19, representatives from Asia were few and far between. Nevertheless, as I walked into the seated lunch on the first day, I was pleasantly surprised to be serenaded by Chinese opera, provided by IMM’s headline sponsor, Visit Suzhou. This was particularly surprising given that China’s borders remain closed to international visitors.

Other Asian destinations represented included Hong Kong and Okinawa in Japan. I also met with representatives of Asia-Europe-straddling Azerbaijan and noted there were a number of representatives of Middle East destinations present. Among everyone I spoke to, there was an unsurprising push towards outdoor activities, sports, beaches, natural parks and other Covid-safe, open-air experiences.

Suzhou This prefecture-level city in eastern Jiangsu province is rich in history and is known for its canals, stone bridges, pagodas and classical gardens. I sat down with Ashley Norman, of PHG Consulting, who handles destination marketing in the United States and British markets for Visit Suzhou as well as Nanjing in eastern China. She told me that Suzhou was ready to welcome travellers back as soon as China reopens its borders.



Suzhou was promoting the new West Branch of the Suzhou Museum.

“Although inbound travel is not possible right now, it is critical for Suzhou to continue its marketing activities so we can stay top-of-mind when borders reopen,” she said. In addition to highlighting Suzhou’s kunqu opera with a lunch performance by the London Chinese Opera Studio, Suzhou was promoting the new West Branch of the Suzhou Museum, which opened in 2021, as well as luxury shopping (the Suzhou Industrial Park SIP District and Suzhou Centre Mall) and new hotels, such as the Niccolo Suzhou and Hotel Indigo Suzhou Grand Canal.

Hong Kong The Hong Kong Tourism Board (HKTb) handles its PR in-house. I met with Jasmine Rushton, PR & marketing manager at HKTb’s London office. She said the city was hoping to attract returning international travellers to the West Kowloon Cultural District, which will be enhanced by the opening of a branch of the Palace Museum later this year. We discussed Hong Kong Global Geopark’s 10th anniversary as a Unesco World Heritage Site and, with sustainability front of mind across the travel industry, the potential to help travellers explore the city’s cultural heritage in Hakka villages such as Lai Chi Wo and Yim Tin Tsai. After the event, I spoke by email with Wah Ming Hing, the HKTb’s public affairs manager. He said the board intended to monitor the pandemic alongside the pace of travel resumption and other global factors.

He outlined HKTb’s three strategies to stimulate tourism recovery: boosting staycations and local tours in the short term; attracting regional travellers from China in the medium term; and organising mega-events around the Hong Kong special administrative region’s 25th anniversary this year.

Okinawa Japan remains closed to international leisure tourists, while students and business travellers must apply for a visa to enter. But Laura Boo, the British representative for the Okinawa Convention and Visitors Bureau, told me that interest in Japan was positive, with many journalists eager to visit as soon as borders open. Okinawa, a prefecture comprising more than 150 islands in the East China Sea, is promoting new accommodation and the northern part of Okinawa Island and Iriomote Island’s addition to the Unesco World Heritage List for outstanding universal value. “Iriomote Island in particular, due to its jungle setting and the vast majority of the land mass remaining uninhabited and untouched, generated a lot of interest, as nature breaks and off-the-beaten-track exploration are popular trends – as well as wellness, of course,” she said.

Asia at IMM IMM was started by a travel journalist who realised there was no space dedicated specifically for journalists and tourism boards to connect. Now in its 10th year, the first IMMs were held in London and Australia and the concept has expanded to Asia (the 2019 event took place in Macau), the US, Brazil, Germany and France. This year’s London event saw 270 media representatives and 65 influencers



The IMM 2022 in London last month. Photos: Steve Dunlop, Getty Images

We had few Asia exhibitors this year, but maybe it was too early

HENRY HEMMING,
UK MANAGING DIRECTOR OF TRAVMEDIA

participate in more than 11,000 meetings with 120 exhibiting brands. In past years, when I was a regional Asia editor at a major travel publisher, I found that IMM UK tended to be Euro- and US-centric and often did not include exhibitors from the regions of Asia on which I focused (China and Hong Kong, Taiwan, Mongolia, Korea and Central Asia). I asked Henry Hemming, the UK managing director of TravMedia, IMM’s organising body, about the spread of destinations this year; in particular, why there were a large number of French exhibitors (30 per cent) but few from East Asia or the global south.

“We had few Asia exhibitors this year, but maybe it was too early,” he said, referring to the fact most of the continent was still in the early stages of reopening following two years of Covid-19 enforced isolation. “We’re hopeful they will be back in large numbers next year.” This does not address my prior experience of IMM UK lacking global diversity in its exhibitor list. However, it may speak to a larger problem with the UK and English-language travel media favouring European and North American destinations, as well as to a lack of support for destinations that may not have the marketing budgets to attend an event like IMM.

