Rivers of the World - China

Shanghai 2008 & 2009
Originating from Lake Taihu, some 127km from its confluence with the Huangpu, Suzhou Creek has historically been considered Shanghai’s most polluted waterway. But it wasn’t always that way. In the early part of the 20th century Suzhou Creek was a delightful park-lined waterway. But it deteriorated following the Japanese invasion in the 1930s. Slums and industrial sweatshops sprang up on what had been beautiful parkland, to be followed in the post-war period by heavy polluting industries. Year after year, the waterway became increasingly glazed over with black dirt and began emitting an appalling foul smell that old-time residents have never forgotten.

In 1998, authorities launched the Suzhou Creek Rehabilitation Project, a 12-year programme to improve the water quality, flood defenses and wastewater management. The first step was to close and relocate the polluting factories. However, even having done this there was little improvement in the water quality. This was because the riverbed itself was severely contaminated and pollution was still entering the Creek from 35 branch streams, from domestic sewerage, from run-off from streets and from agricultural seepage.
The solution was to cut off, the tributary streams and divert their water into canals for treatment. This allowed the streambed to be dredged and contaminated silt to be removed. This material was then made into bricks for the construction industry. Meanwhile, eco-friendly bacteria and oxygen were introduced into the waters that ate up organic substances. The water was then pumped and filtered through six successive beds to reduce its contamination to an acceptable level before being reintroduced back into the now scoured stream.

The estimated cost of returning Suzhou Creek back to the state that nature had intended is estimated at approximately £1.2 billion. But such expenditure seems justified given the vast potential for economic regeneration in this decaying area. Originally, all the abandoned factories and old warehouses along Suzhou Creek were set be demolished in favour of constructing modern high-rise buildings. However, following initiatives by artists in the late 1990s, some pockets of the riverside have been designated as protected heritage zones and here the warehouses have been conserved, providing workshop and gallery spaces for artists together with boutiques and bistros that give it an edgy, bohemian atmosphere.
Shanghai Cosco Experimental School was partnered with St Anne’s CofE School in LB Ealing

It’s no exaggeration to say that participation in Rivers of the World has changed my career as a fine art teacher. Now in my daily teaching, I always think about how I can learn from the ROTW teaching methodology, how I can imbed international dimension in my students’ learning and how to realise a wider arts education." Art teacher from COSCO School
This was the first time for us to communicate with foreigners in artistic languages. I felt excited and interested when I could use my drawing and clay works to exchange ideas with British friends, and to express my understanding and love towards my nation and hometown. I am looking forward to the appreciative smiles from our British friends."
Chen Yuming, Cosco School
“Through this event, I came to realise that how crucial it is to work as a team. Without harmony within the team, we can’t expect high efficiency at work. Furthermore, I learned that we need to protect the ecosystem of Suzhou Creek, our mother river, and prevent others from contaminating the river.”
Student from COSCO Experimental School
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008)
River Culture

Students looked at poetry written about the river, the many creatures that occupy it. They created their own 'River Guardians' and drew pictures of these, wrote stories about them and modelled them in clay.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009)
River of Life

Students researched the kinds of birds living around the Thames, then looking at the work of Jean Aubudon, they made sketches of their favourite species. They created masks from their drawings and acted out movements.
Shanghai No.2 Secondary School attached to Tongji University was partnered with Kingsford Community School in Beckton in LB Newham.

“We hope Suzhou Creek will be clean again so that we can find fish as we did in childhood. It is actually our responsibility. We have gone beyond the study of rivers. We are making investigation about our social obligations.” Student from No. 2 School attached to Tongji University
"I owe my heartfelt thanks to Rivers of the World, through which I had my role changed from merely an English interpreter to an international co-ordinator. I led some students who have participated in ROTW to attend a Water Forum hosted by our partner school in Japan and our programme won the prize. We feel more confident in project management and we are keen to host a British Council’s Students Forum if possible.” English teacher from No. 2 School attached to Tongji University
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008)
River of Life

Students practised a fish printing technique created by fishermen in ancient times to record the size of their catch and to document the locations in which they were found. Their images were scanned and the group collaborated in integrating images and ideas into a composite using Photoshop.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009)
Working River

Employing the repeated shapes and bright colours found in Chinese Peasant Painting, they created small drawings depicting people working along the Thames.
Shanghai Lantian Middle School was partnered with The Charter School in Dulwich in LB Southwark.

