

THE SHOCK OF THE OLD

Avant-garde art curator Johnson Chang's reconstruction of an entire ancient village, complete with traditional rites and artisans, may be the most futuristic thing happening in China. But is this edifice to the past conceptual art, a new community—or a subtle form of protest?

JOHNSON CHANG, THE MAN LARGELY CREDITED with introducing Chinese contemporary art to the West, is not difficult to spot in an art-world crowd. At Hong Kong's China Club—a glamorous venue known for its high-powered business and art clientele, and featuring a riot of artwork selected by Chang himself, many pieces playing ironically with images of Mao and retro Communist propaganda—he can be singled out across the room thanks to his attire: Chinese peasant garments of a type rarely seen outside of historical films, a black cotton jacket with a Mandarin collar, loose trousers, and leather slippers handmade in Beijing.

His fashion statement is deliberate. A champion of the Chinese avant-garde who organized several landmark exhibitions after the Tiananmen Square crisis, Chang is also fiercely dedicated to the idea that ancient Chinese culture can endure today as a vital, relevant force. For several years, he has been pursuing his most radical curatorial project yet, a bold artistic experiment whose ambition is unprecedented in China—perhaps anywhere in the world. Working with a group of artists in a ruined factory zone on the edge of Shanghai, he has created an entire traditional Chinese village from the ground up, using ancient building methods that were almost lost to living memory. The village is not intended as tourist destination, but rather as a working center for traditional Chinese artists, craftsmen and musicians, many of whose skills only survived underground during the Cultural Revolution. “I want to see the revival of Chinese material culture,” he declared. “Four thousand years of tradition need to be kept alive.” Along with the meticulous re-creation of history, Chang



ANCIEN RÉGIME
Pingyao, a 14th-century Han Dynasty walled city and the last of its kind, fell in the path of a planned roadway but was saved from the wrecking ball by a crusading preservationist.

BY TONY PERROTTET PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIPPE CHANCEL



CITY OF DREAMS
 Left: A nighttime view of the Bund, Shanghai's art deco riverfront district. Right: A room at Le Sun Chine, a Shanghai hotel evoking the hedonistic aura of the 1930s.



hopes to restore a fading universe of Confucian values to counteract the materialism seeping through the country, which ruthlessly dismisses and discards anything that cannot turn a profit.

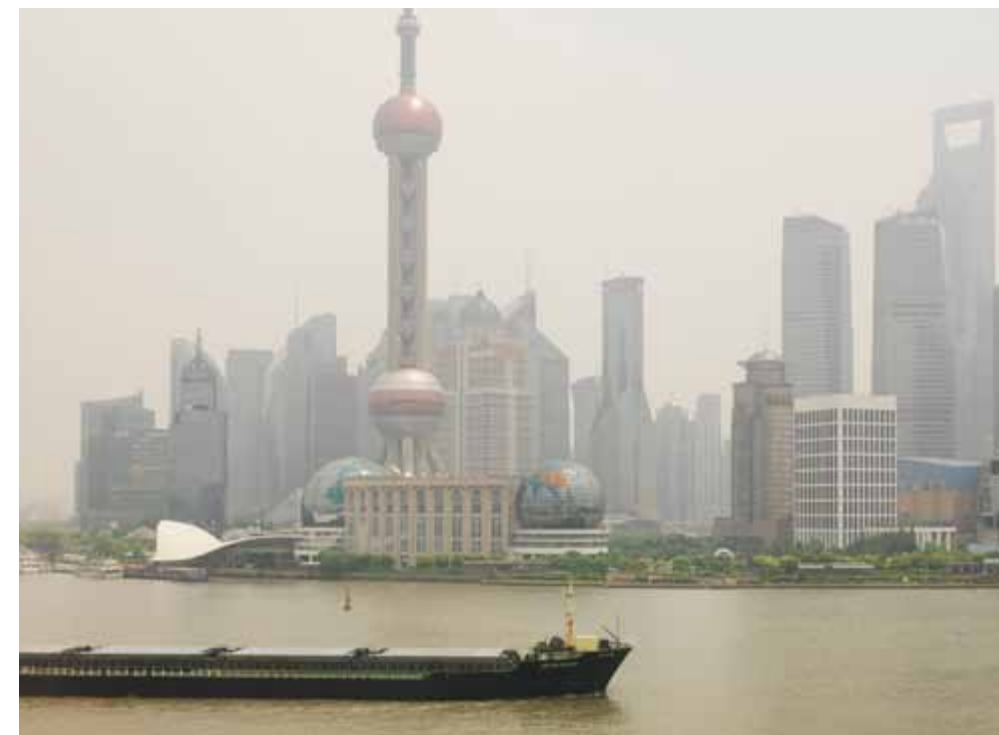
Many in the West are unaware that China's ancient artistic heritage, long battered by the excesses of the Communist Revolution, is facing an even more dramatic threat today from frenzied modernization. Since the country embraced capitalism in the 1980s, development has scorched the landscape at a furious pace, sweeping away untold architectural treasures, and with them the last vestiges of art, crafts and beliefs that form a kind of collective memory. "Twenty rural villages are destroyed by developers every day," says Professor Ruan Yisan, the patriarch of Chinese preservationists, who directs the National Research Center of Historic Studies in Shanghai, quoting figures provided to him by the government's Ministry of Construction. "We don't know what is being lost with them." Johnson feels that China's cultural identity is vanishing beneath an avalanche of modernity, wherein many Western styles and habits are regarded as superior to the Chinese. His project is an attempt to forge a link with the past before it disintegrates entirely. "The new generation isn't even sure what Chinese tradition is," he said. "It's something to be imagined. So it's absolutely crucial to keep the lineage intact."

