



The oil painting "Romantic Old City" by Fucha Danqing

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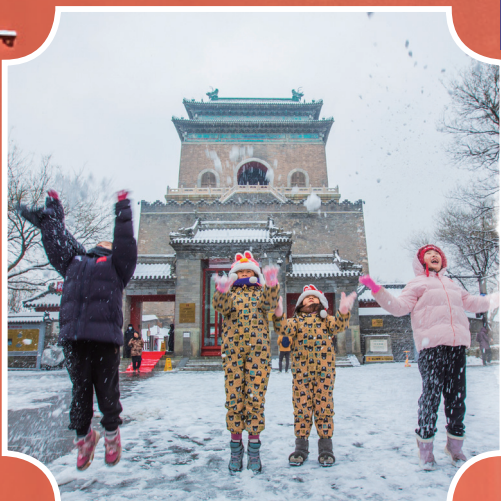
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In the contemporary world, people seek immersive experiences. For instance, immersing oneself in Beijing's *hutong* (used for both plural and singular), the city's traditional alleyways, offers a gateway to discover unique treasures and truly delve into the cultural essence of this ancient capital. The presence of these traditional alleyways contributes to the city's distinctive urban layout. Beijing is a place where history and culture intertwine with the hustle and bustle of modern life; it invites one to explore the daily rhythm of the city while providing a nostalgic journey to a bygone era. The city exudes a gentle and friendly attitude, effortlessly embracing all who express an interest in its rich tapestry.

Encountering *Hutong*

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Qu Bowei, Sang Yi, Wu Chaoying, Zhang Chuandong

It is an honour to live in Beijing's *hutong*. No other city in the world possesses alleyways like Beijing does.

The charm and lifestyle associated with Beijing's *hutong* are integral elements of the city's distinctive culture. In recent years, there have been more refined efforts to preserve and manage these historic neighbourhoods. Urban renewal projects in these compact spaces aim to not only restore their historical charm but also uphold the unique "Beijing style."

To fully grasp and explore the essence of Beijing, a city that offers a multitude of experiences, immersing oneself in this environment is essential.

Home to Everything

A city's character is often intricately connected to its residential areas and transportation systems. Beijing's maze-like *hutong*, like a human's blood vessels and nerves, play a pivotal role in its urban landscape. These narrow alleyways, though seemingly modest, encapsulate Beijing's rich history and bear witness to its trials and triumphs. Delving into this treasure trove of countless memories reveals that *hutong* serve as the true homes of many Beijingers, who continue to preserve the culture of the ancient capital in their own distinctive manners.





A Brief History of the City's *Hutong*

There is no definitive consensus on the exact time when *hutong* first appeared in Beijing. It is generally believed that Beijing's *hutong* came into existence during the construction of Dadu, the capital of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). Historical records indicate that Dadu had a rectangular layout. The city followed a traditional architectural style, featuring three concentric layers of city walls: the outer city, imperial city and palace city. The central axis of the palace city served as the guiding axis for the planning of Dadu. Beyond the palace city, main streets ran horizontally and vertically, dividing the city into 50 neighbourhoods. These residential areas and streets were organised in a tidy grid pattern.

Hutong, as passages linking the courtyards where people resided, served a vital function in the urban landscape of Dadu, akin to capillaries, connecting every corner of the city. When studying an ancient map of Old Beijing, it becomes apparent that its *hutong* and streets, stretching from Chang'an Avenue to Desheng Gate, were primarily arranged in a grid pattern. By comparing this with a contemporary map of Beijing, it is evident that *hutong* in areas like Nanluoguxiang, Dongsì and Xisi have largely preserved their original scale.

Following Beijing's status as the capital during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the city's territory and population continued to grow, resulting in the development of numerous new *hutong* and courtyards. In 1560, Zhang Jue (1485–1566), a native of Beijing who lived during the Ming Dynasty, authored *Collection of Five Neighbourhoods and Hutong Inside Them in the Capital City*, offering detailed documentation of the city's streets and alleyways of that era. According to Zhang's records, during the reign of Emperor Jiajing (1522–1566), Beijing comprised neighbourhoods, featuring 1,288 named streets and *hutong*.

The city of Beijing has undergone continuous planning and redesign throughout various dynasties. During the Ming Dynasty, urban planners made strategic decisions to preserve the layout of the former capital, the Yuan Dynasty's Dadu, with

minor modifications to the city wall by shifting it slightly southward. This adjustment resulted in a buffer zone of nearly 2.5 kilometres (km) between the northern city wall of the former Dadu and the newly constructed Ming city wall. The southern city wall of the Ming Dynasty extended about 1.5 km further south along what is now Chang'an Avenue.

During the Ming Dynasty, under the reign of Emperor Jiajing, Beijing's population experienced a significant increase beyond the inner city. In response to this growth, the emperor, following the advice of his ministers, initiated the construction of an outer city. This development created a clear division between the inner and outer areas of the capital. The newly constructed city wall not only served as a physical barrier between these two regions but also led to changes in the traditional layout of streets and alleyways within the inner city. The areas between the walls began to exhibit distinct characteristics, featuring narrow byways and winding alleyways that introduced a new pattern to the city's layout. Notably, some alleyways were even constructed along the courses of rivers such as Changxiang Ertiao and Caochang Jiutiao, which developed alongside the Sanli River.

During the Qing Dynasty, Beijing's urban architectural layout was meticulously preserved, including the palace structures inherited from the Ming Dynasty. However, the Qing Dynasty's policy of segregating Beijing's inner and outer cities created two distinct urban landscapes. The inner city showcased orderly streets and alleyways, while those in the outer city displayed a more haphazard distribution.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Beijing saw significant changes in the traditional *hutong* way of life that had been preserved for centuries. The once tranquil courtyards evolved into bustling areas, now home to a diverse range of residents. Amidst these numerous transformations, Beijing's *hutong* experienced a profound evolution. These spaces within the city bear immense historical importance, mirroring the cultural heritage of Beijing and safeguarding the memories of its native inhabitants.

Hutong Represent Their Residents' Philosophy of Life



Today, *hutong* have transcended their roles as mere urban structures. They encapsulate the very spirit of Beijing's distinctive culture, an essence that has evolved and endured for centuries. Within the tapestry of *hutong* culture, Beijing's residents vividly manifest their profound comprehension of the city, evident in their life philosophies, lifestyles and behavioural customs.

Hutong residents have cherished a tranquil and contented existence for generations, upholding values of respect, humility and leisure. They each lead lives marked by simplicity and harmony, guided by their personal preferences. Even today, those dwelling in *hutong* affectionately address their neighbours as "*jiefang*," ("streets and neighbourhoods") underscoring the significance of fostering strong community bonds. They believe that neighbours are like close relatives, readily offering support in times of adversity, nurturing a caring and compassionate atmosphere. While they navigate a fine line between adhering to societal norms and valuing human connections, they refrain from feigned enthusiasm or insincere closeness. However, their intrinsic altruism consistently compels them to lend a helping hand to those in need.

Beijing residents often express the sentiment, "One should cherish one's home, even if it is simple." Despite their age, *hutong* possess immeasurable cultural value. The residents of Beijing hold a profound appreciation for these narrow alleyways, recognising their pivotal role in safeguarding the city's cultural legacy. Neighbours frequently convene at the narrow entrances of their *hutong*, engaging in unhurried conversations about family affairs. Within these *hutong*, one may stumble upon small markets teeming with a vibrant array of colourful fruits and vegetables, as well as small, cosy restaurants. The distinctive ambiance and vivacity of *hutong* life have nurtured a deep attachment among Beijingers to their homes. While the homes in *hutong* may appear unassuming compared to modern city dwellings, they radiate a



warmth born of generations of family history, seamlessly integrated into the wider or narrower alleyways. *Hutong* represent nostalgia and serve as a tether to ancestral roots. As long as these *hutong* homes endure, the sense of belonging remains unwavering. Even after embarking on journeys to distant lands, returning to these familiar structures with their ancient roof beams and weathered brick walls imparts a profound inner serenity.

Residing in a traditional alleyway, despite the inconveniences and challenges of daily life, local residents maintain a serene and contented demeanour thanks to their tight-knit community bonds. Amidst the whirlwind of social progress and continuous urban rejuvenation, there is a growing nostalgia for the unhurried pace and enchanting allure of days gone by. Even though those who have transitioned to high-rise apartments now relish improved living conditions and convenience, some cannot help but yearn for their former *hutong* life.

