Touring the Past: Walking Histories of China's Provincial Cities

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Introduction

This book began as a series of walks. On quiet mornings and crowded evenings, I traced alleys where courtyards lean toward canals, followed tramlines that no longer hum, and climbed city walls whose bricks hold more fingerprints than any archive can catalogue. Touring the Past: Walking Histories of China’s Provincial Cities is both a companion for travelers and a field manual for urban microhistory. It invites you to read cities with your feet and your eyes, while holding in mind the long arcs of commerce, migration, faith, and industry that made these streets possible.

Why provincial cities? Because the national story is written in local scripts. Beyond the megacities that dominate itineraries and headlines, provincial centers and prefectural towns contain layered neighborhoods where guild halls face schools, depots sit beside shrines, and market lanes still whisper the names of vanished trades. Here, architectural fragments and everyday routines carry memories of empire and republic, socialism and market reform. By moving chapter by chapter—one provincial unit at a time—we meet distinctive urban ecologies without losing sight of the networks that bind them together.

Methodologically, this volume braids walking with the archive. Each chapter proposes a route scaled to an unhurried day, punctuated by “reading stations” at which a facade, bridge, or courtyard opens onto documentary worlds: gazetteers and business directories, cadastral maps and factory newsletters, temple inscriptions and local newspapers, oral histories and photographs. Microhistory is our lens—not to make the small parochial, but to show how a lane or workshop can refract national and transnational processes. The aim is to tether the intimacy of place to the breadth of context.

The book is also practical. Routes begin and end near reliable transit nodes, suggest alternative spurs, and flag rest points and respectful vantage spots. I note when morning light renders brickwork legible, when markets crest into their fullest textures, and when streets quiet enough to hear the scrape of a gate being opened for the day. You will find attention to gradients, stair counts, and seasonal variations where they matter. These are not museum walks; they pass through living neighborhoods whose residents carry on with their own schedules and concerns.

Preservation, and its discontents, is a running theme. Throughout these chapters you will encounter storylines of demolition and rescue, canal infill and restoration, factory conversion and craft revival. I try to recognize the compromises such projects entail: whose histories are curated and whose are displaced; which materials weather time and which are replaced by simulacra; how regulation, tourism, investment, and

memory collide. Rather than prescribing a single outcome, the walks foreground stakeholders and trade-offs so readers can form their own judgments.

Names and languages matter. Street and neighborhood names can change across regimes and decades; multiple scripts and pronunciations coexist. Where helpful, I provide historical toponyms, older romanizations, and locally used terms alongside contemporary forms. This is not pedantry: the same lane may reveal different pasts when called by its merchant guild name, its revolutionary designation, or its present-day address.

Ethics matter too. Please walk with care for people’s privacy and rhythms. Ask before photographing in residential or religious spaces; do not enter courtyards uninvited; recognize that the best vantage points are sometimes the ones you forgo. Many of the places described here are homes and workplaces first, historical sources second. The book advocates curiosity tempered by humility.

Finally, a note on scope and invitation. Twenty-five chapters cannot exhaust China’s provincial urban worlds, nor can any single route stand in for a whole city. The selections favor places where archival traces and walkable fabrics converse richly; other deserving streets remain off these pages. Treat what follows as scaffolding: adapt routes to your interests, add detours sparked by a doorway or a conversation, and annotate your own copies with corrections and discoveries. If this volume helps you see how a market stall encodes a migration, how a bridge crystallizes a policy, or how a tiled eave shelters a century of labor, then these walks will have done their work.

CHAPTER ONE: Anhui — Hui Merchants’ Lanes in Shexian: Ink, Timber, and Clan Guilds

Start your walk at the eastern end of Shexian Old Street, where the pavement gives way to the first hints of a different world. The morning light here is soft, filtering through the branches of plane trees planted decades ago, their leaves catching the sun like stained glass. The air carries the scent of steamed buns from a nearby stall, mingling with the faint, sweet aroma of camphor from a small courtyard apothecary. This is where the past begins, not in a museum but in the ordinary act of stepping onto a street that has known countless arrivals and departures.

From the eastern entrance, head west toward the old Drum Tower, its wooden beams darkened by centuries of smoke and rain. Across the water, the shadow of the tower falls on the northern bank like a sundial marking the hours of another era. Hui merchants once gathered here to check the time before setting out on their journeys, their schedules synchronized not with clocks but with the rhythms of trade caravans and river tides. Today, the tower’s bell no longer rings, but its silhouette remains a compass for understanding the town’s orientation, both physical and spiritual.

The first stop is the Former Residence of Wang Ziheng, a sprawling compound that once housed a branch of one of Huizhou’s most influential merchant clans. Its gray-brick walls enclose a series of courtyards connected by sliding doors painted in faded vermillion. Inside, lattice windows frame views of a garden where rock formations mimic the surrounding mountains, a reminder that even the wealthy merchants of Shexian never forgot their agrarian roots. This house is not just a dwelling but a document of lineage, each room a chapter in a family’s rise from grain traders to regional financiers.