Johnson's art project is in a suburb called Jinze, but as I discovered after checking in at the Peace Hotel—an icon of Shanghai's 1930s decadence, where Charlie Chaplin kept a suite and Noël Coward wrote *Private Lives*—the name isn't listed in any guidebook, and Google maps was frozen by the government. After trying to arrange a visit for several days, a call came in from Johnson: An assistant would pick me up in 10 minutes. "Bring your bags," he suggested. "Stay as long as you like."

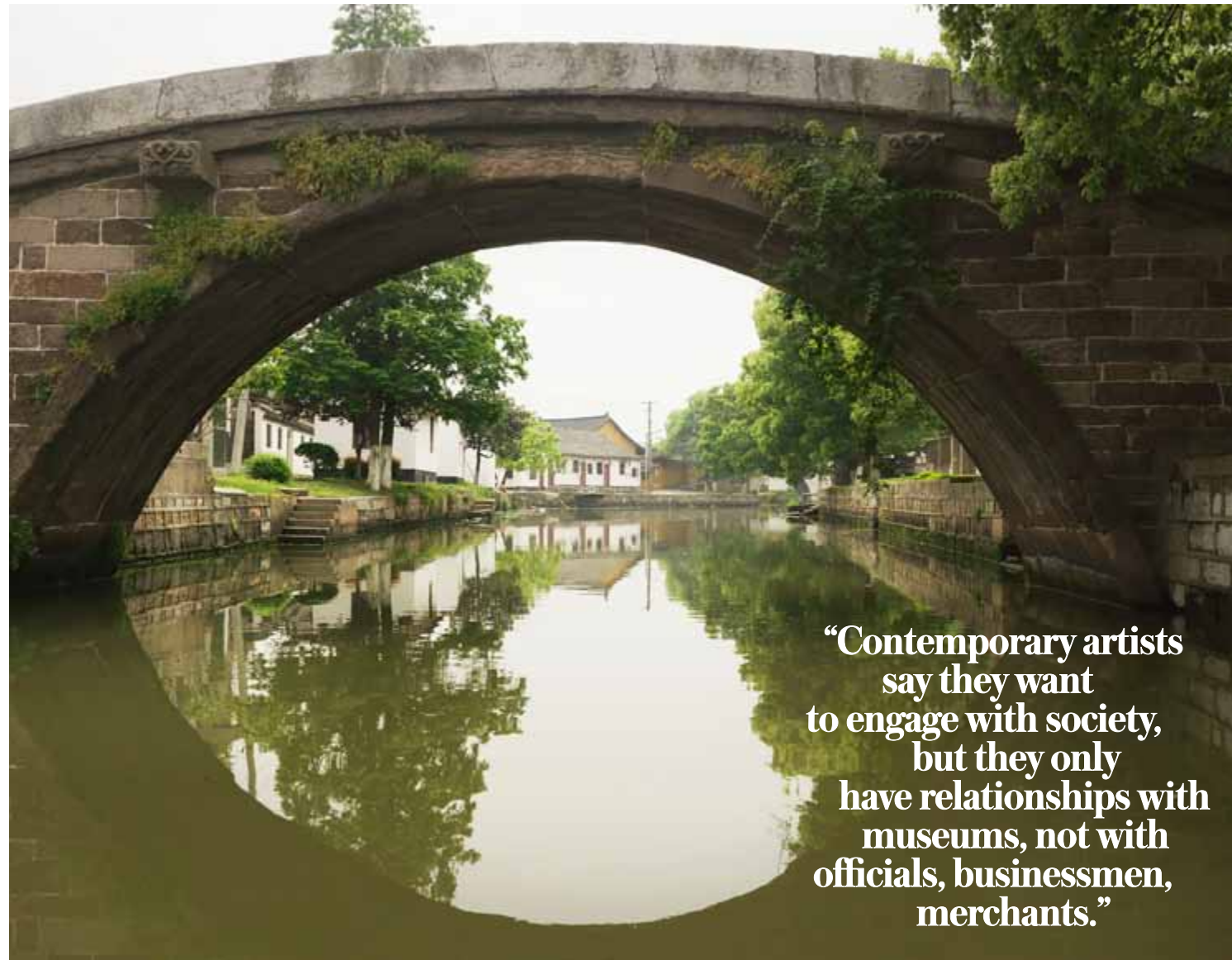
Downstairs, a Chinese hipster in decidedly untraditional clothing was waiting in a beaten-up city cab, and soon we were hurtling through modern high-rise developments and shopping complexes. Ever since the Opium War of 1839–1842 opened the country at cannon-point, Shanghai has been mainland China's most enthusiastic gateway to the West. Cranes cluster like praying mantises on every horizon, and the shudder of construction work provides a constant soundtrack. The result suggests a more crowded version of Las Vegas, except that many of the skyscrapers are capped

