

Kathleen Burns

Culture and the City

Professor Saitta

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Beijing: Past, Present, Future

China is one of the oldest civilizations that still exists today. It has over five thousand years of history and culture, and the ancient cities have seen entire dynasties come and go. These cities seem immortal, especially when compared to the brief existence of many American cities, and over the years they change constantly. Yet despite the change Chinese cities go through, there are still remnants of the ancient city and culture embedded within the new apartment complexes and highways.

Beijing is considered to be one of the four ancient cities of China. Ancient Beijing was described to be “a city of walls within walls.” (Lu 131) It had the Outer Wall, and then the Inner Wall. Within the Inner Wall were the walls of the Imperial City, and within those walls was the Forbidden City. As a result, the structure of ancient Beijing was radial. Each wall divided groups according to the social hierarchy of Ancient China, which placed the Emperor and lords at the top, and merchants at the bottom. Walls not only created a physical barrier, but a symbolic one as well. Walls were a fundamental structure of ancient cities in China, especially Beijing. They represented the values of the city: order, security, and authority. The significance of walls in China can be evidenced by the linguistic emphasis the Chinese language puts on defining different functions of walls. An example Duanfang Lu mentions in his book, *Remaking Chinese Urban Form*, is the difference between *qiang*, *di*, and *yuan*. All three of these words describe

walls, but imply separate function and symbolism. *Qiang* describes the high walls that surround traditional courtyards, and symbolizes shielding oneself from harm. *Di* refers to the walls of the home, and implies warding off cold and wind. Low walls were called *yuan*, which meant leaning on something, or using a wall to defend yourself. From the rich variety in vocabulary when describing walls, it can be understood that walls were very important in ancient Chinese cities. Even the word for wall and city are the same: *cheng*. After the early half of the *Ming* dynasty, walls that had suffered damage from Mongol invaders were restored and reaffirmed China's presence on a more global scale. To this day, walls both physical and symbolic exist in Beijing, even when the many walls of Beijing were torn down during the cultural revolution following WWII.

To say that China went through a lot of change after WWII would be an gross understatement. The former structure of the government, economy, and social structures were completely thrown out, and an entirely new system took hold across China. Being the capital city of China, Beijing felt the full effects of the new People's Republic of China, and the entire city went through an urban revolution. During the Republican period, before WWII, most urban reform was done at the municipal level. That all changed, and the newly established social state took control over all urban projects on a national scale, and municipalities were given very little influence . Now, urban development was carried out through five year plans, and driven by industrialization (Lu 13). Public spaces gave way to industrial civic buildings designed in blocks. Residential areas turned into complexes that combined many functions for efficiency.

The new urban construction was completed by work units, another product of the revolution. Work units were now an essential part of Beijing's identity. After the founding of the

Republic, most schools, factories, and offices were “organized into a state production unit administrative system; the work unit was the basic unit of this system” (Lu 47). The work unit combined economic, social, and political functions, and is the “basic building block of Urban China.” (Lu 48) The work units operated under their own hierarchy, and were often segregated by walled enclosures that were guarded by security personnel. The work units often enclosed both living quarters and working quarters for maximum efficiency, and included several community facilities such as baths, canteens, and social halls.

In addition to the work units, Beijing gave birth to microdistricts, called *xiaoqu*. In the 1935 Moscow Plan, the microdistrict was defined as a “self-contained residential district with an area of 75-125 acres and a population ranging from 5000 to 1500.” (Lu 35) Four to five *xiaoqu* made a residential complex. *Xiaoqu* was similar to a Western idea of urban planning, the neighborhood unit, which was popular especially in London after WWII. In the 1957 master plan for Beijing, these microdistricts served as the basic building block of the city. These made up compact grids with little variance in size or structure throughout the city, which helped to reinforce the values of order and equality. Through this method of urban planning, the Maoist City was created in Beijing. The Maoist City “achieved a morphology made up in large part of a jigsaw puzzle of self-contained and spatially demarcated work units surrounding the old city core.” (Lu 13) It encouraged the integration of separate functions, an idea that existed in contrast to current ideas that organized land into commercial, industrial, and residential districts. The Maoist City also prioritized industry and production. The organization of production shaped the city, especially when Beijing entered a time of scarcity. Resources seemed to disappear, likely due to lack of specialization and poor farming techniques.

