



In the ancient city of Pingyao a man re-enacts the daily routines of what was once China's most powerful bank.

The Ancient Teller of Pingyao

By J. Keith Howie

THOUGH BUTTRESSED by 2,500 years of history, the city of Pingyao, once the center of Chinese banking, is nowadays an off-the-beaten-track destination.

The city walls are intact, 40 feet high and four miles long, and circle a collection of ancient buildings, courtyard houses and temples. The city gates provide magnificent examples of Ming and Qing dynasty construction.

Today, thousands of little shops and business along the city's streets embrace their heritage—not just exotic but also timeless.

The biggest attraction in Pingyao, however, is the Rishengchang Draft Bank museum. The bank operated during the Qing Dynasty (AD 1644

to 1911) and is reputed to be the first draft bank in the world, where cheques could be drawn on the bank's funds. It had a huge influence on the development of modern banking in China today. Open for 108 years, bankruptcy closed its doors when the Qing dynasty abdicated and defaulted on loans, leaving all the banks empty.

The man in this image is acting the part of a 19th-century clerk at the bank, using a quill for the delicate calligraphy needed in record keeping. Once the work place of thousands of men like this, nowadays its immaculately preserved buildings tell their story.

We ended up in Pingyao on an overnight train from Beijing to Taiyuan. Our sleeper compartment consisted of four bunks, so we had an opportunity to meet a couple of locals, one a teacher

who spoke some English. We stayed up long into the night talking...we were the first foreigners she had ever spoken with.

On another trip to China 25 years ago I had the very special opportunity to meet and talk with a few locals at that time. They were polite but highly guarded. In today's China, people are more open.

We talked with our teacher about everything from politics to their justice system. She was very well informed about what was going on in the world and was particularly interested in our impressions of the Beijing Olympics and China in general. ■

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