MASTER BUILDER

Johnson Chang, in Hong Kong's China Club. Far right: The futuristic skyline of Pudong, Shanghai's business district, a symbol of China's embrace of capitalism since the 1980s.



China has seen both extreme socialism and extreme communism in the past 100 years. No other country has tried to cut off its history more radically.



“Contemporary artists say they want to engage with society, but they only have relationships with museums, not with officials, businessmen, merchants.”

PRESERVATION HALL An ancient bridge spanning a canal in Jinze. Below: One of the ceremonial halls in Jinze. Opposite: The core of the project is the Ritual Hall, where traditional Chinese wedding celebrations are held.



with shapes intended to evoke the roofs of Chinese temples—to the untutored eye, resembling giant power tools.

Even so, Shanghai remains an architecture student’s dream. Hidden among the towers are relics of almost every conceivable era—Russian Stalinist spires, neoclassical facades, a Gothic cathedral. In its passion for Western styles, the city is also graced with nine surreal New Towns, a series of residential developments that include Thames Town, an artificial Tudor village; a Dutch town; and a German town designed by the son of Albert Speer.

The skyscrapers began to thin as we approached Qingpu district in Shanghai’s west. Occasional stretches of farmland could now be glimpsed among acres of decaying industrial parks. Jinze turned out to be a bustling provincial township within the city limits, filled with grimy concrete-block housing and shabby stores. Although traffic was now mostly on bicycle and foot, we got lost in a maze of abandoned factories. Then the taxi stopped suddenly at a pair of wooden gates. A caretaker rushed out to open them, revealing a startling vision of Old China that might have been lifted from a Qing Dynasty vase.

A tranquil courtyard was surrounded by whitewashed timber structures, all with elegant upturned eaves. Goldfish gathered in a pool, shaded by blossoming trees. Paper lanterns fluttered in the breeze. After the chaos of Shanghai, it was a welcome vision of rural serenity. I was escorted to an empty tearoom, whose wood-framed windows looked out over a broad canal, spanned by a stone bridge, and where we were soon joined by Johnson himself, smiling in his trademark rustic garb. “This is our effort to return to the roots of Chinese culture,” Johnson explained. “In Europe, civilization began in the cities, but in China, it was in the countryside. Everything



changed with Mao’s land reform, which got rid of the wealthy and the intellectuals who were tied to the land.”

