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Faking it: Chinese burn their bridges with the past

China is demolishing ancient walled cities in a building frenzy to attract tourists. Jasper Becker reports on a national scandal that has brought the country into conflict with conservationists

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"If I tear anything down now, people will kill me because that is how they get rich," said Zhuang Chundi, the ex-mayor of the Zhouzhuang, the "Number one Water Town of China" with a dash of melodrama.

Then he emptied another glass of Italian red and gestured outside the restaurant at the visitors crowded along alleyways and stalls offering pearls, paintings, antique knick-knacks and local delicacies - pink smoked turnip tips, red cooked pig's calves and spinach-green dumplings.

Zhouzhuang, a quaint old market town about 50 miles from Shanghai in the Yangtze Delta and 25 miles from Suzhou, looks like Venice. Along the narrow canals and under humpbacked stone bridges, visitors are paddled in narrow boats very much like gondoliers. The boatman, however, is usually an apple-cheeked local woman dressed in a blue smock who serenades the tourists with the official song "New Zhouzhuang is good" which Mr Zhuang wrote himself, because, although Zhouzhang is old, it is actually new.

In a delta crowded with joint-venture export factories churning out televisions, plastic toys and cheap underwear for supermarkets across the US, the locals prefer to build themselves villas dominated by Hispanic balustrades, Doric columns, Roman statues and Gothic coats of arms.

Mr Zhuang, however, had the vision to see that there was money to be made by creating an old city to attract the tourists hungry to experience the old China. Many of them came to see Suzhou, a listed World Heritage site whose ancient gardens and narrow canals are lost amid an urban sprawl of ugly and polluting factories.

Mr Zhuang transformed his little town, just half a square kilometre in size, into an attraction that brings in 2.5 million visitors a year by relocating most of the population and rebuilding it with plenty of concrete - artfully hidden beneath the paint. Visitors now have to buy an entrance ticket to get into the old sector which is given over to 500 shops and restaurants.

Zhouzhuang has become such a money spinner that Mr Zhuang's take on urban planning is inspiring copycats all over the Delta and beyond.

As China contends for the rank of number one tourist destination, there is less and less to see. Rapid urbanisation is sweeping away what little of the past survived Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution and the decades of war and invasion before the Communist Party's 1949 victory.

Professor Ruan Yisan, of the urban planning department at Tongji University in Shanghai, has devoted his life to recording it all before it disappears. "The speed of the urbanisation took everyone by surprise," said Professor Ruan, who founded a National Research Centre for Historic Cities. "We managed to save a few but the destruction was so fast."

Fifty years ago, he says China had 300 walled cities. Now only four are left - Pingyao in Shanxi province, Xi'an in Shaanxi, Xincheng in Liaoning and Jingzhou in Hebei. Of China's 2,000 historic cities, only 100 have survived, and of these Professor Ruan says only about 20 have been preserved in anything like their original state.

A short modest man in his sixties, he has criss-crossed the country lobbying local governments to protect their old buildings in the midst of real estate frenzy which has enabled some property developers to become billionaires.

"At the beginning, people would not accept my views but now they are ready to apply my ideas," he said.

When the economic reform started in 1979, the destruction was largely limited to the countryside where peasants, as soon as they had a bit of money, demolished their traditional houses in favour of utilitarian blocks made with concrete, tiles and glass.

Centuries' worth of ancient craftsmanship has been hastily jettisoned by people hungry for televisions and air-conditioners. The carved lattice windows, doors, beds and other furnishings have been thrown out as so much worthless junk. Some has been scooped up by canny antique dealers, repaired and sold around the world.

Professor Ruan has to trek to remote areas inaccessible by car to find old towns and villages faithful to China's architectural traditions. And when the makers of the Oscar-winning film *Crouching Tiger, Sleeping Dragon* wanted to find a real Chinese-looking Ming-dynasty village, they had to go all the way to an obscure region in Anhui province where the architecture had been preserved because the villagers were too poor to merit a road. These villages, called Xidi and Hongcun, are becoming a huge tourist destination in their own right.