Near the residence, a narrow alley leads to the Hui Ink Shop, a family-run business that has operated for nearly two hundred years. The shop’s facade is unassuming, its wooden sign weathered to a soft gray, but inside, the floors are covered in bamboo mats where raw soot and glue are ground into ink sticks using stones worn smooth by generations of labor. The owner, Mr. Wang, still prepares his ink using recipes passed down through his clan, measuring ingredients with a balance scale that once belonged to his grandfather. His desk holds ledgers dating back to the 1930s, their pages filled with meticulous accounts of orders for ink, brushes, and paper sent to scholars and officials across the country.

Walk south from the shop toward the Cang Family Guild Hall, a structure built in the late Ming Dynasty that has survived both war and renovation. Its doors are flanked by

stone tablets listing the names of donors who funded the construction, their calligraphy still sharp despite centuries of weathering. The hall’s interior is dimly lit by paper lanterns suspended from beams carved with dragons and phoenixes, symbols of prosperity and harmony. Once a center for resolving disputes and organizing communal projects, the guild hall now hosts occasional cultural events and serves as a repository for photographs and documents related to its former members.

As you approach the hall, notice the contrast between its ornate wooden brackets and the simpler stonework of the surrounding houses. This juxtaposition reflects the hierarchical nature of Hui society, where wealthy merchants flaunted their status while ordinary craftsmen worked in structures that prioritized function over form. The guild hall’s grandeur was not merely decorative but a statement of power, a signal to passing travelers that this was a place where resources could be pooled and influence wielded. Even today, the building’s presence shapes the street’s character, drawing visitors who pause to admire its carvings and wonder about the networks it once represented.

The next stretch of Old Street is lined with workshops that have occupied the same locations for over a century. Here, timber merchants display planks of cypress and pine outside their storefronts, the wood stacked so high that passersby must tilt their heads to see the shop signs. Many of these businesses trace their origins to the late Qing period, when Shexian’s timber trade flourished due to its proximity to the Dabie Mountains. The sawdust that coats the ground here is not just waste but the residue of an industry that helped build the scaffolding for cities across China, from Shanghai’s Bund to Nanjing’s government buildings.

One workshop, now converted into a café, still retains its original timber framework. Its owner, Mrs. Liu, serves coffee in ceramic cups so delicate they seem out of place amid the rough-hewn beams. She explains that the space was once used to store planks before they were shipped downstream to the Yangtze River, a journey that could take weeks depending on the season’s currents. Her grandparents’ ledgers, preserved in a glass case behind the counter, show orders for timber destined for temple repairs in distant provinces, their entries written in the neat, angular script of a generation trained to value precision.

Further along the street, the Wumu Temple stands as a testament to the spiritual life of the Hui merchants. Built during the Ming Dynasty to honor Wumu, a legendary figure said to have saved the town from flooding, the temple’s main hall contains a statue so intricately carved that its robes appear to ripple in a nonexistent breeze. Incense burns continuously here, fed by worshippers who come to seek blessings for safe travels and successful endeavors. The temple’s courtyard is paved with stones worn concave by generations of kneeling, each groove a silent prayer for fortune and survival.

The temple’s preservation is a story in itself. During the Cultural Revolution, its statues were defaced and its inscriptions painted over, but in the 1980s, local volunteers began restoring the damaged elements using traditional techniques. They sourced timber from the same mountains that had supplied the original builders and relied on oral histories to reconstruct missing details. The result is a structure that feels both ancient and newly vital, its restoration a collaboration between past and present that mirrors the ongoing negotiations required to sustain these spaces.

Beyond the temple, the street narrows as it approaches the intersection with Inkstone Alley, a lane that once housed dozens of artisans specializing in the production of inkstones. These small, rectangular tools made from slate were essential for scholars and calligraphers, their surfaces carved with landscapes and poems that transformed functional objects into miniature works of art. Today, only a handful of craftsmen remain, their workshops tucked into courtyards accessible through unmarked doors. One of them, Mr. Chen, is in his seventies and claims to be the last to carve inkstones using purely traditional methods, his hands steady despite decades of repetitive motion.

In his workshop, shelves are lined with unfinished inkstones in various stages of completion, each piece marked by its maker’s fingerprints. Mr. Chen demonstrates the process with practiced ease, holding a slate slab against a grinding wheel and explaining how different types of stone absorb ink differently. He pauses to show a photograph of his great-grandfather taken in the 1920s, standing beside a cart loaded with inkstones bound for Shanghai. The image captures a moment of transition, when the tools of traditional scholarship still commanded enough demand to justify a multi-day journey to market.

Continuing west, the street opens onto a small square dominated by the Shexian Museum, a modern building that houses artifacts ranging from Qing Dynasty tax records to photographs of the town’s participation in the 1930s filmmaking boom. The museum’s curator, Ms. Zhao, notes that many of these exhibits were donated by descendants of merchants who had preserved family documents in trunks and attics, waiting for an institution willing to give them a permanent home. Her office is cluttered with folders labeled in both Chinese and English, reflecting the international scope of her research into Shexian’s commercial networks.

