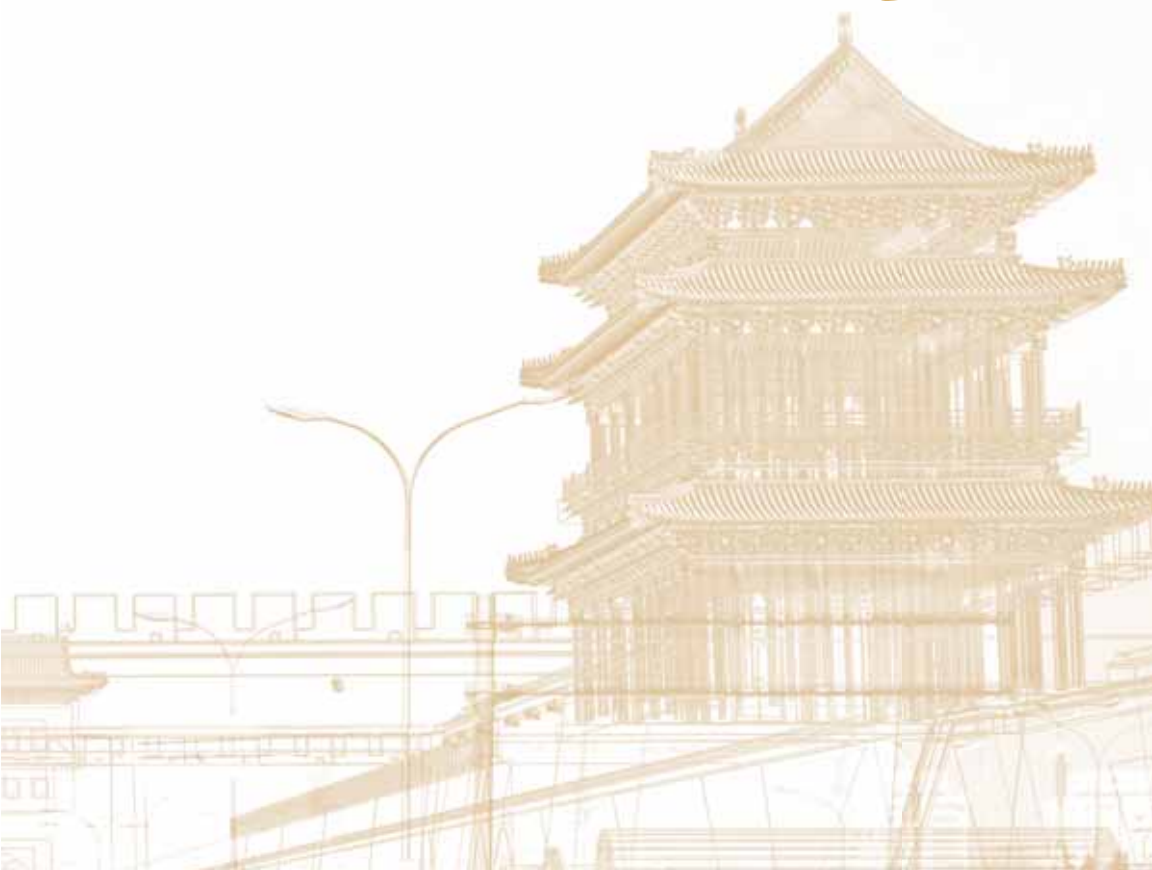


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Preface

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Preface

The City of Beijing: in the Twinkling of an Eye

I really don't know what prompted me to write this book, impetuosity or God's will. In March 2001, I received a letter from Qinghua (Tsinghua) University School of Architecture, asking me to submit a paper to a forthcoming academic symposium to mark the centenary of the birth of Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), a most prominent architect of contemporary China. Shortly afterwards, Ms. Lin Zhu, Liang's widow, called me, urging me to be quick. "Hurry up," she said. "Otherwise you'll be late!"

