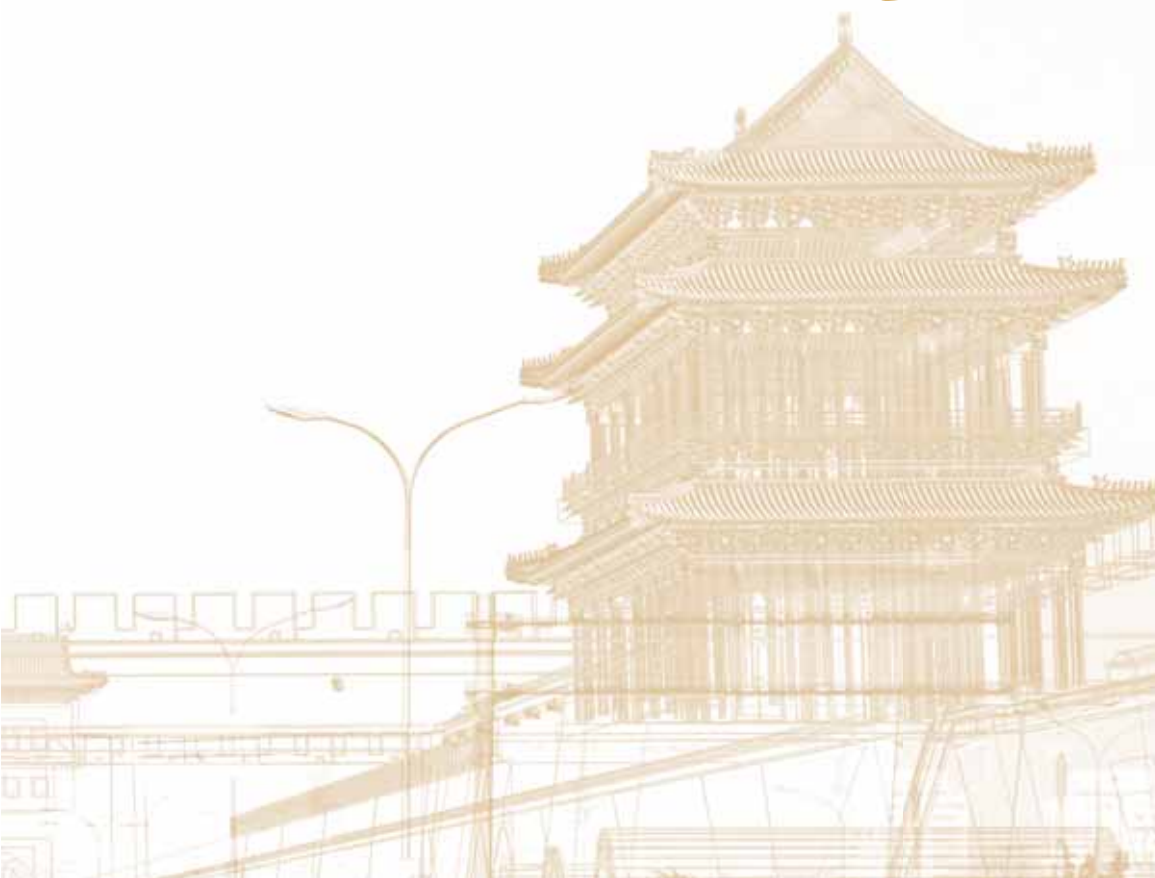


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Foreword

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Over the course of its long and eventful history, Beijing has been called many things: *The City of Splendor*; *Beijing the Magnificent*; *Beijing the Sacred City*; the *city of grand and harmonious design*, the *frontier city*, or the *ultimate capital city of China*, to name but a few. Recently, however, labels and attributes related to Beijing have dramatically changed in tone and nature. One particular attribute deserves, alas, to be mentioned here, for it is a ubiquitous sentiment: Beijing, a city being lost before our very eyes. From *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing* (Wu Liangyong, 1999), “Remaking Beijing” (Wu Hung, 2005), to *The Last Days of Old Beijing* (Michael Meyer, 2008) and *The Concrete Dragon* (Thomas Campanella, 2009), historians, urban planners and journalists both in China and abroad have written, lamented, lectured and blogged about the transformative (internal and external) powers that triggered the development of the old city of Beijing into a modern, global city consisting of different, and oftentimes, conflicting aspirations and temporalities.

Wang Jun’s book *Beijing Record*, at long last, brings to an extended western audience the inside story of the key decisions that led to Beijing’s present urban fragmentation and its loss of memory and history in the form of the bulldozing of its architectural heritage.

Beijing Record is a remarkable achievement. It was researched and compiled mainly in the 1990s, when many archives reformulated and loosened their access policies; it, therefore, incorporates a huge amount of previously unpublished (or “classified”) data; it draws some of its most vivid perspectives and insights from eyewitness accounts, in the form of interviews, with a great variety of actors on the stage of Beijing’s economic and urban development; finally, numerous illustrations, many of them published here for the first time, supplement the narrative of a city exposed to highly volatile ideological and market forces.

First and foremost, *Beijing Record* is about the engaged curiosity and determination of a Xinhua News Agency’s journalist to get to the bottom of things. Wang Jun engages the authorities in debate; he makes Beijing residents aware of current and historical events; he follows decision-making

processes devised by the Beijing Municipal Government or by real estate developers, and evaluates their respective consequences; he publishes opinion pieces in major journals and newspapers, and his blog at blog.sina.com.cn/wangjun constitutes a treasure trove of materials on heritage sites and preservation planning (or, rather, the lack thereof) in China as a whole. His reports and factual accounts both galvanize and offend. They galvanize public opinion, and offend developers and authorities. Over the course of our acquaintance, I have witnessed Wang Jun coming under strong attack by colleagues using language derived straight from the rhetoric of the days of the Cultural Revolution; I have similarly (and in short order) witnessed him succeed, with the support he managed to solicit from the public and government departments, in stopping the demolition of countless structures of historical significance.