Much like distant tourists, they discover that they still relish immersing themselves in *hutong* imbued with Beijing's unique culture. Yet, unlike ordinary sightseers, former *hutong* residents aspire to rekindle their own cherished memories of life within those narrow alleyways.

Beijing natives possess a unique sense of direction, a testament to their deep familiarity and profound connection with their city. From a tender age, they adopt cardinal directions (north, south, east and west) as their preferred means of location description. Navigating their surroundings becomes second nature, honing their orientation skills to perfection. Even if their initial grasp of direction is not spot on, their immersion in the environment cultivates an innate sensitivity to the four cardinal points. Beijing's grid-like urban layout further refines their sense of direction, impacting not just daily life but also permeating their literary creations. Esteemed writer Wang Zengqi (1920–1997) astutely observed,

“When seeking directions from native Beijingers, they will tell you whether a place lies north or south of a street. In the past, rickshaw drivers would often holler ‘go east’ at every turn. Even in the intimate setting of an elderly couple preparing for bed, if the wife feels cramped by her husband, she might say, ‘Move south a bit!’” Native Beijing authors frequently emphasise direction in their literary works as well. For example, Lao She (1899–1966), a native of Beijing, in his novel *Rickshaw Boy*, masterfully interweaves the protagonist Xiangzi's movements and reflections throughout the city, often referencing cardinal directions like “heading northeast to return to Western Hills” or “heading south towards Changxindian.” These instances vividly illustrate the innate direction-savvy nature of Beijing natives.

The enduring sense of direction in Beijingers continues to influence not only their writing but also their daily lives, ensuring they navigate their surroundings with effortless precision.



A Spiritual Home for the City's Residents

Beijing's *hutong* exist at the intersection of tradition and modernity, bridging the gap between bustling urban life and cultural heritage. There are various reasons why *hutong* resonate with people. When visitors initially wander through these unique alleys, they may be captivated by the charm of the grey walls and tiled roofs. However, for those who take the time to explore further, it becomes clear that each *hutong* has its own distinctive stories, legends and remarkable experiences. The anecdotes and historical references embedded in these *hutong* contribute to a rich cultural atmosphere of times gone by.



The Endless Beauty of *Hutong*

H*utong* not only serve as a geographical reference but also symbolise traditional Beijing culture. Their names reflect the straightforward and genuine nature of native Beijingers; they are named in a way that is easy to remember and aligns with the local characteristics of the area.

According to *Flora of Beijing* (1992), there are 1,790 species of native plants in Beijing. These flowers, plants and trees are a reflection of the city's character. Among the native plants, one will find the Chinese scholar tree, Beijing lilac and orange day-lily, which are prevalent throughout the city. These hardy species play a vital role in Beijing's environmental preservation and enhancement. In *hutong* neighbourhoods, residents take great pleasure in living amidst fragrant courtyards adorned with thriving plants. Consequently, it is quite common to come across alleyways named after different plant species.

The Chinese scholar tree, the city tree of Beijing, is a prominent tree species found throughout its streets. These historic trees, located in Beijing's *hutong*, significantly contribute to the city's charm. As noted by the writer Zhang Henshui (1895–1967) in his "May in Beijing," "Chinese scholar trees can be found in abundance in both major streets and small alleyways, regardless of the surrounding household type. In May, if one ascends Jingshan Hill and gazes upon the old city of Beijing, a breathtaking sight awaits them. The cityscape is adorned with a sea of green, primarily constituted by the lush and towering Chinese scholar trees."

These trees, known for their long leaf cycle and delicate fragrance, have been a dominant species in Beijing since the Yuan Dynasty. Many alleyways are still adorned with an abundance of these beautiful trees. Today, locals continue to enjoy spending their leisure time under the shade of these towering trees, engaging in games, chats and relaxation. Located in the southern part of Xicheng District, Huaibaishu (Chinese scholar tree and cypress) Street stretches from Changchun Street in the east to Xibianmen Inner Street in the west. This street, once a Qing Dynasty military barracks, derives its name from the ancient Chinese scholar tree and two cypress trees that once grew on a nearby elevated slope.

In the reign of Emperor Shunzhi (1644–1661), an imperial prince created a garden outside Di'anmen (Dí'an Gate) and planted numerous apricot trees there, leading to the garden being known as Xinghuayuan or "Apricot Blossom Garden." A native of Shanxi Province later opened a distillery at the alleyway's entrance, initially naming it Xinghua Village and later changing it to Xinghuatian (Apricot Field). In 1965, this *hutong* became known as Xinghuatian.

In addition to flowers, various grasses have also lent their names to

hutong in Beijing. North Lucaoyuan (Reeds Garden) *Hutong* has a historical background dating back to the Ming Dynasty when it was known as Luweiyuan (Reeds Garden), referring to part of the Sanli River full of reeds. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the narrow lane and other alleyways were integrated and collectively named North Lucaoyuan *Hutong*, celebrating the presence of "reeds" in its history. This *hutong* held a special place in history as a gathering spot for notable individuals such as Mei Yutian (1869–1914), a celebrated Peking Opera accompanist.

Huashi, situated near Chongwenmen, is colloquially known as Hua'ershi (flower market). Back in the day, many residents in this area were engaged in the production of artificial flowers. Over time, this area evolved into what is now known as the Huashi neighbourhood.

Beijingers are accompanied by the blooming of locust flowers, the yellowing of chrysanthemums, the fragrant scent of plum blossoms, the fluttering of ginkgo leaves and the evergreen vitality of pine and cypress trees throughout the year. These natural elements enhance the visual beauty of the city and contribute to the rich tapestry of life in Beijing, leaving behind captivating stories that continue to be cherished.





Luminaries in *Hutong*

Today, memorial halls have been established in some of the city's *hutong* to honour and remember renowned individuals from various fields. Although these individuals have passed away, their spirit and influence endure through the tree-lined paths, blooming flowers and traditional architecture found within the *hutong*, creating a living legacy for future generations.



Wenhua Hutong, stretching approximately 400 metres from Tong Ling Road in the east to Naoshikou Street in the west, has a rich history. Originally known as Shifuma Houzhai, meaning “the residence of Mr. Shi, the emperor’s son-in-law,” this *hutong* was later renamed in honour of Li Dazhao (1889–1927). In 1920, Li and his family moved to courtyard No. 24 within the *hutong*, marking a significant period in his revolutionary career. During his time there, Li authored over 150 articles, organised more than 120 meetings, co-founded the Marxist Theory Research Society alongside Chen Duxiu (1879–1942), Deng Zhongxia (1894–1933) and

other revolutionaries, and met with representatives of the Comintern, including Grigori Voitinsky (1893–1953). He also established the Beijing Communist Party Group, actively promoted Marxism, published the influential magazine *The Voices of Labour*, conducted educational classes for labourers and formed the Changxindian Trade Union. Courtyard No. 24 in Wenhua Hutong witnessed the remarkable achievements of Li’s brief yet impactful life.

Wenhua Hutong stands as a profound historical witness to Li’s influential role in spreading Marxism, founding the Communist Party of China (CPC), leading the northern workers’ movement

and facilitating the initial cooperation between the Kuomintang and the CPC. Today, visiting the *hutong* serves as a commemoration of Li’s remarkable contributions. It has become the foremost representative site that encapsulates these pivotal events and their enduring impact on Chinese history.

The renowned Peking Opera artist Mei Lanfang (1894–1961) once called several *hutong* locations in Beijing home, including courtyards in Tieshu Xiejie, Baishun Hutong, North Lucaoyuan, Qingyun Hutong and Huguosi Street. Today, visitors have the opportunity to explore his former residence in Huguosi, near the picturesque and popular Shichahai area.

Mei’s former residence is a well-preserved grey brick quadrangle courtyard with two entrances and multiple rooms. Inside, one will find a carefully arranged layout that mirrors Mei’s original lifestyle, including a parlour, living room, study and bedroom. The east and west exhibition halls have been thoughtfully curated to host themed exhibitions, offering constantly refreshed content to engage and captivate visitors. The outdoor exhibition area uses captivating visuals to provide an immersive introduction to Mei’s life and social activities. Visitors can marvel at Mei’s exquisite performance costumes and explore the trunks he used to carry his belongings during overseas shows. Additionally, the residence houses a collection of over 30,000 documents and texts with significant artistic value.