The travel rebound With the resumption of IMM and many destinations around the world starting to reopen their borders and reduce – or even do away with – quarantine periods and mask mandates, it is hoped international travel will rebound this year. But much depends on the status of the pandemic. Britain was one of the earliest to ease travel restrictions, in February, with a number of destinations in Europe following suit. On March 21, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor announced an easing of quarantine measures for fully vaccinated residents and an April 1 lifting of a flight ban for travellers from nine countries, including Britain, the US, Canada, Australia, India and France. But the mainland shows no sign of deviating from its “zero-Covid” policy, barring entry to international arrivals, including students and business travellers. The big question is how long China will continue to hold to this policy as the world cautiously opens.

How one man is working to revive an Indian architectural structure

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Infatuation comes in all shapes and sizes; Rohan Kale found it in a stepwell. “It was love at first sight, which slowly became an obsession as I discovered more as I travelled – discovering their architecture, their structures and myriad shapes, and their astonishing history and role in water conservation,” says Kale, 38, who works in human resources in the pharmaceutical industry and discovered his first well in the Indian state of Gujarat. Stepwells (also called baoris or vavs) are deep wells built in stone over catchment areas and underground aquifers, accessed by stairs that can descend as deep as 20 metres. They are sturdy, built to withstand earthquakes. They have existed in India since Harappan times (2500BC -1700BC) and

were mentioned in Ashokan inscriptions (made in the second century BC). “The concept was to build an architectural structure around a naturally occurring water source, accessed by a flight of stairs and landings so water could be [drawn] in any season, with fluctuating [water] levels,” says Rahul Chemburkar, an architect who specialises in heritage conservation. Many were built with royal patronage, exquisite architecture adorned with carvings and idols. Others include a maze of galleries and chambers, where people could rest. Stepwells were built along trade and pilgrimage routes and near highways, where travellers and armies would seek respite from the daytime heat, and hydrate, with their animals. “India’s stepwells are unique and an ancient system that helped in storing and using water effec-

tively, especially in arid areas like Gujarat and Rajasthan,” historian Rana Safvi says. “They also became places of social, cultural and religious significance. Many stepwells had rooms around them which served as serais, or inns, or community centres. People would meet on the stairs, or come to look after strangers in the serais. With the coming of taps and pumps, this culture and fostering of community spirit, where people from different faiths and classes would meet, has been lost.” Chemburkar calls them “engineering feats of those times. They were naturally air-conditioned and great spaces for people to congregate or rest in the harsh summers.” They slowly became redundant with the advent of British colonial rule (from 1858) and many have since been lost to development and the widening of roads. Others have fallen into

disuse and become rubbish pits. In a British gazetteer published in 1881, Kale found mention of around 15,000 stepwells in just five districts of Maharashtra state, many of them dating from the Yadava (1187 – 1317) or Chalukya (between the 6th and 12th centuries) dynasties.

He extrapolated those numbers to the whole state, judging there must once have been at least 50,000 stepwells in Maharashtra. Thus began his quest to map those that remained in the state’s 44,000 villages and on highways. “My experience in human resources had taught me the value



A stepwell in Riddhapur, Amravati district, Maharashtra. Photo: Handout

of data and mapping,” Kale says. “Unless a stepwell is located and mapped, there can be no further action, like conservation. This is what the Maharashtra Stepwell Campaign is about. It’s a community project that largely depends upon the cooperation of local villagers. I have also taken help from historians, archaeologists, Indologists, architects and students, as well as people from government bodies and NGOs. Between October 2020 and March 2021 Kale found more than 1,650 stepwells and other man-made water storage structures, such as pushkarnis (tanks). Two hundred or so were still used for their intended purpose. Once the mapping of an area is complete, Kale says, the next step is documentation. Historians and Indologists detail each stepwell: its structure, number of steps, type of entrance and so on. Then each is photographed, including from above, with drones.

Architectural drawings are made; then comes preservation. “The first step ... is cleaning, as something like tree roots can destroy a stepwell or cause it to deteriorate,” Kale says. “Villagers have been enlisted to clean the stepwells in their areas.” Some of these old structures have been put back to their original use. “In the Pune area, NGOs have revived [and help maintain] 12 stepwells, and I am sure more people will come forward to restore and revive these important markers,” Kale says. “My main aim is to bring these historical milestones out of anonymity – from misery to glory – and revive them so that they are preserved for posterity,” he adds. March 1 this year marked Maha Shivratri, an annual Hindu festival in honour of the god Shiva, and on that date, 160 stepwells across the state were illuminated with diyas, or small earthen lamps.