Although construction will continue for another five years, the first Shanghai artists, poets, scholars and musicians have already begun visiting and staying for short residencies. The centerpiece is a grandiose Hall of Rituals, which has hosted traditional coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings, New Years festivities and birthdays for local villagers and Shanghai residents, using ancient costumes and rites. There are several performance stages for Chinese opera and music, which have so far included concerts featuring the gu qin, the stringed instrument favored by Confucius. Accuracy is aided by an extensive network of specialists—Chinese historians, folklorists and anthropologists, and advisors from the Chinese Academy of Art and the Shanghai Theater Academy—who draw on the surviving practice of ancient ceremonies. “This is not a film set,” said Johnson. “It’s a working place. To begin with, artisans in dying trades—craftsmen who have no apprentices—have come to pass on their skills to the next generation.”

Other sections lie outside the main gate. “This dates from the 14th century, when the Mongols ruled China,” Johnson said as he stopped to admire a stone bridge with no railings. Several factory spaces have been converted into research centers, conference halls and warehouses, which store antique handicrafts salvaged from remote provinces of China. One chamber contained exquisite hand-woven clothes; another, dozens of ancient stone cake molds; another, wooden statuettes. A larger storeroom contained 20 varieties of antique wooden loom, all in working order.

We were joined by the Shanghai artist Hu Xiangcheng—the robust 62-year-old, who is overseeing construction of the project, has been a fixture of the Asian

contemporary art scene for decades. The pair met in 1997 and collaborated on the São Paulo Biennale the following year, where they bonded over their despair at the number of ancient villages being razed. After decades of grim communal farms established by Mao, most urban Chinese regarded rural areas with disdain. “We decided to build something so beautiful that everyone would be seduced by it,” Johnson said. “It would be authentic but attractive, and prove that country living is desirable—which, after 60 years of Communist rule, young people don’t believe.”

“The idea for Jinze had been in my head since I was young, growing up in Hong Kong,” Johnson explained. “In my imagination, the Chinese countryside always seemed more real and attractive. This vision was derived from ancient landscape paintings, martial arts novels, and the fact that one detested the overcrowding in Hong Kong, with its property-mad economy. But, of course, most Chinese people are now mesmerized by the new and the fashionable.”

The site, funded mostly by Johnson and his brother, a successful Hong Kong financier, covers 400,000 square feet, a quarter of which now contains structures whose purposes are quickly evolving. There are 12 guest rooms for artists and scholars, with a dormitory for Shanghai art students under way, and even a working organic farm. “We want to show local farmers that you can follow traditional agricultural methods and still thrive,” said Hu. He regards this involvement with the villagers of Jinze as crucial. “Contemporary artists say they want to engage with society, but they aren’t doing it hands-on. They only have relationships with museums. Art is cut off from the lives of everyday people. But Confucian philosophy encourages artists to work with society—officials, businessmen, merchants.” He has already erected 20 theater stages for villagers in the traditional style and provided musical instruments. “At



night, the villages around us used to be dead. They were dark and silent. Now people are now coming out! There's a new sense of happiness."

CLEARLY, THE PROJECT AT JINZE doesn't fit any neat categories. It's an arts center, a rural retreat, an academic facility, a community center. But it's also a conceptual artwork in itself—an implicit protest at the direction China has taken in recent decades. "The very existence of Jinze is a critique of the destruction of villages currently taking place," said Professor Ruan Yisan.

According to Johnson, the assault on China's ancient traditions—including its architectural heritage—began at the turn of the 20th century, when the ancient Confucian social system began to crumble. For 2,000 years prior, China's villages had experienced remarkable continuity: Their wooden buildings were maintained by master artisans who had intimate knowledge of carpentry, lacquer, paint pigments, resins and textiles. But when Sun Yat-sen began the process of Westernization after the 1911 Republican Revolution, wooden buildings were built less often, and traditional skills were slowly abandoned. The 1949 Communist Revolution hastened the process, as antique structures were regarded as vestiges of a feudal era. During the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, Mao let loose the Red Guards against "the Four Olds"—old customs, old culture, old habits and old ideas—destroying temples, historical relics and tombs. Even Beijing's vast Forbidden City would have been steamrolled, but Premier Zhou Enlai had objected and posted troops in its defense.