Stepping inside Fengfu Hutong will lead one to none other than Lao She’s former residence, a quintessential example of a traditional Beijing courtyard. In 1953, Lao She and his wife nurtured

two flourishing persimmon trees and a jujube tree within this very courtyard. Each autumn, these persimmon trees would bear brightly coloured fruits, infusing the courtyard with a vibrant atmosphere and earning it the endearing nickname “Danshi Xiaoyuan” or “Red Persimmon Courtyard.” The courtyard itself comprises a main hall, north hall, and east and west side rooms. Tucked away in the northwest corner of the courtyard lie Lao She’s bedroom and study, meticulously preserved. Today, one can still catch glimpses of the couple’s life within the courtyard, as the interior exhibits faithfully maintain their original character. The persimmon trees, season after season, continue to bear fruit, serving as living evidence of the enduring legacy of Lao She’s presence.

Lao She, a native Beijinger, dedicated his entire life to capturing the essence of the city through his literary works. Exploring his writings offers a multifaceted view of Beijing in different eras. Xiaoyangjia Hutong not only stands as Lao She’s birthplace but also serves as the backdrop for his novel *Four Generations Under One Roof*. This hutong, originally known as Xiaoyangjuan, stands out due to its distinctive layout, evoking imagery of a sheep pen.

After establishing himself as a writer, Lao She prominently incorporated the hutong into three of his novels, such as *Four Generations Under One Roof*. He skilfully employed the hutong as not only a geographical setting but also a stage for a multitude of activities, effectively conveying the tragic history of China’s tumultuous experiences during the first half of the 20th century.








Colourful Backdrop of the Ancient Capital

The city's *hutong* emanate vibrancy, filled with lively inhabitants. From dawn till dusk, the hustle and bustle seem never to cease.



The friendly exchanges between neighbours upon their encounters and the gentle melody of pigeon whistles carried by the wind, although seemingly disrupting the tranquillity of *hutong*, actually instil a sense of inner peace among the local residents.

In the recollections of writer Xiao Qian (1910–1999), the early mornings in *hutong* bustled with the ceaseless calls of street vendors, each peddling their seasonal specialties. Spring heralded the alluring scent of large river snails, while summer tempted with the sweet fragrance of lotus seedpods, roots and bean jelly. With the advent of autumn, the air became redolent with the captivating aroma of chestnuts roasted in sugar, and in the grip of winter, the comforting warmth of hot roasted sweet potatoes enveloped the alleyways. The writer Wang Meng also fondly remembered spring's arrival, with cheerful vendors offering vibrant goldfish, while the sweltering summer heat brought forth the popular treat of bean jelly. As autumn settled in, the air carried the fragrance of freshly harvested corn, and in the winter's cold embrace, *hutong* featured sellers offering crisp radishes.

In the daytime, the vibrant atmosphere of bustling *hutong* was pervaded by the calls of vendors selling essential items like food and drink. Yet, in the serene evenings, the melodic cadences of these vendors created a somewhat wistful ambiance. Xiao, in particular,

found solace in the soothing sounds of the night hawkers, whose chants featured a slow, drawn-out rhythm, often interspersed with pauses and occasional prolonged silences.

In addition to the lively ambiance, the city's *hutong* also resonate with the enchanting melodies of another kind. One place where individuals can truly immerse themselves in the authentic charm of Old Beijing is Zhengyici Theatre (Temple Theatre of Beijing Opera House), nestled in an alleyway near Hepingmen. As China's first indoor theatre featuring a complete wooden structure, this Peking Opera theatre has earned the prestigious title of the "living fossil of China's theatres."

In 1881, Mei Qiaoling, the leader of the Sixi Troupe, graced the stage of Zhengyici with a remarkable performance. Later, in 1919, Mei Lanfang, his grandson, at the age of 25, embarked on his illustrious career as a Peking Opera performer on the same stage. Today, a pair of couplets adorns the pillars of the theatre's stage, paying homage to the vibrant performances of traditional Chinese operatic arts that draw inspiration from historical events and real-life stories. The stage of Zhengyici continues to be a platform for countless performances, consistently attracting a full house of enthusiastic audience members. Whether watching operas or savouring tea, everything at Zhengyici appears to have remained unchanged, preserving

the timeless allure of this cultural gem.

Within the city's *hutong*, culinary delights continue to thrive. One such renowned *hutong* is Menkuang, celebrated for its collection of traditional Beijing-style street stalls. The entrance of this *hutong* was once marked by a distinctive stone door frame, linking it to the bustling Dashilar, a traditional business hub in the city, from which it derived its name. During its heyday, Menkuang Hutong boasted nearly 20 well-established snack stalls, each flourishing with business.

Many renowned figures from the performing arts, such as Ma Lianliang (1901–1966), would visit the *hutong* to indulge in these delectable treats after removing their stage makeup. Today, the *hutong*, along with the entire Dashilar area, has experienced a revival of its former prosperity.

Beijing's *hutong* not only serve as residential areas but also as fertile grounds for creativity and inspiration. The former residence of Qi Baishi (1864–1957), a prominent traditional Chinese painter, can be found in Kuache Hutong, while his disciple Li Kuchan (1899–1983) resided in Liushu Hutong. Zhang Henshui spent his final years in Zhuanta Hutong, where he penned notable novels, including *A Family of Distinction*. These luminaries captured the vibrant atmosphere of the city's *hutong* through their works, evoking a shared sentiment within these exclusive memories.





Natives of Beijing often express that snowy days provide an authentic glimpse of the ancient capital. On December 11, 2023, a gentle snowfall began to grace Beijing, softly cloaking the Forbidden City's iconic red walls and their golden glazed tiles in a wintry blanket. Amidst this captivating snow dance, a bustling street just north of the moat beckoned more visitors than usual. Enveloped in cosy down jackets, they intermittently stamped their feet and warmed their numbed hands, while their smartphones captured an enchanting tableau—the Forbidden City's majestic turrets standing proudly across the serene moat.

Life in **Hutong**

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Li Zhiguo, Qu Bowei, Wang Jianzhong, Wu Chaoying,
Yao Yao, Zhang Jirong, Zhang Liping, Zhou Mingxing, Zhu Zhenli

The transition from the lively sidewalk to the narrow *hutong* (used for both singular and plural), traditional Beijing alleyways, situated across from the former imperial palace, creates a distinct sense of entering a different world. Within these *hutong*, the throngs dissipate, yielding to a tranquil ambience. The charm of the area is heightened by the peeling red lacquer doors and the grey eaves blanketed in snow, lining the courtyards on either side of the *hutong*. Behind these doors, residents uphold their enduring winter traditions with a peaceful resolve, preserving a sense of order in their way of life.

Born in *Hutong*

Hutong, a defining feature of Beijing's cultural landscape, emerged during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and have experienced a multitude of transformations across the centuries. These *hutong* have been the lifelong homes of generations of Beijingers. To this day, these alleyways are held dear as both birthplaces and homes for many, embodying a rich tapestry of historical continuity and cultural significance.

Prior to the Yuan Dynasty, Beijing boasted vast development spanning over two millennia. Despite various transformations throughout history, the symmetrical design has consistently been a cornerstone of the old city's architecture. Beijing's Central Axis, stretching north to south, stands as a testament to the enduring principles of balance and harmony that are deeply ingrained in traditional Chinese culture. Along this axis, the city's major horizontal and vertical streets intersect,

creating a harmonious urban landscape. Tucked along these streets are the city's small *hutong*. Born in 1958, Gao Wei's childhood unfolded in a modest courtyard deep within Dashizuo Hutong. This space was originally shared by five families, including Gao Wei's father and uncles, the courtyard's former owners and another family. A stone's throw to the west lies the east bank of Beihai Park's lake, once an imperial garden, and to the east, a dividing wall marked the boundary with Jingshan Park, another regal garden. Walking south down the *hutong*, one's gaze would inevitably be drawn to the stately turrets of the Forbidden City.

Historically, this *hutong* bustled as a hub for crafting stoneware during the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911). Later, it transitioned from a place of craftsmanship to a residential area.

Gao Wei entered the world in a room on the southern side of the courtyard. His early years were brightened by the array of flowers his father cultivated just outside his window. While they were common varieties like roses and

sunflowers, they infused the courtyard with a vibrant tapestry of colours. In the summer, opening the window would release a wave of sweet fragrances, filling the air with the scents of the season.

During his childhood, the *hutong* seemed more spacious, the courtyards larger. Directly opposite Gao's room stood a formidable building, its entrance marked by five steps.