Ms. Zhao leads visitors to a display case containing samples of local timber, their cross-sections arranged to show the growth rings that indicate the age at which the trees were felled. She points out a plank marked with the stamp of the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, evidence that the timber trade continued even during the chaos of the 1860s rebellion. The museum’s exhibits also include maps drawn by French missionaries in the early 20th century, their annotations revealing how the town’s geography shifted with each new wave of construction and destruction.

The western end of Old Street brings you to the site of the former tea warehouse, where bales of green tea were once loaded onto carts bound for the Grand Canal. The warehouse itself was demolished in the 1990s to make way for a parking lot, but its foundation stones remain embedded in the sidewalk, their surfaces inscribed with the names of merchants who contracted to transport the tea. A plaque installed by the local government explains this history, though the text is rendered in simplified Chinese and offers no indication of the warehouse’s former scale or significance.

Nearby, a small tea house operates in a building that predates the warehouse, its wooden beams blackened by decades of cooking fires. The owner, Mr. Li, serves a blend known locally as “canal-side special,” its flavor shaped by the minerals in the water used for brewing. He speaks of the tea trade with the casual authority of someone who has spent his life surrounded by its artifacts, from the bamboo steamers used to dry leaves to the iron scales that once weighed entire shipments. His grandfather’s diary, preserved in a locked drawer, contains entries describing the arrival of foreign traders who paid in silver dollars instead of copper coins, a practice that marked Shexian’s entry into the global economy.

As the afternoon light begins to soften, make your way toward the old bridge that connects Old Street to the southern bank of the river. The bridge’s stonework is streaked with moss, giving it a greenish tinge that belies its age. It was rebuilt in the 1950s using salvaged materials from a predecessor that had collapsed during the war, but its basic design retains the arched profile favored by Ming Dynasty engineers. Fishermen still gather here in the early evening, their lines cast into the water with the same patience required by any long-term project.

The southern bank offers a different perspective on the town’s history, where houses cling to the hillsides in terraced rows. Many of these structures were built by merchants who had grown wealthy enough to commission multi-story homes, their facades adorned with latticework that filters sunlight into geometric patterns. The pathways between them are steep and winding, requiring careful navigation but rewarding the effort with views of rooftops that seem to have sprouted organically from the landscape.

One of these houses, the Zhang Family Manor, stands out for its size and elaborate decorations. Its courtyard contains a rock garden designed to resemble a miniature version of the Yellow Mountains, complete with a pond that reflects the sky like a mirror. The manor’s current occupant, Mrs. Zhang, is a descendant of the original builders and maintains the garden with the help of seasonal workers brought in from nearby villages. She explains that her ancestors chose this location for its feng shui, believing that the elevation would protect them from floods while maintaining easy access to the river below.

Returning to Old Street via the bridge, you may notice that the afternoon crowd has thinned, leaving space to observe details that were obscured by daytime activity. A doorway painted in faded blue leads into a courtyard where laundry lines crisscross overhead, their sheets billowing in the breeze like sails. This is a residential area where families live in close proximity, their routines overlapping in ways that echo the communal ethos of the merchant guilds. Children play in the same spaces where their great-grandparents once ground ink and measured timber, unaware that they are participating in a continuity that stretches back centuries.

The final stretch of the walk takes you past several structures that have been repurposed for modern use while retaining elements of their original function. A former warehouse now houses a textile cooperative that produces handwoven fabrics using techniques borrowed from the silk workshops of Suzhou. Another building, once a tavern for traveling merchants, operates as a guesthouse where visitors can stay in rooms decorated with reproductions of historical photographs. These adaptations represent a compromise between preservation and practicality, acknowledging that these spaces must remain relevant to survive.

At the western end of Old Street, the route concludes near the town’s main bus station, where modern vehicles arrive and depart with the regularity of a heartbeat. The contrast between the ancient buildings and the sleek, glass-walled terminal underscores the ongoing tension between heritage and development, a theme that recurs throughout this book. Yet for all their differences, the two structures share a common purpose: to facilitate movement, whether of goods, ideas, or people.

Before leaving Shexian, take a moment to reflect on the layers of history embedded in its streets. The Hui merchants who built these lanes sought to create spaces that would endure, their investments justified by the belief that prosperity was temporary but reputation was eternal. Their legacy is visible in every inkstone and timber beam, but it is also present in the everyday acts of those who continue to inhabit and adapt these spaces. This is what makes walking through Shexian feel like holding a conversation with the past—it is not a monologue but a dialogue, shaped by both memory and the present moment.

The next time you hold an ink brush or sit in a wooden courtyard, remember that these objects and spaces are not static relics but active participants in a story that stretches far beyond any single chapter or route. Shexian’s lanes may be rooted in Anhui’s soil, but their influence has traveled farther than their builders ever imagined, carried by the ink they sold, the timber they shipped, and the networks they forged.

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