China has seen both extreme socialism and extreme capitalism in the past 100 years, and Johnson feels "no other country has tried to cut off its history more radically." The only comparison in the West might be the collapse of the Roman Empire, which shattered Greco-Roman culture. "The question is," Johnson says, "having gone this far, how do we rethink our situation? How does one redeem the past?"

The project at Jinze is certainly one of the more creative protests of China's headlong rush to capitalism and modernity. Other artists have raised objections, such as Ai Weiwei, who in 1995 famously photographed himself dropping a Han Dynasty urn and letting it smash on the ground. In recent years, the stray voices have resolved into a more tangible clamor. "Chinese intellectuals—academics, architects and planners—are now in very hot discussion about how best to pursue preservation," said Li Xiangning, a professor of architecture and urban planning at Tongji University in Shanghai. "There is a growing sense that we need to slow down our pursuit of money

LIVING HISTORY

Above: Boys from Jinze. Opposite: The main courtyard of the Jinze project, where the Ming-era cobblestones were rescued from other villages that had been destroyed.



"This is not a film set; it's a working place with artisans in dying trades, craftsmen who have no apprentices, coming to pass on their skills to the next generation."



HIGH CONTRAST
Left: Beijing's China Club is in one of the city's last traditional *hutong* neighborhoods. Opposite: A corner of a *hutong*, which despite official assurances are still being leveled. Below: The pool at Opposite House, a modern Beijing hotel bearing gestures to the past.



Four thousand years of China's cultural identity are vanishing beneath an avalanche of modernity.

and development. Ninety percent of Chinese society is charging toward the future at an incredible pace, but there must be a few of us who cast an eye backward. If we look to history and tradition, we might be able to rethink what we've done in the past two or three decades."

Signs of a budding preservationist spirit can be seen even in development-mad Shanghai. Despite its reputation for the unsentimental pursuit of the yuan, the city has had more success in saving its heritage than many others in China, including Beijing. The local government declared 12 "preservation zones" in 2004 to give a modicum of protection to the city's historical area. The centerpiece is a waterfront district known as the Bund, lined with majestic art deco buildings such as the newly restored Peace Hotel. Tourists who still seek the nostalgic 1930s can also visit the French Concession, once the refuge of opium lords, gangsters and prostitutes, where restored colonial mansions stand on streets lined by parasol trees. One former home of a wealthy Chinese family opened last year as a boutique hotel, Le Sun Chine, complete with a retro champagne bar. "In the 1930s, there was a conversation between the cultures in Shanghai," explained the owner, a Shanghai entrepreneur in his 30s,

