

Flurry Wright, one of our London-based colleagues, recently took a trip to China and visited the northern city of Datong in Shanxi Province, an area that holds one third of all China's coal reserves. The city is far removed from the current trade spat but is playing a full part in the story of China's economic and social transformation whose path we believe is exorable. Her observations on her city visit illustrate why China's investment story is not a passing fad. Miles away from President Trump's world of fake news and the Mar a Lago golf club, the steady lifestyle upgrading in China rolls on.

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Flurry goes to China – Datong city view

“Datong? Why on earth would you want to go there? It's dirty, polluted, and gritty. Admittedly I haven't been to China for ten years, but that is one of the last places I'd recommend.” The well-travelled, oriental art expert (who happens to be my mother's cousin) had a point. In 2004, when China's environmental watchdog first drew up a list of the country's ten most polluted cities Datong won an unenviable fourth place. Hardly a surprise for a city referred to as the ‘coal capital,’ which has a coal bearing area of 240 square miles and proven coal reserves of 37.6 billion tons.

I first came across Datong when a friend recommended ‘The Chinese Mayor’, a fly-on-the-wall documentary that follows the colorful character of Mayor Geng Yanbo, as he tries to transform Datong from a city reliant on the coal industry into a cultural destination. At first glance this seemed a simplistic story of China cleaning up its act, all neatly fitting in with the city of Datong's founding myth, where the metropolis is created from a broken wing of a phoenix. However, our western (Greek) idea of a phoenix as a symbol of rebirth from the ashes does not correspond in any way, shape, or form to the Chinese version. The Chinese phoenix is a complex creature which according to China's first dictionary (c. 3rd century BC) describes the animal as having “The beak of a rooster... The back of a tortoise, the hindquarters of a stag and the tail of a fish.” The documentary shows the regeneration of Datong to be just as disjointed.

In order to create an idealized historic center the mayor must relocate over 500,000 people. On the positive side these people are removed from slum conditions into new modern apartments; but on the downside the human cost is extensive; communities are separated and family homes that have supported generations are lost. Despite this the depiction of the mayor is nuanced. Geng Yanbo is a man evidently fascinated by culture who realizes Datong's potential. His caring side willingly signs papers that allow immigrants from the country to attend the city's schools, his ruthless personal ambition to transform Datong at any cost in order to further his career is also obvious. The film finishes inconclusively in 2014 with the abrupt transferal (which is not unusual in China) of Mayor Geng Yanbo to another



A photoshoot for a tourist brochure in the historic city

city in the province. Very few of the cultural projects and renovations are complete, and Datong risks becoming a white elephant sunk by debt. Curious to see what had happened to Datong in the four years since the documentary, I decided to visit.

Datong was briefly the imperial capital of China from 398-493. This was during the Northern Wei dynasty. You probably haven't heard of this dynasty unless you have an excellent knowledge Buddhist history in China, or an obsession with the Disney film *Mulan* (which is based on the 'Legend of Hua Mulan'- written and set in the Northern Wei period.) In short, Datong city might not be the most obvious cultural destination in China but driving into it you could well have stumbled on a Disney set. The city walls are imposing, perfectly symmetrical, and evidently recently rebuilt. I was dropped off at a Qing era square and accidentally photobombed a shoot for a tourist magazine where a couple were posed in traditional clothes below an imposing gate. The streets are spotlessly clean and were not deserted despite the 95-degree heat. I headed for the shade at the Huayun temple and from its pagoda there is a clear view of the "ancient" city. Most of the areas near the temple are restored and green manicured streets fall away towards the walls. However, there are still patches of the old Datong from which the population have been moved but restoration is yet to take place. At a guess the city is around 70% complete.



"Restored" Datong



"To be restored" Datong

The emphasis on wood as a building material in Chinese architecture means that active rebuilding has always been inextricably linked to restoration. Every city I have visited in the country has had an overly restored historic section, often built using modern materials on a historic footprint. The difference in Datong is the sheer scale. This is not a small district, but the whole ancient city. The historic mosque that marked the city boundary on the Silk Road has been moved (apparently 'brick by brick') into the center. A green ceramic roof of a completely 'restored' palace (that is due to open to the public next year) glints behind scaffolding. The ambition is astonishing. Forty-five years ago, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, the Red Guards were tearing down China's ancient buildings as symbols of the 'old ways'. Today these buildings are being rebuilt.