Because of urban reform and resource scarcity, those living in Beijing experienced a shift in ancient values. Whereas those living in ancient Beijing valued the walls for the security and status they provided, the people of Maoist Beijing saw the walls as a waste of precious resources as well as a physical reminder of economic inequality. The debate over what to do with the walls quickly engulfed the city. Many argued that the walls were a political and economical issue, and got in the way of urban development and planning. Others claimed that the walls were an essential part of Beijing's heritage and culture, and that destroying the walls would be destroying Beijing. Some people suggested alternative uses for the walls, such as running roads along the tops of the massive walls, making the historical gates museums, or turning the walls and the space around them into a greenbelt. A famous architect and historian, Liang Sicheng, was a huge supporter of using the walls as a greenbelt. He came up with the idea to transform the city walls into garden walkways, where people could stroll along the walls and see out over Beijing. In Liang's plan, the gate houses would be public reading rooms or teahouses, and the moats adjacent to the walls could be used for boating, fishing, or ice skating. (Lu 133) Through the lense of "The City Beautiful," this plan sounds ideal. The city planners, however, rejected this idea, dismissing the plan as a nostalgic fantasy. The outer walls were already being demolished for resources, and the rains only hastened the process. By 1959, the outer walls were completely destroyed by chaotic destruction and weather. Under these circumstances, the municipality decided that the remaining city walls should be demolished and the stone and brick used for constructing more work and residential units.

The resource scarcity that affected the decision to tear down the walls also caused Beijing city planners to prioritize production over everything else. Investments made by the state moved

away from finance and commerce, and focused entirely on “productive construction”. This resulted in a city that placed production over services for the people, and as a result public health and local economy suffered huge blows.

In order to understand modern Beijing, one must first understand the long history of the city and the values of those who built it. Today, Beijing has adopted a more fluid form of urbanism that moves away from the strict control of the urbanism of the Maoist City or the Imperial City. Beginning in the late 1980s, economic shifts began to break down the communist city. Beijing began to participate in Western ideas of capitalism, and the cityscape changed to reflect that. Centers of commerce and luxury are slowly taking over the city, with more and more American brands and ideals. In addition to capitalism and the takeover of the private sector, increased mobility and proliferation of communication are contributing to the change in Beijing’s urban spaces. As Duanfang Lu writes, “both a rising modernity, with its evolving structure of power and technologies, and rising post-modernity, with its fluid and tractable associations, have been influential in shaping Chinese urban space over the past 30 years.” (Lu 159) The development of a global city, while positive for consumerism, has had a negative effect on the unique culture of Beijing.

Social and urban reform from the 1950s left an impact that is hard to ignore. As Qicheng Zhang writes in *Ten Thousand Things*, “decades of revolutionary mobilization and socialism left their mark on both the physical form of the city and on the habits of daily life.” (Farquhar 58-59) Work units and committees are still a large part of the culture of Beijing, and the architecture remains from the era of the residential complex. Despite these reminders from the past, Beijing, along with many Chinese cities, prides itself on the Chinese concept of *renao*. *Renao*, literally

translated, means heat and noise, and it refers to the vibrancy of public life that American cities, by comparison, lack. Modern Beijing values crowded streets lined with stores and restaurants, and attempts to call back to an ancient, lively city.

Modern Beijing has more public spaces that can be used by many people. In fact, Tianjin Economic and Technological Development Area identified eight types of urban public spaces: commercial retail spaces, service spaces, local markets, performance spaces, recreational spaces, clubhouses, formal public spaces, and parks (Gaubatz). Parks are especially prevalent. The green space helps the environment, lowers stress, and provides a cleaner, safer place to spend time. Many Beijing residents use parks to go for walks, practice tai chi, and dance in public squares to lively music. Many parks even offer casual classes where one can learn different art forms or specialized skills. The public park is a place often populated by older citizens, who spend most of their day taking care of their mind and body. The main reasons for the recent proliferation of parks are “to generate healthier ecosystems and to create more aesthetically- and experientially-pleasing cities.” (Gaubatz) Apart from the public parks, other efforts to make Beijing appear more modern and pleasing to the eye have been an emphasis on busy streets. Public streets have been significant in China’s history, and even now “[p]ublic streets are the main form of civic space in Chinese cities.” (Miao 52) In recent years, these streets have seen an increase in Western shops and restaurants, creating a space similar to an American outdoor mall. Walking down a main street in Beijing, it is said that if it were not for the Chinese writing on the signs, one would think themselves in America.