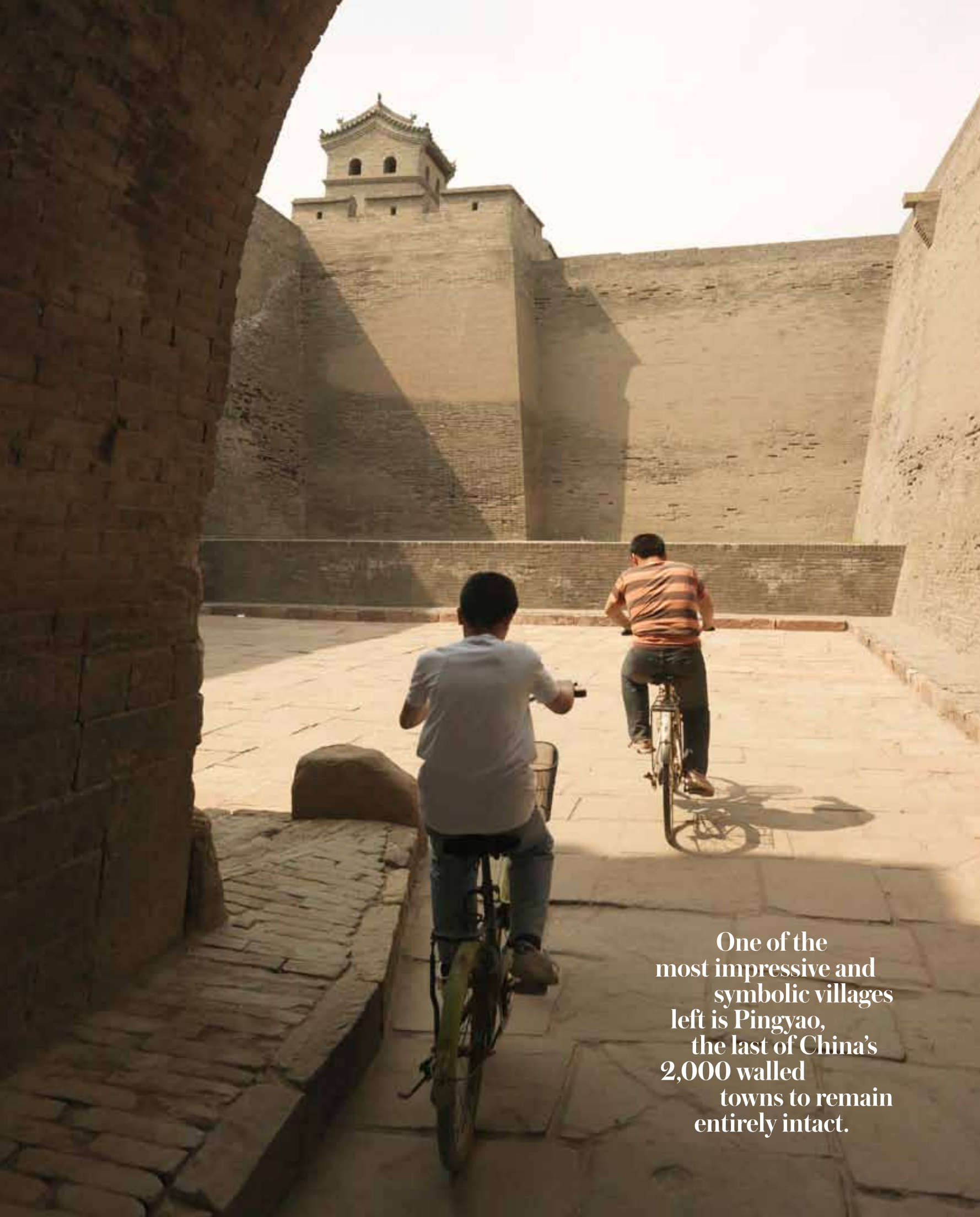
Sebastian Sun. Even Chinese travelers are tired of all the 500-room business hotels, he has found, preferring Le Sun Chine's more intimate scale.

Many historical sites that have escaped the wrecking ball, however, have suffered from gaudy restorations catering to China's boom in domestic tourism, which can turn remote relics into fairground attractions almost overnight. "The Chinese do enjoy visiting their cultural treasures, but they have very different sensibilities to our own," says Catherine Heald, director of high-end Asian tour company Remote Lands, in New York. "They prefer to go to sections of the Great Wall that has been fixed up and made to look brand new, while we prefer the original, even if it is in ruins." Ancient sites are regularly demolished and replaced by copies, whose lack of fine detail and commercialism can suggest a dispiriting theme park. "Luckily, there are still a few far-flung towns and villages that have not been over-restored."

One of the most impressive—and symbolic—is Pingyao, the last of China's 2,000 walled towns to remain entirely intact. Located 800 miles northwest of Shanghai, its survival is a small miracle. Under Mao, authorities in the impoverished Shanxi province lacked the resources to destroy Pingyao's formidable fortifications, which are 33 feet thick and topped with 72 watchtowers. These stubborn bastions also protected a thriving ancient town, its lanes lined with lavish mansions, temples and even banks dating from the period when Pingyao was the financial capital of the Qing Dynasty. But having survived the Red Guards, the remote town became the focus of a dramatic conservation battle in 1980, when the government decided to plow six roads through its heart for car traffic. Professor Ruan Yisan rushed to Pingyao to halt the steam-rollers; given one month by the state governor to devise an alternative proposal, he moved into the town with 11 of his best students. It turned into a grueling assignment—all 12 of the group came down with dysentery and were plagued by lice—but Ruan's plan for an adjacent new town was accepted. In 1997, UNESCO declared the entire town a World Heritage site, and in 2009, the first boutique hotel opened, Jing's Residence, mixing ancient and modern styles within a former silk merchant's mansion. But strangely, despite its iconic status, few foreigners make the effort to visit it today.