“I got to know the Thames River and the dragon boat festival through this programme. I worked together with my friends to make our dragon boat. Time elapsed with the joy of boat design, trial and final production. Nothing is impossible when we support one another with the facilitation of teachers.”

Student from Lantian Middle School
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008)
Working River

Students learned about jobs and machines used on and around the river. They manipulated coloured wire and made figures poised in various river occupations. They made coloured board backgrounds to photograph their figures and these images were combined and arranged as a group work.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009)
River Culture

Students researched British life and culture to come up with ideas for boats. They worked with mixed materials to create their works. Their images were scanned and arranged into a final poster in the form of ancient Chinese painting.
Shanghai Changzheng Secondary School was partnered with St Joseph's College in LB Croydon.

“Thanks to Rivers of the World, there have been many exchange visits between St. Joseph and us over the past two years. Teachers and students have improved their understanding, knowledge and skills. Now our collaboration goes beyond arts into new collaborative learning on Climate Change.” Headteacher of Changzhen Secondary School
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008)
Polluted River

Students visited the water treatment centre, investigated the names of various water plants, animals and organisms used naturally to clean the water. They created an installation with drawings, laboratory bottles and other natural elements.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009)
River City

Utilizing the method of Chinese paper cutting, the students merged British symbols into their bridge designs. They applied gouache to their images and arranged them on boards.
Shanghai Ganquan Foreign Languages Middle School was partnered with Acland Burghley School in Tufnell Park in LB Camden
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008) 
Resourceful River

Instead of building dams and walls to hold back the river, what would Shanghai be like if it embraced the flooding river? The students looked at old and new maps and designed an imaginary city of the future. They used air-dried clay, recycled materials and other media in their creations.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009) 
Polluted River

Students drawings were divided into three parts: What caused the Thames to be polluted, who was affected by the pollution, and what is the Thames river like today. The students practiced Exquisite Corpse drawings before starting their final projects.
Shanghai Tongbai Senior High School

Shanghai Tongbai Senior High School was partnered with Harlington Community School in LB Hillingdon
Robert Davis & Peng Zhenyu (2008)
River City

Students investigated different methods of merging nature and architecture. Their 'living landscapes' were photographed along with scanned images of themselves and manipulated to create an overview image of the work of the group.

Robert Davis & Ye Wendong (2009)
Resourceful River

Using the theatrical work of the artist Kara Walker as a base, students created silhouetted scenes from nature, recreation, industry, and leisure found along the Thames. They then arranged their silhouettes on board and employed the central character of a bird to tell their story.
In addition to workshops, students have been given opportunity to introduce their artworks and lead interactive demonstrative mini-workshops in Connecting Classrooms in China Annual Conference, which has greatly developed their project knowledge and presentation skill.

This year’s exhibition coincided with the first Connecting Classrooms in China Annual Conference in Beijing between 27 and 28 January 2010. 12 artworks created by Putuo-London schools and the creation process were displayed to more than 330 conference participants, mainly education authority officials, education experts and practitioners from across China Region. ROTW was showcased as a best practice of Joint Curriculum Project at the Collaborative Learning themed breakout session.

Convinced and inspired by the impact that ROTW has been able to create, drawing on positive feedback from local partner and the successful delivery experience, a new themed Joint Curriculum Project “Better Community. Better Life” has been developed by Connecting Classrooms Chinese team with support and input from UK and Southeast Asia.

ROTW was used as one of the three most representative Joint Curriculum Projects in Connecting Classrooms Brochure in China this year.

Participants were interviewed about their experience of ROTW in video, which will be used as a training visual aid in Connecting Classrooms capacity building workshops

As ROTW extended activity, Putuo Education Authority organised students trip to view “The Future Demands Your Participation” visual arts exhibition in Shanghai, driving traffic to this arts programme.