Heading north from Gao's *hutong* leads to an area nestled between Beihai Park and Shichahai, renowned Beijing tourist attractions graced by picturesque lakes. Dashiqiao Hutong lies to the north of Shichahai. When he was young, Fang Biao and his family relocated from Dongsi to this *hutong*. Their stay was brief, as Fang Biao's father soon received a transfer to Guangxi in southwest China. Fang Biao temporarily left Beijing, but a mere three years later, a song in a film, evoking the serene beauty of Beihai Park's lake, stirred a deep nostalgia in him for his hometown. He implored his father to let him return to Beijing, to live with his grandfather in Dashiqiao Hutong, a place that would shape much of his life.



Playing in *Hutong*

In recent years, Beijing has witnessed extensive *hutong* renovations, with the aim of accommodating modern daily life while preserving the traditions of Old Beijing, which evoke a profound sense of nostalgia among the city's native residents.

Despite the extensive renovations that have taken place, the essence of Old Beijing's style remains deeply rooted in its *hutong*. These traditional alleyways, nestled amid the bustling modern buildings, may seem small, narrow and labyrinthine. However, in Gao's recollection, the *hutong* of his childhood was an expansive playground where he relished boundless freedom to run and play. After school, children roamed the alleyways with a sense of freedom, partaking in playful pastimes or gathering at a classmate's home for conversations that often stretched into the evening. The voices of parents calling out to their children, echoing through the court-



yards, acted as a gentle summons to return home.

Having siblings who were significantly older than him, at the time, Gao could not partake in their games due to the age gap. However, as a pre-schooler, Gao never experienced loneliness. Within the confines of the courtyard,



he discovered companionship in the world around him. Tourists atop the hill in Jingshan Park, the small boats dotting Beihai's lake and the towering trees of the *hutong* all became his playmates. Snowy days held a special place in Gao's heart. Adjacent to Jingshan Park, a small open area within the courtyard allowed him to leave his footprints behind after a fresh snowfall. During that era, tourism had yet to flourish, and few visitors enjoyed the snow in the Forbidden City and Jingshan Park. Within the confines of his courtyard, a door adorned with traditional Chinese embellishments served as the boundary between the residential area and the open space. The courtyard itself was a microcosm, while the open area became an even more diminutive world—a snowy realm that belonged exclusively to him.

In the summertime, he found delight in visiting a courtyard with a terrace located just across the alleyway, offering breath-taking vistas of Beihai Park. On stormy days, he would occa-

sionally join his friends in a rush to the lakeside of the park, where they would witness a large boat ferrying tourists from smaller boats back to the shore.

Wang Defu, born in 1947, has been a lifelong resident of Dongsì Toutiao Hutong, situated just outside the traditional Beijing business area known as Longfusi, or Longfu Temple. In Wang's formative years, he bore witness to the transformation of Longfusi from a religious sanctuary into a thriving city market. Wang's father toiled as a rickshaw puller, like the protagonist Xiangzi in Lao She's (1899–1966) novel *Rickshaw Boy*. As a youngster, Wang, along with a group of friends, often ventured into the labyrinthine *hutong*, with their preferred destination being the lively and bustling Longfusi People's Market. They would while away their time squatting in front of captivating stalls. As Wang matured, he also delved into small entrepreneurial ventures within the market, fostering a profound attachment to his cherished childhood memories.



Learning in *Hutong*

In Beijing, the presence of primary and middle schools in nearly every *hutong* was a common sight, guaranteeing that children living in these alleyways enjoyed convenient access to education.

In the vicinity of Dashiqiao, several primary schools were situated, one of which was attended by Fang Biao. In 1956, Fang returned to Beijing on his own from Guangxi and commenced his grade four. On his inaugural day at the school, the curriculum revolved around acquainting students with the school regulations. Two rules stand out vividly in Fang's memory: firstly, students were obligated to partake in morning exercises as a collective, and secondly, they ate breakfast brought from home together following the morning exercises.

During the breakfast break, while other teachers attended to various classroom matters, Fang's teacher had a unique approach. He would utilise this time to impart knowledge to his students, whether by teaching them to recite a poem or sharing a brief historical tale. Although some of these

poems and stories may have dimmed in memory, the vivid scenes from that time persist in Fang's recollections.

Living near the Drum Tower, Fang would hear the resonant beats of the drums every morning and evening, serving as a traditional timekeeping method. In Fang's primary school days, the closing of Desheng Gate, situated near his school, would follow the drumbeats. After school, two teachers would always stand on a street outside the school's main entrance, attentively observing as students dispersed into the alleyways, even though there were few vehicles during that period.

For Gao Wei, residing in Dashizuo Hutong, one of the most profound memories was his school, which was located near Beihai Park and provided a captivating view of the moat surrounding the Forbidden City from the classroom window. The school was conveniently situated just a few minutes' walk from his home in Dashizuo, adjacent to the moat. During dusk, the setting sun would cast its rays upon the surface of the moat, creating a mesmer-

ising reflection on the glazed tiles of the former imperial palace turrets. This moment of radiant beauty profoundly touched the young boy's heart.

Autumn is widely regarded as the most enchanting season in the city. One of the most captivating locales in Beijing can be discovered within a specific alleyway, featuring both straight and winding paths, traditional structures, flourishing trees and blossoms. Gao believes that this beauty is a harmonious fusion of human craftsmanship and the natural surroundings.

Growing up in *Hutong*

Life within Beijing's *hutong* is a scene of complexity and diversity, a living testament to China's ancient social customs and cultural heritage.

Much like the city's main streets, *hutong* also follow a distinct directional layout, spanning north, south, east and west. When navigating these narrow alleys, individuals are commonly instructed to "proceed south" or "turn west," directions which are generally dependable. While scholars have noted that the arrangement of old buildings in *hutong* may not always align precisely with the meridian lines, this slight variation does not diminish the locals' perception of them as central and accurate landmarks.

Traditional Chinese social structure is also mirrored in *hutong*. Residents of *hutong* come from diverse backgrounds and hold various identities. Even in ancient times, one could encounter unexpected individuals in *hutong*, such as businessmen or artisans living in close proximity to a noble's courtyard. Urban life cultivates a sense of innate equality among its residents, with the changing fortunes of its inhabitants quietly underscoring the notion that we are the architects of our own fate. Through unwavering determination and persistence in the city, individuals can ultimately achieve a certain degree of success.

For example, aside from the emperor, everyone else was considered a commoner. There was no distinction based on high or low social status within *hutong* communities.

Banjie Hutong in Dongsì Toutiao attracted luminaries such as the scholars Qian Zhongshu (1910–1998) and his wife Yang Jiang (1911–2016), General Zhang Xueliang (1901–2001) and General Fu Kang'an (1754–1796) from the mid-Qing Dynasty. In this alleyway, Wang's neighbour was Hou Baolin (1917–1993), a crosstalk performing artist, who lived opposite his courtyard. As a child, Wang often saw Hou, always wearing a smile on his face and warmly greeting his neighbours.

In Dashizuo Hutong, just a short walk from Gao's home, there is a small courtyard that faces Beihai Park. This courtyard was once the residence of Xu Guangping (1898–1968), the wife of the renowned writer Lu Xun (1881–1936), and their son, Zhou Haiying (1929–2011). Regardless of their high-ranking positions or their

prominence, these individuals are all considered ordinary residents within *hutong* communities. Most residents developed a sense of indifference, as if they had become accustomed to seeing nobles and luminaries as everyday people. In Gao's *hutong*, there lived an elderly Manchu lady who had served as a palace maid in the Forbidden City during her youth. After the Qing Dynasty's downfall, she relocated to the *hutong* adjacent to the former imperial palace. Gao fondly remembers the elderly lady as someone not particularly talkative, yet she engaged in more conversations when in the company of other women from the *hutong*. She would often share stories with children about life in the imperial palace, recounting instances of young Puyi (1906–1967), the last emperor of the Qing Dynasty, enduring mistreatment from his eunuchs and palace maids, often experiencing hunger and deprivation.

In Dashiqiao Hutong by the Drum Tower, Fang shared the neighbourhood with notable residents. As dusk settled, a melodious flute would often emanate from a courtyard, its gentle notes echoing through the alleyway. In that enchanting moment, the entire *hutong* was enveloped in a serene tranquillity.



Changing in *Hutong*

In the early 1970s, Li Xiuyun relocated from Caishikou to Dashizuo Hutong. Her family of five settled into a quaint single-storey residence nestled within a courtyard, becoming immediate neighbours to the Gao family. Both Li and her husband hailed from Shandong Province. Li's husband, a skilled craftsman with a specialisation in mould-making, eventually secured employment at a vinylon factory, where

he earned a modest monthly income. Li, despite her lack of formal education and occupation, proved herself to be a remarkably resourceful individual. She consistently took on various odd jobs for a nearby clothing factory, tasks such as sewing buttons and hemming trouser legs. Remarkably, by the end of each month, her earnings often rivalled those of her husband. Their children also eagerly pitched in, assisting Li with these tasks after school and thus honing their needlework skills in the process.