For the moment, Pingyao's 40,000 inhabitants still live in a town that looks much as it has for centuries. But its status is fragile. "The larger public buildings have been saved," Professor Ruan said. "But there are dozens of historic residential houses that are in urgent need of repair." Pingyao is also being discovered by the first Chinese tourists, who travel in large bus groups and stay only briefly. As a result, the main crossroads has already been taken over by souvenir vendors, selling the same cheap knick-knacks you can find in Shanghai or Beijing markets (or New York's Chinatown). The rise in housing prices is threatening to drive out residents. "We need to switch from mass sightseeing," Ruan said. "People should stay for an extended time so they can understand Pingyao's art, its culture, its cuisine. But it's not easy to control tourism in China, because economic growth is such a focus for the authorities." Rampant commercialism has the power to destroy Pingyao just as efficiently as neglect.

IN BEIJING, SIGNS OF THE PAST are more elusive. The old city, once as admired as Paris for its beauty, has been battered since the first days of the Communist Revolution, and its charming hutongs, or narrow-lane neighborhoods, have been steadily disappearing ever since. Even so, protests were ignited last February when developers demolished the home of the country's most illustrious 20th-century architect, Liang Sicheng, who had campaigned in vain to save Old Beijing under Mao. (After one defeat, he presciently shouted, "In 50 years, you'll know I'm right!") Thanks to public support, the house was declared an



One of the most impressive and symbolic villages left is Pingyao, the last of China's 2,000 walled towns to remain entirely intact.



STILL STANDING
Two views of Pingyao, China's financial capital during the late Qing Dynasty, and a lone survivor of the Cultural Revolution and modern developers.

“immovable cultural relic,” but in February, during the lull of the New Year holidays, a developer moved in and leveled it anyway. The company received a token fine of \$60,000 from the government, which provoked a renewed level of outrage. “Some professors are calling it the Chinese Penn Station Movement,” says Professor Li, referring to the destruction of New York’s railway station in 1966, which spurred preservation. “But I’m not optimistic.”

Chang sees the fight to save historical architecture as one part of a broader mission. Just how broad became apparent when I attended an academic conference he had organized at Tsinghua University in Beijing, where 60 scholars from around Asia converged for a “Symposium on Ritual Studies”—the first of its kind since the Communists came to power. “One of the most drastic breaks with the past has been with traditional rituals,” he said. “Lunar festivals, ancestral rites, seasonal ceremonies, funerals.” He hopes to revive the Confucian concept of Li, he explained, which goes beyond the English word “ritual” to include everything from etiquette, education and morality to a cosmic vision of a balanced world order. “Many people are trying to exploit nostalgia by inventing rituals to fill our sense of loss,” said Johnson, “but they don’t carry the weight of authenticity.” The Ritual Hall at Jinze is a setting for correct ancient ceremonies—or as correct as possible, given the enormous weight of research that surrounds their revival—and he hopes to create similar spaces in Beijing and Hong Kong.

On the opening night of the symposium, a bevy of scholars, artists, Johnson’s family and friends (it was also his birthday) converged at a reception at the China Club, the Beijing branch of the Hong Kong club. The setting itself seemed to capture the

quixotic nature of the enterprise, since the historic mansion, once in the heart of a hutong, is now the lone survivor, overshadowed on all sides by skyscrapers. The interior was exuberantly traditional. In the banquet hall, guests were entertained by a Chinese opera troupe, as Johnson drifted happily from guest to guest, engaging them in erudite conversation and making introductions across continents and cultures. At my table, an art curator and a magazine editor lamented China’s cultural loss. But artist Feng Mengbo, whose work is in New York’s MOMA, sought some middle ground. “Does it matter if something is Chinese or Western, modern or traditional? The ideal is to go for something fresh and inspiring, wherever it’s from.” His own art features video games that use Red Guards as Mario-like avatars, but he also incorporates calligraphy and Shan shui landscapes.

As the party wound down, Johnson stepped from the warm glow of lanterns to the cold streetlight reflected off the surrounding skyscrapers. Standing by the busy highway, it was easy to doubt that an idyllic art project, even one executed at the grand scale of the village at Jinze, could have an impact on the juggernaut of China’s modernization. But Johnson was, as ever, hopeful. “Art has a special role in society,” he said. “It provides a public space where reflection is possible, and criticism can be launched.” His village offers the disparate voices protesting the government’s vandalism of the past a living critique of China’s lightning modernization—a spark that could ignite an equally intense burst of energy to preserve its ancient heritage.

As he returned to the China Club for a last cup of rice wine, Johnson and his friends seemed like genteel revolutionaries ready to take on the modern world. ♦