This rapid modernization could be a result of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The pressure of hosting the games, an event that would be publicized and televised to the world, caused the

Chinese government to crackdown on making Beijing look more pleasing to foreigners.

Nostalgic redevelopment projects began to spring up everywhere, transforming Beijing into a modern city with a traditional aesthetic to appeal to foreigners. These projects romanticized the traditional city life and commodified it to a point where even American tourists began to realize that they were enjoying a watered-down version of Chinese culture. The authors of “Ten Thousand Things” mention an encounter with one such American, who complained that he was not experienced “real Chinese culture” (Farquhar). The redevelopment of the city has also led to a financial strain on Beijing locals. For example, during the Olympics, old taxis and buses were sent down to other districts and were replaced by sleek, clean vehicles. Unable to keep up with the costs of owning a modern bus, drivers suffered. Similar situations occurred with restaurants, hotels, and local shops. While Beijing has been able to enjoy the luxuries of being a modern city, it also has to deal with the consequences of creating an expensive existence to those who already live in the city.

Beijing has gone through many changes in its lifetime, some more severe than others. It is impossible to assign Beijing one brand of a city without first considering the urban evolution Beijing has experienced. It began as a Symbolic City. The walls, the architecture, and the organization of the ancient city symbolized power, order, authority, and security. It sent a clear message to the other kingdoms before China was unified, and it continued to broadcast that message when it became the capital city of China. It showed enemies that the city was strong and defensive. Within the city, the urban planning reinforced the social hierarchy and power dynamics that took shape between the four classes under the emperor: the lords, the farmers, the artisans, and the merchants. Beijing then transformed into the Maoist City, which is something

unique to China. After WWII, China was destabilized, and the Communist Party rose to power. It revolutionized Beijing, and the city went through extreme urban reform that left an impact for decades to come. During this period, Beijing was also an Industrial City. It prioritized industrialism and production, changing the entire cityscape and social structure to create more resources and capital gain. Now, Modern Beijing is attempting to become a Retrofitted City as well as an Intercultural City, attempting to make up for lost urban culture of the past while inviting foreigners to come experience Beijing. It should be noted that Beijing has issue integrating with the ethnic minority communities that live in enclaves around the city limits.

Beijing has many other issues as well. The sudden increase in demand for automobiles in the past ten years has wreaked havoc on the transportation infrastructure of Beijing. In the past, many people lived close together due to the planning of the work units, and only had to walk or bike to get places. The roads took the form of narrow alleys and wide boulevards. However, now that Beijing has become a larger, more Westernized city, more people drive cars. The small roads needed to change quickly in order to respond to the increased traffic. Piper Gaubatz writes,

“To support the city’s planned spatial structure, the concept of a ring and radial road system was created in the 1950s and strengthened in the 1982 and 1993 comprehensive plans. The system was considered to be an ideal transportation model to support the planned urban pattern. The 4th ring road would be the edge of the city center; the 5th ring road would link the 10 scattered districts; and the 6th ring road was designed as the intercity highway to connect some of the 14 satellite towns. The radial highways were planned to provide rapid access between the ring roads and to create traffic corridors between Beijing and other cities.”

This system might help the traffic, but it cannot help the massive amount of pollution that Beijing struggles with as a result of the high population, dense traffic, and proliferation of

factories. Many Beijing residents have to wear masks to filter out the pollution. On days when the air quality is particularly poor, the entire city appears engulfed in a thick haze. This is a serious public health concern, as well as an environmental one. The creation of green spaces such as parks attempts to mitigate the pollution, but serious change is needed before the situation gets better.

No city is perfect. Beijing has many issues, and a lot of progress to make, but it is a city on its way onto the global stage. One day in Beijing is all it takes for anyone to realize that it is teeming with history, culture, and life. Beijing has gone by many names, but the most fitting name seems to be The Immortal City.

Sources

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