Professor Ruan had won fame - and the enmity of Hong Kong's property tycoons - by persuading Shanghai not to tear up the Bund riverfront or the famous Nanjing Road shopping street. Generally, though, the resistance mounted by Chinese intellectuals has failed. A letter-writing campaign to protect walls around the town of Dinghai in Zhejiang province and another to preserve old Tianjin were ignored. Only the profits to be made from tourism have helped protect places like the Yangtze canal towns.

Professor Ruan partly saved Zhouzhuang by persuading Mr Zhuang to take a European tour. There he acquired a taste for *vin*o and on his return invited Professor Ruan to propose a preservation plan..

Mr Zhuang did not exactly follow the preservation plan to the letter, he admits. He bulldozed half the historic buildings and built a new town complete with hotels and pedestrian shopping zones. But on the other hand he inspired neighbouring towns to try harder.

In the nearby rival water town of Tongli, Ling Gangqian, deputy director of the campaign applying to Unesco for the area to be declared a World Heritage site, says they are sticking strictly to the rules of Unesco and Professor Ruan's plan.

"We want to keep it as a living city, not a museum, so here you can see ordinary people living their ordinary lives, fishing or washing their clothes in the canal," he said.

Tongli is twice as large with 10,000 inhabitants and has a much quieter feel. If you walk around, the local residents politely invite you to sit on a wicker chairs set by the canal for contemplative cup of jasmine tea. Tongli has preserved its 2,000 years of history so well it makes most of its money as a stage set for over 40 films and historical made-for-TV dramas.

On the other hand, closer inspection reveals that the most attractive and picturesque old buildings are modern fakes, including a 800-year old "Yuan dynasty" Buddhist temple. The building has ochre yellow walls and green tiled roofs and sits on Luoxi Island surrounded by a lake. Only when you get there do you discover that no temple has existed here for 300 years and even now it is still not a place of worship.

Four other towns are copying Zhouzhuang and Tongli. These include Luzhi, the smallest and newest which claims 40 bridges and 69 lanes, Wuzhen, as well as Nanxun and Xitang in the neighbouring Zhejiang province.

Phone and electrical cables are being buried underground. All waste water including household waste is being treated at a newly built plant and paving stones and bridges are being carefully repaired.

They are attempting to form a union and make a joint application to the United Nations Education, Culture and Science Organisation (Unesco) to be included on the list of World Heritage sites - but success is not guaranteed. Unesco requires heritage sites to remain as ruins and obliges local authorities to preserve the social and cultural identity of the place and to involve local inhabitants in the development and management of the areas around any site.

Out of the 730 World Heritage sites, 28 are already in China but Unesco officials are trying to discourage more listings because so often it leads to a deterioration in the sites, real estate speculation and the exodus or marginalisation of the local poor.

Even in Beijing Unesco has had trouble persuading the municipal officials to protect the capital's architectural heritage and observe the basic rules governing historical conservation. "Traditional community neighbourhoods have been relentlessly destroyed and the benefits and rights of ordinary people have been severely offended," says Genevieve Domenach-Chich, deputy director of the Unesco Office in Beijing

Mr Zhuang defends his actions vigorously. "You can't introduce foreign concepts of conservation into China - we have to do things our own way. The ideas of Unesco are just too idealistic - they don't match the realities of China," he says. "How can you try to put a place like this under a glass case?"

Generally, once local officials do decide to go into tourism, they first start turving out the original inhabitants before they rebuild everything. This provokes what Unesco politely calls "dissatisfaction and even social turbulence".

When Pingyao, a walled city in Shanxi province, was renovated for tourism, the local government evicted half the residents - leading to furious disputes over compensation. And when the provincial tourist authorities in Henan cleared away restaurants, shops and factories obstructing access to World Heritage sites of the Longmen Buddhist Grottoes and Shaolin monastery, it led to attempted murder. One Luoyang City official in charge of the Buddhist caves narrowly survived after a peasant tracked him to his house and stabbed him in the leg.