With the city's population steadily on the rise, the *hutong* neighbourhoods saw a surge in the number of residents, resulting in a heightened concentration of people within each courtyard in the 1980s. This evolving landscape brought together a mix of inhabitants, including both native Beijingers and individuals hailing from various other regions. As a consequence, many of the courtyards underwent a remarkable transformation, evolving into diverse and mixed living spaces.

In some *hutong*, space remains limited, with entire families gathering in rooms as small as 10 square metres (sq.m). These homes lack independent water and bathroom facilities, forcing residents to use communal public toilets and set up courtyard stoves for cooking. Gradually, spacious courtyards have given way to crowded new structures, with one family's use of a public space often leading to others following suit.

After residing in their courtyard for several decades, Li's children gradually began to relocate. With time, other residents in the courtyard also moved away. Li and her husband decided to construct a small kitchen next to their 20-sq.m room. Subsequently, the government initiated a renovation project for the entire courtyard, which included remodel-



ling Li's room and kitchen. However, a challenge arose due to the placement of the kitchen in front of the main room's entrance, affecting natural light. To address this issue, an automatic opening and closing glass skylight was installed on the kitchen's roof. This skylight serves a dual purpose by providing ventilation and allowing sunlight to enter. Additionally, the main room also receives ample sunlight.

A trend emerged in the 1990s within *hutong* neighbourhoods. The younger generation of *hutong* residents started to transition from their traditional homes to the increasing number of high-rise buildings. Fang's children have left Dashiqiao Hutong, opting to establish their homes in modern flats.



Hutong have undergone substantial transformations, mirroring the shifts from a traditional to a modern society and the transition from rural to urbanised China. The city's alleyways encapsulate the profound changes that have transpired in China over the past few decades.





Living in *Hutong*

As an elderly man, Wang Defu enjoys a unique pastime during his leisure hours. He rides his tricycle, which is equipped with fish tanks containing goldfish of varying sizes. He navigates through his neighbourhood, skilfully promoting his fish by delivering captivating sales pitches with a melodious chant.

Wang has spent several decades selling goldfish in the vicinity of his home. He would often pause by the roadside, patiently waiting for passers-by to inquire about prices. Initially, Wang did not have a designated stall in the Longfusi market, so he had to carry fish tanks using a carrying pole through-

out the market. Later, he transitioned to riding a tricycle while transporting his goldfish, a practice he continues to this day. As the market eventually closed due to the development of a new cultural and creative park, other street vendors in the neighbourhood gradually faded away. Despite these changes, Wang remains resolute in his trade. What was once a means to make a living has now become an integral part of his life. While elderly residents of Beijing frequently express their desire for a “carefree life” in their later years, the truth is that they still yearn for activity and wish to prove that they

are not ageing rapidly. Wang, much like numerous hardworking individuals in Beijing, is far from idle and consistently pursues enjoyable activities. He has been involved in the business of selling goldfish since his youth. If he were suddenly unable to continue this occupation, adapting to such a change would pose a significant challenge for him.



In 2018, at the age of 28, Chen Xing made the choice to rent a room in a quadrangle courtyard nestled within one of the city's historic alleyways. This particular *hutong* is a vibrant hub, hosting a diverse array of establishments including theatres, bars, bookstores and art galleries. Moreover, the courtyard is surrounded by ancient structures and former residences of prominent individuals. This *hutong* serves as a magnet for both unconventional rock enthusiasts and traditional Beijing elders, who coexist peacefully without causing disturbances. This harmonious coexistence creates an atmosphere that beautifully blends traditional Beijing culture with global trends. For Chen, a young newcomer to Beijing, the city is both familiar and unfamiliar, and the magnetic appeal of this place is undeniable.

Hutong living has its devotees, but others aspire to move away. Nevertheless, diverse stories continue to unfold throughout the city's iconic alleyways.



After conducting some inquiries, Chen took over a friend's rented house in the *hutong* for a reasonable monthly rent.

Upon settling into the *hutong*, Chen swiftly became aware of the challenges associated with life in such a location. Despite making some modest renovations, the constrained space in his room remained a persistent issue, prompting him to part with many of his belongings and alter several initial plans. While he does have the convenience of hot water for bathing, the absence of a toilet remains a notable challenge. Chen must resort to using a public toilet located outside the courtyard in the *hutong*. This adjustment proves troublesome and inconvenient for Chen, a young individual accustomed to the comfort of modern amenities like flushing toilets and Internet connectivity through a smartphone.

Despite the inconveniences that come with *hutong* living, Chen has discovered it to be an incredibly enriching experience. The *hutong* offers easy access to groceries, bars and supermarkets just steps away from his courtyard. After a day's work, he can unwind with a glass of beer at one of the nearby bars, engaging in conversations with fellow young residents.





Ageing in *Hutong*

A few months back, Li Xiuyun celebrated her 90th birthday in the same 20-sq.m room in Dashizuo Hutong where she has spent the majority of her life. With the passage of time, she has begun to grapple with the effects of memory loss, causing past events to grow increasingly hazy and her ability to recognise individuals in her presence to diminish. While her children diligently care for her, she often struggles to recall their identities. Nevertheless, when her children visit her room, she treats them as honoured guests, always eager to provide tea and invite them to sit on the sofas. She cherishes these moments, using them to engage in conversations and share family stories.



The geneses of stories originate in *hutong*, and the enduring significance of the residents' recurring rituals year after year has been instrumental in shaping the spirit and culture of Beijing over thousands of years, much like the ancient capital itself.

A few years back, Li's husband passed away while seated on a sofa in the same room. While some may consider it fortunate that he did not suffer much in the end, for Li and their children, the pain of losing a beloved family member is a wound that has taken a considerable time to mend. Indeed, the couple's children have also grown older and established their own families outside the *hutong*. They take turns returning to the *hutong* at night to care for their mother and share memories of their life within the historic alleyway.

Upon reaching the age of 90, Li became eligible for an additional subsidy specifically designed for the elderly. This subsidy has boosted her monthly income by 500 yuan, which is ample to support her life in the *hutong*. The old coal-fired stove in her room has been replaced with electric heating, ensuring a clean, safe and warm living environment. Even on snowy days, the interior of her room remains pleasantly warm and comfortable.

Wang Defu still resides in the house where he grew up, and has witnessed changes such as the opening and closing of businesses in nearby Longfusi. Wang may occasionally forget to charge or bring his smartphone when he goes out, but he takes solace in the presence of familiar faces nearby. Whenever he encounters trouble, he is confident in finding someone willing to assist him.

The city boasts numerous traditional alleyways, inhabited by a diverse range of residents. Some have called *hutong* neighbourhoods home for generations, while others are newcomers to these historic lanes. Many individuals opt to live in courtyards. They eschew modern high-rise buildings, believing that the accumulation of cultural charm is lacking in these areas, despite their modernity and convenience. Both high-rise buildings and *hutong* communities may be densely populated, but within the world of *hutong* lies a vast realm.



SPECIALS

- Keizerrijk Van Bree 20
- Saranac 25
- Tempt cider 25
- Xingu 25
- Red Seal 30



Touching *Hutong*

Translated by Wang Wei Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Han Xiaotong, Wang Yuanzheng

Hutong (used for both singular and plural), the traditional alleyways of Beijing, hold a cherished place in the memories of the city's inhabitants. However, as times change, *hutong* undergo changes as well. Some who grew up in *hutong* have developed a profound emotional connection to their hometown. They willingly use cameras and paintbrushes to document the ever-changing nature of the city's *hutong* in their artistic endeavours. Driven by their sentiments, they hope to grow old alongside each brick and tile within these alleys.

Liu Yue

Documenting the Times by Writing *Hutong* Stories



Liu Yue, a scholar steeped in Beijing's rich culture and history, is poised to resurrect his writing career after a year of retirement. His unwavering focus remains the city's *hutong*, the capital city's traditional alleyways. Fifteen years ago, Liu penned *Beijing Hutong 66* and *Exploring Hutong and Meeting Luminaries*. These literary books garnered substantial acclaim and found a permanent place on the shelves of numerous Chinese libraries and universities. They also enjoyed resounding popularity in the market. Nevertheless, Liu perceives his prior works as mere glimpses into the profound cultural tapestry woven within Beijing's alleyways. With his forthcoming works, he aspires to dive deeper into the cultural significance of these famed alleyways.