So I began writing, resolved to accomplish the assignment. To my own surprise, barely one week had passed before I put down somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 words, and I still couldn't stop wielding my pen. That period of history I was writing about was indeed too heavy, with myriad changes in society, with the rise and fall of so many individuals, which made it a real challenge to record it. Digging into old archives while trying to offer a sort of new interpretation of that period, I felt as if I was brought back to those bygone years, unable to shun this question those involved seemed to keep asking me: What would you have done had you yourself been involved? The job was so painful, as time and again I was compelled to "communicate" with those tragic heroes of history.

The 20th century that ended not too long ago witnessed sweeping changes in Beijing. For this historical, culturally rich city, those bygone 100 years seemed so short, just like the twinkling of an eye. Yet the force resulting from the changes that took place in this short period was so great that the city still maintains a kind of inertia powerful enough to shape it now and in the future, to affect, in a tangible way, the life of every person living in it. Though short, this period, I believe, will be an eternal subject of discussion by members of China's intellectual community of all generations to come. To know what the future will look like, we, prompted by human nature, invariably look back. I hope that my pygmy effort would end up with a rough sketch of what happened to Beijing in the past century. Rough as it is, the "sketch," so to speak, may become increasingly precise along with the opening of more and more archives to the public.

I do not dare to make hasty comments on this period of history. What I have done, in my capacity, was to collect and screen historical records on the subject, with sources of information ranging from old newspapers, magazines and books, unpublished writings to interviews with those who had survived those changes.

This book is divided into ten parts which, starting from the current realities of Beijing, attempts to record the history of the city's urban construction over the past 50 years, by using those debates that occurred at different times as the principal line of narration. To be more precise, the book focuses on telling what happened in the 1950s and 1960s, interwoven with stories about the lives of architects and planners including Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin (*alias* Lin Whei-yin), Chen Zhanxiang (*alias* Charlie Chen) and Hua Lanhong (*alias* Leon Hoa). By doing so, I attempted to decipher the antecedents and consequences of the "Liang (Sicheng)-Chen (Zhanxiang) Proposal," to explain how Beijing's city planning was done in the 1950s and how, on that basis, the current pattern of Beijing's expansion was formed. The book also records the mushrooming of structures capped by *dawuding* (large palace- or temple-like concave curved roofs) and the demolition of Beijing's city walls along with many other ancient structures. These came at different times of that period in history, with different events to feature: the call of the ruling Communist Party for "transforming Beijing from a consumption city to a production city," criticism of the so-called "attempt to restore the ancient," the "Great Leap Forward Movement" in the late 1950s and the "Cultural Revolution" from 1966 to 1976.

Photos and graphics in the book, more than 300 in total, are as important as the text. Many of the graphics resulted from outstanding achievements made by China's academic community. Here, I would like to extend my heartfelt respect to those seniors and colleagues of mine who helped me in my research for this book. I owe this book in particular to the following people:

- **Ms. Lin Zhu**, for allowing me to access photos of Liang Sicheng's life and work, as well as some of the sketches drawn by Liang Sicheng in his notebooks;
- **Mr. Luo Zhewen**, for letting me use his photos of Beijing's city gate towers and other important ancient structures before they were torn down;
- **Mr. Liang Congjie**, for allowing me to use an unpublished water color sketch by his father, Liang Sicheng;
- **Mr. Zhang Wenpu**, for providing me with a photo portrait of Zhang Xiruo;

- **Mr. Chen Yanqing**, for providing me with photos of Chen Zhanxiang;
- **Mr. Zhang Kaiji**, for allowing me to use photos of his architectural works;
- **Mr. Zhang Xiande**, for allowing me to use his sketches of city gate towers, along with some photos of old Beijing;
- **Mr. Kuang Han** and **Mr. Charles Chauderlot** for providing me with their drawings of *hutongs* (narrow lanes and alleys) in Beijing;
- **Mr. Song Lianfeng**, for providing me with some aerial photos of Beijing; and

Staff members of the Library of Qinghua University School of Architecture, for the assistance they gave me.

No student of Chinese architecture and city planning can forget the name, Liang Sicheng.

