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Sunset over Yuandang Lake, mostly lit by natural light at night — Photos by Wang Yong

### Dark sky: then and now

I made multiple trips to the Sheshan area in 2012. Even though I am not an expert in astrophysics and have no understanding of how a scientific telescope operates, I could see that the luminous nights in the region had already begun to obscure the stars.

The skyline was decked with new, dazzlingly lit street lights as local investment accelerated in tandem with a surge of growing urbanization.

But things have changed for the better over the past decade, during which Shanghai has thrown its weight behind beautifying its vast countryside. With the closure of certain polluting businesses, many rice fields have been restored or expanded, and a number of ecological corridors featuring forests and wetlands have been built.

Since 2014, more than 100 “beautiful villages” have sprung up in Shanghai. This has put the city on a new path for growth that is different from the urban sprawl fueled by the industrial revolutions in the West.

An urban sprawl lends itself to light pollution, while a rural revival helps bring back starry

nights to people.

The idyllic village I visited sits at the foot of Tianma Mountain, about 10 kilometers to the southwest of Sheshan Hill. The village, featuring rolling rice fields, borders a forest that covers an area of 10,000 *mu* (about 667 hectares).

I visited the forest a few years ago when it first took shape. This time, I found trees had grown taller and thicker, creating a giant “citadel” against the glare of road lamps, the only source of light in the vicinity.

I went to another town near Sheshan Hill on Thursday night. There, I ran into a middle-aged couple who came from a nearby town to enjoy the rural landscape in the twilight. They sat in a wooden pavilion near a group of field camps for stargazers, chatting their time away. At some moments, they even recited poems to each other.

That reminded me of German poet and novelist Joseph von Eichendorff (1788-1857), who dedicated a poem to a moonlit night. These lines impress me most as they link nature with one’s soul:

*The breeze was gently walking  
through wheatfields near  
and far;*

*the woods were softly  
talking  
so bright shone ev’ry star.  
And, oh, my soul extended  
its wings through skies to  
roam:*

*O’er quiet lands suspended,  
my soul was flying home.*

Similar to this, many people are drawn to the gradually reappearing dark sky over Sheshan Hill. They unwind and enjoy the sweetness of the night after a long day of labor.

Yang Xiaoming, a specialist in dark-sky preservation, told *The Paper*, a local news portal, that the Sheshan region will eventually become one of Shanghai’s four main dark-sky zones; the other three are located in Chongming, Fengxian and Nanhui (in the Pudong New Area). Additionally, he proposed creating a dark-sky zone in the Yangtze River Delta, which borders Shanghai and the surrounding provinces of Jiangsu and Zhejiang.

Following his suggestion, I visited Yuandang Lake at night for the first time last week. I used to be there several times during the daytime to investigate how it was cultivating one of Shanghai’s best low-carbon environments for work and life.

Shortly before 8pm, when the sun sent its last rays across the horizon, a few stars began to appear. My cellphone could not catch them, but I joined a number of stargazers in the “wow” moment when stars began to blink.

### Stars over a lake

A photographer in his 60s set up his tripod and slowly adjusted his camera toward the dark sky.

“Are you sure you can shoot the stars?” I asked.

“Yes, I came here just for that,” he smiled back. “I’ve been observing the sky for many years, and this is one of the best places for stargazers in Shanghai.”

“Even if we cannot see stars on some nights, a dark sky free from artificial lights is still a luxury here, which you hardly find in a brightly lit downtown area,” a man in his 50s told me as we chatted on a 600-meter-long pedestrian bridge over the lake, which links Shanghai’s Qingpu District with Suzhou’s Wujiang District. He came from Wujiang.

Creating dark-sky zones is simply one aspect of Shanghai’s attempts to reduce light pollution and build a better living environment. In addition, the city is rewriting a

decades-old environmental rule to strengthen its fight against light pollution.

Suggested changes include increased use of low-light or light-free security cameras, a prohibition on landscape laser lights directed at residential windows and harsher penalties for those who emit light pollution.

While dark-sky zones are often meant for outlying districts, the amended laws will apply to every neighborhood in the city, guaranteeing that everyone has a “tender night.”

American plant ecologist Lauren Trotta says in an article titled “Diversity in the Dark” that a big difference between daylight observations and those that occur after dark is the “trade-off between sights, sounds and smells.” In other words, there are nocturnal animals and plants that one can hardly see, smell or hear during the day.

“Observing biodiversity affords us the chance to feel like we have discovered something new,” says Trotta.

It’s not only about trying something new. Because a dark sky protects biodiversity in a unique way, we are transforming our city into a 24-hour wildlife refuge.