Liu has conducted extensive explorations of numerous alleyways in diverse locales, encompassing Qianmen Street, Dongsì, Shichahai and Wangfujing. His fervour for documenting Beijing's *hutong* prompted him to begin writing books about them in his 40s.

Over a span of two years, he authored several books, collectively amounting to 570,000 Chinese characters. Yet, one manuscript has lingered unpublished for over a decade, leaving Liu with a palpable sense of discontent.

Despite the abundance of captivating stories nestled within the intricate network of Beijing's alleyways, Liu acknowledges the formidable challenge of authentically capturing the enchantment of these *hutong* in his literary works. Today, at over 60 years of age, he remains resolute in his commitment to continue his writing journey, aiming to craft a book that authentically interprets the cultural essence of the city's *hutong*, imbuing it with his unique style and perspective.

Exploring *Hutong* by Bicycle

Liu has long been familiar with the saying, "There are countless *hutong*, with names numbering 360, while the unnamed ones are as numerous as ox hair." Since his youth, he has been entranced by the enigmatic allure of

Beijing's *hutong*.

In one single *hutong* one encounters a diverse array of atmospheres. Some households boast expansive courtyards adorned with towering walls and stone lions at their entrances, exuding a majestic and commanding presence. Other houses showcase intricate brick carvings, depicting elegant flora, fauna and ornamental designs. However, nestled amidst them may be a house with a modest style, characterised by thick black tiles on its roofs and patches of overgrown weeds. The genial owner



of this house, a plump individual, leads a life guided by his own whims. As a devoted bird enthusiast, he spends his days cheerfully engaging in conversations with his neighbours.

In the 1980s, shortly after Liu commenced his career, he acquired a bicycle, greatly enhancing his ability to explore the city's *hutong* with convenience. During that era, vehicles were seldom spotted within *hutong*, but bicycles were a common sight, scattered along these narrow alleyways. When acquaintances crossed paths in the *hutong*, they would exchange greetings using the distinctive sound of bicycle bells. Even today, Liu stands firm in his belief that the most efficient means of leisurely exploring the *hutong* is by bicycle. The narrow confines of these alleyways make finding parking spaces for vehicles a challenging endeavour.

Mounted on a bicycle and armed with a film camera and a notebook, Liu embarked on a mission to traverse the city's alleyways in pursuit of writing materials. Typically, he would photograph the *hutong* before extracting his pen and paper to meticulously record his key observations. Inquisitive elderly residents often approached him, inquiring, "Hello! Are you an engineer conducting surveys of our courtyards?"

Thanks to Liu's visits, he has unearthed numerous details that remain uncharted in historical documents. For instance, courtyard No. 31 on Waijiaobu Street was once the residence of a prince from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911).



However, courtyard No. 48 remains relatively obscure. Through conversations with long-time residents of the *hutong* and assiduous research, Liu unearthed the fact that this serene courtyard was, in fact, a small-scale model constructed by an American engineer before the establishment of the Peking Union Medical College Hospital in the early 20th century. Remarkably, despite the passage of a century, the courtyard's structure has been exceptionally well-preserved.

During his visit to Dongsi Toutiao Hutong, Liu had the privilege of exploring the former residence of Chu Tunan (1899–1994), a distinguished translator. Chu's courtyard, with its three-storey structure and adorned with majestic locust trees flanking the entrance, welcomed visitors via seven steps, leading to a grand screen wall within the court-

yard. One of Chu's neighbours divulged to Liu that the esteemed scholar often indulged in leisurely strolls alongside the lush locust trees, displaying his courteous demeanour towards his neighbours. Consequently, everyone held the scholar in high regard and greeted him with a respectful "Hello, Mr. Chu" whenever they crossed paths.

"Why did I document this particular instance of locals greeting Chu? It is because I firmly believe that it is the individuals residing in *hutong* who genuinely infuse these alleys with their unique cultural essence."

Colourful Lives in Hutong

Liu remarked that beyond the confines of the *hutong* lies a vast world, whereas within it exists a small realm brimming with individuals of diverse personalities and an assortment of delectable cuisine. To genuinely savour the delights of *hutong* living, visitors are encouraged to leave their vehicles behind and meander leisurely through these narrow alleyways. Along the way, they may chance upon an abundance of authentic Beijing snacks such as *aiwowo* (sticky rice balls) and *bingtanghulu* (candied hawthorn).

Only by wandering through *hutong* can individuals from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities have the



"Beijing is changing, and so are its *hutong*," Liu Yue penned in the preface of *Beijing Hutong 66*.



chance to initiate cultural integration. In Qianhaidongyan Hutong, Shichahai, there stands a roast meat restaurant that has been in operation since the era of Emperor Xianfeng (1851–1861) of the Qing Dynasty. This restaurant's patrons encompassed local commoners and nobles residing in the vicinity during the bygone era.

In his book, Liu introduces the distinction between the "civilian manner" and the "wild manner" observed during the consumption of roast meat. When dignified individuals dined, they would retain their long robes and employ large fans to elegantly cool themselves while partaking in their meal. This conduct was termed the "civilian manner." In contrast, the "wild manner" defied these conventions. Patrons would rest their left leg on an extended bench and wield chopsticks measuring over 30 centimetres in length as they vigorously devoured pieces of meat. Intriguingly, even individuals hailing from noble and intellectual backgrounds embraced the "wild manner," as was more commonly the style of labourers.

Courtyard No. 24 in Houhaibeian

Hutong was once the residence of Shafick George Hatem (1910–1988), the first foreigner to acquire Chinese citizenship following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Originally an American, Hatem arrived in China and served as an advisor to the General Health Department of the Eighth Route Army. After 1949, he made the decision not to return to the United States, opting instead to apply his acquired expertise to bolster China's medical sector.

As per historical accounts, Liu uncovered that Hatem had a distinct penchant for the "wild manner." During weekends, Hatem would extend invitations to foreign culturally influential individuals who held a positive view of China to partake in a hearty roast meat feast. They even made an effort to speak in Beijing dialect and would enthusiastically exclaim in Chinese to the restaurant manager upon their arrival, "Bring on the meat!" Hatem himself could consume five or six plates of mutton, each weighing 250 grams.

Rediscovering Hutong Culture

Liu elaborated on the idea that a defining trait of Beijing culture is its integration. The city's *hutong* culture has consistently been a dynamic and continuously evolving phenomenon, driven by the absorption of diverse cultural influences. It does not pertain exclusively to a specific group but rather is shared by all those who have either lived in or presently occupy these alleyways.

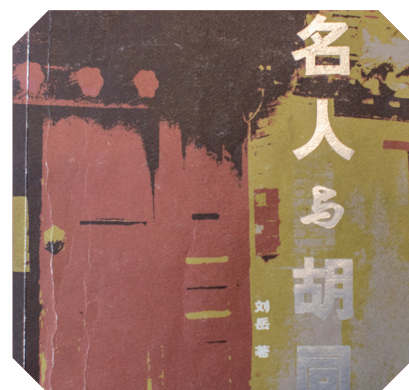
Liu pursued a history major in university and subsequently served for an extended period in the Party History Research Office of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee. Liu's substantial work experience in literature and history has equipped him with research methods that make him highly proficient in scrutinising the historical intricacies of Beijing's *hutong*. When recounting a particular event in a specific alleyway, Liu frequently

relies on a multitude of sources, including historical records, archaeological discoveries and oral testimonies gathered from elderly individuals.

Liu admitted that composing his third book presented him with considerable challenges. Despite having finished the initial draft of the third book on *hutong* in 2008, he remained dissatisfied with it, primarily because it lacked the cultural allure he aspired to capture. Moreover, given the perpetual transformations occurring in *hutong* during the new era, his manuscript was constantly undergoing revisions.

"I intend to delve even deeper into the culture of Beijing's *hutong* in my upcoming book," stated Liu. He explained that his previous two books aimed to introduce the origins and history of Beijing's *hutong*, especially to those unfamiliar with them, serving as a comprehensive guide to this unique area. In these books, each *hutong* in the city was meticulously chosen and presented as a precious pearl for readers to appreciate its charm. However, for his third book, Liu plans to connect these individual "pearls" through the cultural richness of the city's *hutong*.

In recent years, Liu himself has ventured into the realm of short videos to narrate the rich history of the city's *hutong* to his audience. He is pleased to find that his short videos have garnered popularity among young people.