It is Liang Sicheng who, in old China, trekked over land and water to find things that could epitomize the quintessence of the Chinese civilization, in total disregard of the physical difficulties and hidden dangers in those almost inaccessible, bandit-infested areas. On that basis, he produced China's first-ever monograph on the history of Chinese architecture.

Liang Sicheng was the first to call for "dwelling to the dweller." He was also the first to define "contented life and work of residents" as the "ultimate aim of city planning" — in fact the first to work for a rational development of Chinese cities.

It is Liang Sicheng who, in disregard of political risks, did his utmost to plea against destruction of ancient structures for construction space. His appeal was turned down again and again but never did he give up. The architect, as portrayed by the Chinese mass media and publications in the most recent years, was a person of tragedy. So many people have been moved by the words he wrote in 1957: "Demolishing a city gate tower, you are cutting a piece of flesh off my body; taking off a brick from the city walls, you are peeling off an inch of my skin." Earlier still, in 1950, he and Chen Zhanxiang proposed that the administration center of the new government be built outside Beijing so that the ancient capital would be preserved in its entirety. Both were to suffer because of what was dubbed as the "Liang-Chen Proposal," and their tragedy has moved so many to tears.

Over the years I have been hard at work to search for Liang Sicheng's footprints all over Beijing, to catch his words that seem still echoing, while trying to acquaint myself with the city's new moods and sentiments. The more I learned, the more I felt that there were still things to dig up. This "vicious cycle" of cognition once made me hesitant. Time and again



An artist's rendition of Beijing's Fuchengmen area now and the demolished Fuchengmen Gate (by courtesy of Beijing Crystal Digital Technology Co. Ltd.)

I stopped writing, and time and again I picked up my pen and pressed ahead. Based on what I wrote for the symposium in commemoration of Liang Sicheng, I produced two relatively complete articles, one submitted to Qinghua University and the other, to the *City Planning* magazine. Both articles aroused interest among China's academic community. With encouragement from many seniors and friends, I continued writing and eventually produced this book.

Indeed I experienced so much sorrow and had so many regrets during those ten years when I was trying to explore the changes that had taken place in Beijing. Chen Zhanxiang died, and so did Shan Shiyuan, Mo Zongjiang, Zhang Bo, Zhou Yongyuan, Zheng Zuwu and many others. All of them had an ardent love of Beijing, though they had different roles to play in Beijing's history and held different opinions on the changes that had taken place in the city. Bedridden, Zheng Zuwu exerted himself to the utmost to receive me, inhaling oxygen while trying to talk. Twice Chen Zhanxiang shed tears when talking with me. To sum up, I would like to thank all those I interviewed, not only for the help they rendered me, but also for their honesty toward history.

I am grateful to Ms. Lin Zhu for allowing me to access Professor Liang Sicheng's notebooks and diaries, which came in scores of bound copies,



An artist's rendition of Beijing's Chaoyangmen area and the demolished Chaoyangmen Gate (by courtesy of Beijing Crystal Digital Technology Co. Ltd.)

as well as the “confessions” he was forced to write for alleged “anti-Party, anti-socialism crimes” during the “Cultural Revolution.” I spent the whole winter of 1999 at Qinghua University working on these invaluable historical records, an experience forever inscribed in my memory.

I must thank Mr. Chai Zhen, my teacher, and Mr. Luo Ruiren, a senior schoolmate of mine, for the encouragement they gave me. I must also thank all those who helped me by offering suggestions on the draft of this book — Ms. Lin Zhu, Mr. Liang Congjie, Mr. Liu Xiaoshi, Mr. Chen Yanqing, Mr. Zhang Xiande, Mr. Yang Dongping and Ms. Zhang Zhijun. For years in a row, Mr. Li Jing kept supplying me with newspaper clippings, and I also had the help of Ms. Wang Lei in sorting out those photos.

Finally, I must thank my wife Liu Jie who shared the sorrows and joys I experienced over a long decade of hard work. She was able to contribute her knowledge and wisdom to this book as both of us have been studying the same subject — the changes of Beijing where both of us live.

Wang Jun

October 29, 2002, Beijing