
Spent one whole day on a daytrip out to Zhouzhuang, a sort of Colonial Williamsburg: More than sixty percent of the buildings in Zhouzhuang date from the Ming or Qing dynasties or even earlier, and the entire town is built around canals rather than streets. Until fifteen years ago it was accessible only by boat; now it's just over an hour's drive from Shanghai, and every shop is aimed at tourists. Very pleasant, though; any new buildings must match the existing ones, and billboards, megaphones, aggressive touts, and – best of all – motor vehicles are prohibited. This was something I hadn't seen in China, and something that no one would have wanted the first time I visited (in 1987): A living museum of China's feudal past.

Most foreigners who come to China expect to see either something like Zhouzhuang, but more so – a Chinese fantasyland of scholars in long robes, sipping tea with lute- (or pipa) playing courtesans, while peasants in pointed hats grow rice in the fields – or an entire nation of gray concrete apartment blocks, filled with people marching about in blue-gray Mao jackets.

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