Fucha-Danqing

Portraying *Hutong* Then and Now



On the afternoon of December 11, 2023, Beijing experienced its first heavy snowfall of the winter season. Despite battling a cold, Fucha Danqing dressed himself warmly and ventured outside to paint at the foot of Desheng Gate. The outdoor temperature lingered around minus 10 degrees Celsius, inducing a painful chill in his hands. Nevertheless, he regarded this sensation as ideal, remarking, "I have successfully infused my emotions about snowy Beijing into my artwork."

Born in 1987, Fucha grew up in one of Beijing's *hutong* neighbourhoods, nurturing a passion for drawing from an early age. Even as a toddler of three or four, Fucha would sketch *hutong* scenes on pieces of paper. During the 1990s, Fucha and his playmates would partake in games like skipping rope and hide-and-seek in a tranquil alleyway adorned with ancient trees. Occasionally, the group of joyful children would hear the gentle hum of bicycles passing by, accompanied by the cheerful chime of their bells. Fucha reminisces, "In spring, swallows usually began building their nests on the walls or under the eaves. That's when we would know that spring had arrived, and the weather would soon warm up. Wearing just sweaters, children would explore the *hutong*. We would often hear a particular grandfather calling his grandsons to return and witness the swallows' return from the south."



Fucha's living room featured one of his paintings portraying Guozijian Street during the autumn season. The artwork skilfully depicted fallen ginkgo leaves carpeting the ground, set against the backdrop of age-old, red-walled structures. A lone pedestrian strolled along the quiet street, beautifully captured in the painting.

"Beijing has undergone significant transformations in recent years, and its *hutong* have evolved accordingly," expressed Fucha. While he was in middle school, some of his neighbours began relocating to high-rise buildings. Childhood friends who once played alongside him in the *hutong* dispersed across the city. He often finds himself longing for conversations with those

familiar faces, reminiscing about the stories of the old *hutong*. However, he has come to realise that such reunions have become nearly impossible. Consequently, he conveys the beauty of those memories through his paintings.

From childhood through adulthood, Fucha has never kept a tally of the number of paintings he has created depicting Beijing's *hutong*. However, in just the past decade, he has completed over 1,000 artworks. Each painting is crafted meticulously on-site. Fucha typically rides his electric bicycle with his easel, exploring the city's *hutong*. When a particular *hutong* captivates his attention, he sets up his easel and dedicates five to six hours to capturing its essence on canvas. Enthusiastic residents often

approach him, inquiring about his subject matter and offering assistance, such as providing water.

The city's timeworn *hutong* are characterised by weathered blue bricks, mottled stone pedestals and aged trees that appear unchanged throughout the year. However, Fucha perceives these *hutong* as continually undergoing transformations. On one occasion, he observed a section of fresh paint peeling off a wall, revealing the underlying layer of age. Fucha captured this revelation in one of his paintings, remarking, "See, *hutong* also age with time. They bear scars and undergo rebirth."

Fucha derives immense joy from capturing the essence of *hutong* life through his paintings, portraying both the people and animals that inhabit these alleyway neighbourhoods.

Fucha's paintings resonated with some individuals, who exclaimed, "Wow, this is exactly how Beijing appeared when we were young!"

Fucha explained, "When someone appreciates and connects with a painting, its purpose is fulfilled. While I paint the city's *hutong*, I envision all of Beijing. Whether you are a newcomer or a lifelong resident of Beijing, if a painting can spark even the smallest curiosity about this city, it is sufficient for me."

Jia Yong

Capturing *Hutong* through the Lens

Hutong, the traditional alleyways of Beijing, hold a cherished place in the memories of the city's inhabitants. When reflecting on *hutong* life, they recall the presence of crickets nestled in brick crevices, cacti adorning the walls and swallow nests tucked under the eaves. They remember the elderly residents chatting with each other while fanning themselves with palm-leaf fans. However, as times change, *hutong* undergo renovations. Former dirt and brick pathways have given way to cleaner and more orderly asphalt lanes. Some old houses within *hutong* have been transformed into trendy coffee shops.

Jia Yong, a 60-year-old native of Beijing, has dedicated the past four decades to capturing the essence of the city's *hutong* through his photography. While running his braised pork shop on Dashilar West Street, he has transformed its interior into a gallery adorned with a remarkable collection of vintage *hutong* photographs. These images offer glimpses into a bygone era, featuring scenes of elderly men seeking respite from the heat by gently fanning themselves with palm-leaf fans and children delighting in the simple pleasure of skipping rope in the narrow alleyways. Jia's profound appreciation for the lively and spirited atmosphere that characterises old *hutong* is evident in every photograph he displays.

Jia's initial inspiration to photograph Beijing's *hutong* was deeply rooted in his childhood attachment to these charming alleyways. He fondly recalled a time when kindergartens were a rarity in the southern part of Beijing, and most children were cared for by their parents during their early years. It was not until the age of seven or eight that they embarked on their journey to primary school, independently making their way there each morning. Their parents would entrust them with one jiao (one-tenth of one yuan), which the children would carry along to buy breakfast, often consisting of deep-fried dough cakes and a bowl of soy milk. The remaining change from this modest allowance might be spent later on a lollipop, a delightful treat on their way home from school.

"In those days," Jia reminisced, "many people had limited financial means, but they were truly warm-hearted." In his youth, Jia derived immense satisfaction from sketching and honed his artistic abilities by creating his own drawings. Among his neighbours, there was a Manchu resident with a profound passion for photography, possessing a treasure trove of vintage photographs from the bygone imperial era. This neighbour harboured a special affection for children, and young Jia featured prominently in many of the photographs lovingly captured by this photography enthusiast.

Jia fondly recalled his childhood, a time when Dashilar and

Qianmen Street were replete with camera equipment shops and photography studios. For a mere seven jiao per day, he could rent a camera. His photography routine involved renting a camera, procuring a basic roll of film and subsequently developing the pictures independently within the confines of his home. Remarkably, even at the tender age of eight or nine, he had acquired the proficiency to develop the film within his own makeshift darkroom.

In the early 1980s, Jia's girlfriend, who would later become his wife, enrolled him in a photography class. From that point onward, he embarked on a photographic journey, focusing on capturing the essence of *hutong* communities, particularly those around his home. Throughout the years, he has amassed a collection of over 200,000 film photographs, each portraying

a vibrant alleyway and offering a captivating glimpse into the lives of his neighbours and fellow residents.

Jia clarified that his scope of *hutong* photography is confined to a few square kilometres, stretching from Qianmen to Tianqiao and from Ciqikou to Xuanwu-men, forming a large square-shaped area. Remarkably, all of his recent photographs prominently feature individuals, as he firmly believes that the quintessence of *hutong* culture resides in the spirit and demeanour of its inhabitants. By observing the spiritual disposition

of the residents within an alleyway, one can glean insights into the distinctive cultural attributes of each *hutong*. Furthermore, Jia underscores that an individual's state of being serves as the most accurate reflection of the current societal condition.

As the city rapidly progresses, old elements of its *hutong* are disappearing. In the same *hutong*, photos taken a decade ago show fewer surrounding high-rise buildings. Today, towering structures encircle these alleyways.

However, the most heart-wrenching aspect is the vanishing presence of familiar faces in *hutong*. "I have consistently concentrated on our historic *hutong* neighbourhoods and their residents. I have been capturing images for many years, solely with the aim of preserving our beloved home through these photographs."







Beijingers have a profound affection for the city's *hutong* (used for both plural and singular), the city's traditional alleyways, as these alleys, regardless of their width, serve as the threads that connect their homes. However, just over a decade ago, the majority of residents desired to depart from these iconic alleys. During that period, the city underwent rapid development, witnessing the construction of numerous high-rise buildings in areas beyond the *hutong*. Modern buildings offered enhanced access to public services, and *hutong* inhabitants aspired to transition from traditional courtyard residences to these contemporary structures. Consequently, *hutong* began to lose favour among the residents, and it appeared that the development of these alleyways had reached an impasse.

Transformation of *Hutong*

Translated by Zhang Hongpeng Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photos by Jia Jianxin, Zhou Shijie, Zhang Quanyue

Changes started to become noticeable after Beijing incorporated the preservation of the city's ancient quarters into its urban development strategies. In recent years, the traditional attributes and historic landscapes of the city have taken on an increasingly significant role in Beijing's urban growth. The city has identified more than 20 *hutong* as areas deserving historical and cultural preservation, among them Nanluoguxiang, and Xisibei No. 1 to No. 8 lanes. Consequently, the living conditions within *hutong* have seen enhancements. Furthermore, as cultural elements from various regions of the country have found their way into these alleys, *hutong* have acquired richer cultural characteristics and purposes.