One such *victory* over the authorities, if the word may be permitted, came when, in July 2009, Wang Jun published an article denouncing the pending demolition of Liang Sicheng's courtyard house. Liang Sicheng, it should be pointed out, was modern China's founding father of the discipline of architectural history and preservation. *Beijing Record* is largely about Liang Sicheng's ultimately futile attempt to save traditional Beijing from the wrecking balls of Mao's socialist revolutionary projections. While Wang Jun's 2009 article was hotly debated in Beijing, I had the privilege to travel with him and his family in Hebei province. We had undertaken several trips together in the past, but July 28, 2009 turned out to be a significant day: the head of Beijing's Cultural Preservation Bureau personally intervened in the demolition of Liang Sicheng's old courtyard house, and, over the course of the next week, a moratorium was called on the destruction of traditional structures in Beijing, especially those known to be associated with famous personae both past and present. Liang Sicheng's old home, which, curiously, had not been placed under the protective envelope of the Cultural Relics Bureau, was spared.

It was a victory of symbolic impact, albeit it must be placed to the far right of an envisioned temporal axis of such events; the far left of that same axis is occupied by what Wang Jun and Wu Hung (quoting Chen Gan, a senior engineer instrumental in formulating Beijing's post-Liberation construction plan) describes as the shift of "point zero", namely, the consequential shift of the seat of power from the throne hall in the imperial palace onto the open, public stage of the newly constructed Tiananmen Square in 1950. By then, Mao's decision to anchor his authority within the realm of the old city had already been made. The changes Beijing underwent in the 1950s were not subtle. It lost its magnificent archways along Chang'an Avenue. They

were taken down overnight, in clandestine fashion, “because it was realized that their destruction would be unpopular and it was thought preferable that there should be as short a time possible during which people could see them actually being demolished.” By 1952, one of the few remaining foreigners pointedly observed that “the People’s Government seems to have a lack of taste and a narrow-minded suburbanism more often associated with a government of the lower middle class than a government of workers.” (Peter Lum, aka Lady Crowe, *Peking 1950–1953*, London 1958) Yet, during these same years, urban planners and architects at Qinghua University and state planning bureaus, most of them familiar with western (and Russian) planning principles and fully aware of Beijing’s traditional urban fabric, imaginatively designed community spaces, administrative compounds and individual residential buildings which, if executed, would have stood any capital city in the world in good stead. However, as far as I am aware, these very creative and adaptive designs (that left the cell structure and overall grid of Beijing intact), were never implemented, reputedly due to lack of funding.

Beijing’s architectural heritage trajectory of the 1950s continues downwards, and, with much anxiety, Pearl S. Buck, noting in general how Beijing’s monuments were falling into decay, remembers a visit to the old Summer Palace on the outskirts of Beijing:

“It was under guard, for the new government, as we still called it, was conscious of its national treasures and the great imperial buildings of the past were all under military guard. On this day I had lingered long in the Forbidden City, the idle soldiers staring at me curiously, and at last one of them beckoned me to follow him around the corner of a palace. Thinking that he wanted to show me something I had not yet seen, I followed. But when I reached the place where he stood, he put up his hand and pulled down a magnificent porcelain tile from the edge of a low roof, a tile of the old imperial yellow, stamped with a dragon. ‘One silver dollar’, he said.” (Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds*, 1954)

The story of the 1950s ends with a number of significant events: the smelting of iron for a projected but ill-advised and devastating Great Leap Forward campaign, resulting in the loss of massive quantities of building timber pulled from historic temples and traditional residential housing; the first phase of the sustained and irreversible tearing down of Beijing’s city walls and gates (as illustrated by the cover photo); and the construction of the Ten Great Buildings to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic in 1959. The latter were decidedly not of a structural style,

“regulated by a harmony so subtle, that after having looked at it, you bend your head as if to listen to it.” (Abel Bonnard, commenting on the dignity and harmonious coherence of traditional Chinese architecture in 1926.)

Wang Jun’s *Beijing Record*, first published in 2003, has won a number of awards not long after its release. It was recently voted book of the year by the China Readers’ Journal *Zhonghua dushu bao*, an influential trade publication, and thus occupies an illustrious position within the pantheon of the most influential books published since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. It is still in print, now in its 9th print run, fully seven years after first being published. It was translated into Japanese in 2008, and there is a Taiwanese edition. This English translation is a result of conversations dating back to 2006. With the Olympic Games sitting squarely in the middle of the project as a distracting event, it took over two years to complete. Looking from afar, one could have the impression that with Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV tower entering the skyline in that same time span, Beijing’s transformation from a coherently conceived imperial capital city to an international stage for disaggregated and locally, stylistically disconnected architectural forms, urban functions and community designs, is complete. However, by way of juxtaposition, Beijing’s recent efforts regarding preservation policies can be benchmarked by pointing to the regulatory framework of defining Beijing’s Historic Preservation Districts (2002), and by making historic preservation one of the priorities in the latest version of the Beijing masterplan (2004–2020).

Among all the chatter about urban renewal, among this cacophony of construction noises permeating modern Beijing day and night (regrettably, or perhaps fortunately, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin remained largely silent on the matter of urban regeneration!), Wang Jun’s voice is all the more important for our understanding of a city which may well become the capital of the world’s largest economy in the not too distant future. The undeniably precious place of the past in this future is being negotiated and re-negotiated for all of us, by citizens like Wang Jun, on the ground level of Beijing’s streets, on a daily basis.

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