Longines Watch Service Center

When I entered one of the malls near the Drum Tower (built during the Ming dynasty 1368-1644) I wasn't expecting to find a Rolex shop. I thought it was probably fake until I saw the number of zeros on the price tag. Rolex was flanked by Jaeger-LeCoultre, and most interestingly a Longines watch service center, which although empty at 5pm on Wednesday afternoon, did at least suggest people were buying these luxury items, (and not like me merely taking advantage of the free air conditioning.) The mall opened out into a large jewelry store full of Chinese branded diamonds, silver and gold. I happily tried on a jade bracelet before realizing that I had missed a zero off my exchange rate calculations, and it was priced at more than \$1,000.



Expensive shopping options

These luxury boutiques were a far cry from the previous city I had visited - Pingyao. This historic city is crumbling under the weight of cheap domestic tourism. Imagine a Chinese version of London's Camden Market crammed into Ming era buildings with a random space simulator in the center. Fun and chaotic, but based on "stack em high, sell em cheap" development plan. Datong's approach is different. While there are plenty of cheap clothes shops on the edge of the historic city, the center boasts boutique silk shops, a wedding photography studio, and high-end tea shops. The majority of Pingyao's restaurants were identikit shacks that opened onto the street, full of neon lighting and bright picture board menus. Datong is targeting the higher end of the market. I queued for a table at a restaurant where I could have eaten turtle and washed it down with various French red wines (had I not been suffering from an overly adventurous street food episode earlier in the day.)

The one thing missing in Datong are the crowds. Whilst not deserted it could hardly be described as bustling. I suspect few tourists are willing to face the 16.5-hour diesel train from Xi'an, endure the eight-hour slog from Pingyao, or brave the grubby overnight train from Beijing. However, this is all set to change.

The bullet train line is about to reach Datong, and Xi'an will become a comfortable four hours away, with the time to Pingyao narrowing dramatically to 2.5 hours. The historic center may not be finished but is pleasant enough - and reminiscent of Dubai in places. In the meantime, Datong is fortunate in the location of the Hanging Temple and the Yungang Grottoes, arguably two of the main tourist attractions in northern China, which are both located within one and a half hours drive from the city.

For my second day in Datong, I hired a dilapidated taxi to visit these sights. On the road to the Hanging Temple we passed lines of tour buses punctuated by overladen lorries carrying coal. When the taxi stopped for fuel I was asked to leave the car. To my surprise the hood was raised, and an adapted tank was filled up with LPG. The arrival of other taxis suggested this was not a one-off. After four



Clean Taxis

days of grey smog in and around Beijing it came as a surprise to spend two days under blue skies in Datong. The city is much cleaner than I expected. At the opening of China's annual National People's Congress last year, the premier Li Keqiang promised that "we will make our skies blue again" by reducing the reliance on coal power. It certainly seems to be working here, since Datong is no longer one of the top ten polluted cities in China and is one of the cleanest cities in Shanxi province. At the end of 2017 the total installed capacity of solar and wind generation in Datong reached 3.2million kilowatts, accounting for one third of the provinces total.

I finished my trip to Datong at the Yungang Grottoes, which enjoyed plenty of redevelopment from Mayor Geng Yanbo. A colossal temple has been built on stilts in the middle of a lake in front of the grottoes. This baffled the American tourists next to me, but you can just about spot that it hides a huge coal mine from view. Overall, Datong is well on the way to becoming a city where tourism, not coal, is the main industry. Mayor Geng Yanbo's vision is becoming a reality. Slogans cover the city's



Temple blocking a view of the coal mine

tourist brochures proclaiming Datong is no longer “煤都黑” coal capital black but 大同蓝 “Datong blue.” This city is an interesting case study of the wider ‘Blue skies’ thinking, going on in China at the moment. The Asian team explored this theme earlier in the year, as the Chinese government exploits environmental reasons to push through change - trading off higher overall growth for slower, more profitable and therefore more sustainable growth. To read more about it please [click here](#).

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