Following protection and restoration efforts, *hutong* have evolved from mere residential districts into cultural landmarks of the city. They seamlessly combine recollections of Old Beijing with modern infrastructure, pleasant living environments, picturesque scenery, and a mix of local and international cultural influences. Today, *hutong* serve as pivotal contributors to urban development and act as connectors that weave together various facets of the city.

Both Banks of the Sanli River

Chinese writer Lao She (1899–1966) once described Longxu Ditch in his writing as a foul-smelling waterway in Beijing's Tianqiao area, filled with garbage, cloth scraps and dead animals. Today, it is hard to imagine such conditions, but in the past, this ditch was part of the Sanli River, a major drainage channel in the capital city.

The Sanli River was originally constructed for drainage purposes during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). It extended approximately 1.5 kilometres from Datong Bridge in the Chongwenmen Outer area. If one looks at an old map of Beijing, one will find several alleys to the east of Xianyukou on Qianmen Street. These alleys differ from traditional Beijing *hutong* in that they form a fan-shaped spatial layout. During the Ming Dynasty, the drainage basin of the Sanli River was crisscrossed with numerous waterways, and many settlements were established along these water channels. However, in the late Zhengde period (1506–1521) and early Jiajing period (1522–1566), the Sanli River began to silt up and dry out, although its channel was still preserved.

By the late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), only the narrow southern segment of the river remained, and Longxu Ditch was a part of this section. Over time, it transformed into a two-to-three-metre-wide foul-smelling ditch, littered with heaps of refuse and filled with sewage. Following the establish-

Revitalisation of Cultural and Natural Landscapes



ment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, efforts were made to flatten the Sanli River in order to enhance the local environment and sanitation. Consequently, the waterway of the Sanli River disappeared. Lao She portrayed and celebrated Beijing's endeavours to improve the environment in his famous play, *Longxu Ditch*.

The Sanli River left a profound imprint on Beijing's development throughout a 200-year period beginning around 1437. During its early existence, the river played a pivotal role in nourishing and irrigating the southern region of Beijing. Numerous place names with aquatic associations, such as Lucao Park (mean-

ing "Reed Park") and Hongqiao Bridge, were linked to the river. Moreover, it catalysed the expansion and growth of commercial and residential areas outside the Zhengyang and Chongwen gates. During the Zhengde and Jiajing eras, the western bank of the Sanli River emerged as the bustling commercial hub of Beijing. This area witnessed the emergence of various markets, including Zhushikou and Xianyuxiang. Some of these location names are still in use today. Historically, the Sanli River exerted a profound influence on place names, landmarks and urban layouts in the Qianmen area. Its impact extended beyond southern Beijing to encompass the entire city, becoming an integral part of the city's fabric, residents' daily lives and folk culture.

The old waterway was a quintessential symbol of the traditional residential and commercial culture of southern Beijing. As a result, the eastern Qianmen area evolved into a historical and cultural zone that brimmed with nostalgia. Despite the river's disappearance, the area's relevant location names provided a window into the river's extensive history. Fortunately, with the implementation of Beijing's old city preservation efforts, the river's significance was rediscovered and recognised.

Historical remnants, cultural monuments and profound culture are integral to any city. *Hutong*, a distinctive feature of Old Beijing, help preserve residents'



memories. According to *Beijing Municipal Master Plan (2016–2035)*, the restoration of cultural areas like the Sanli River and Caochang Hutong will provide leisure areas and cultural zones. In August 2016, an initiative began to rejuvenate the Sanli River in the eastern Qianmen area. Just eight months later, the river had been successfully restored, winding its way through residential neighbourhoods, breathing new life into the surroundings.

During the Sanli River's restoration, attention was given to enhancing the *hutong's* environment. Disorderly aerial

cables were organised or buried underground to improve aesthetics. Neglected *hutong* houses were repaired and renovated. Traditional grey bricks and stone slabs paved the roads, echoing the area's heritage. To increase local vegetation, Sanli River Park was built along the river. Centuries ago, the river was central to the region, with many residents along its banks. Today, the restored river and improved environment have revived the area's liveability. Bookshops and cafes now dot Caochang Hutong and surroundings.

During winter, Sanli River Park trans-

forms into a picturesque scene of snow and ice. Muscovy ducks can be seen nestled in the snow, gazing at visitors in a tranquil state. Mallards playfully frolic on the icy river, occasionally swimming in the unfrozen sections. In the chilly weather, a family of three strolls along the park's boardwalk. The child, wearing a tiger-head hat, energetically bounces while holding hands with both parents. This area seamlessly integrates history, culture, residences and the waterway, providing a multifaceted experience for all.

Fayuan Temple-centred Block



A Witness to the Revival of Xuannan Culture

Taiwanese writer Li Ao (1935–2018) penned a novel titled *The Fayuan Temple of Beijing*, depicting the endeavours of influential thinkers and reformers like Kang Youwei (1858–1927) and Liang Qichao (1873–1929) in revitalising the Chinese nation. Remarkably, Li crafted the temple's portrayal in the book solely through imagination, despite never having visited the temple himself.

Fayuan Temple stands as one of Beijing's oldest and most meticulously preserved temples, with its origins tracing back to the Tang Dynasty (AD 618–907) when it was initially known as Minzhong Temple. In 1733, it underwent a name change to become Fayuan Temple. The temple is inseparable from Xuannan culture, which thrived around Fayuan Temple. Xuannan encompassed the region to the south of Xuanwu Gate, both inside and outside Guang'an Gate, during the Qing Dynasty. This vibrant area attracted individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering a distinct regional culture. Xuannan culture was historically composed of three facets: imperial culture, shaped by Han officials who resided outside the imperial city under the "separation of Manchu and Han people" policy; literati culture, crafted by scholars who journeyed to Beijing for imperial

examinations; and folk culture, originating from the local populace.

The book *The Fayuan Temple of Beijing* vividly portrays how Kang Youwei and other visionaries frequently convened at the temple. Throughout history, this region, deeply shaped by Xuannan culture, served as a nurturing ground for numerous ambitious individuals. The nearby guildhalls accommodated countless pioneers and scholars who were resolute in their mission to reshape the destiny of the nation.

Fayuan Temple is renowned for being home to the city's enchanting lilac blooms. Each year, literati and scholars congregate there to admire the lilacs. The "Lilac Poem Gathering," a tradition dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties, continues to thrive when lilacs grace the temple with their springtime blossoms. During this event, poets and writers craft verses and prose, while visitors relish the lilac's beauty. Inhaling

the fragrance of lilacs, one feels transported to a meeting with ancient literati and scholars within the temple's serene surroundings.

To the east of Fayuan Temple, within Lanman Hutong, resides a kindergarten catering to Hui children, which was once known as Hunan Guildhall. The block centred around Fayuan Temple is home to a substantial Hui population. To the west of the temple lies Niujie Street, one of Beijing's most renowned Hui settlements. Xuannan has historically been a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups. As various minority communities converged here, religious culture flourished. The area boasts numerous temples and religious landmarks, including the Niujie Mosque, the pagoda of Tianning Temple and White Cloud Temple. Xuannan culture, a product of contributions from all local ethnic groups, is characterised by its inclusivity.

Adjacent to Fayuan Temple stands the China Islamic Seminary, a distinctive grey-white building adorned with multiple green onion domes, characteristic of Arabian architecture. Niujie Street, in close proximity, boasts a plethora of halal restaurants celebrated for their unique and delicious halal cuisine, making them a favoured choice among food enthusiasts.

Beijingers have a strong affinity for halal cuisine. Some jest that Beijing lacks delectable dishes, attributing this misconception to their unfamiliarity with the city's halal culinary treasures. To truly savour authentic halal fare, a visit to Niujie Street is imperative. Locals frequent this street daily to procure fresh beef and mutton, using these quality ingredients to prepare savoury sauced beef and instant-boiled mutton. In recent years, Niujie Street's halal snacks have gained widespread internet fame, often attracting long queues of eager patrons.

On an ordinary afternoon, many Hui people concluded one of the five daily religious services and streamed out into the bustling street and made their way to the nearby halal eateries. Inside Silu Yilan Hand-pulled Noodles Restaurant, an elderly Hui gentleman, sporting



a traditional white Muslim skullcap, sat across from his granddaughter. They ordered two bowls of savoury beef noodles, eager to satisfy their appetites. Nearby, an elderly Han man could not resist teasing the young girl, "Is this your grandfather?" The Hui man, donning his skullcap, playfully chimed in, "Call him grandpa." The girl, her hair styled in two neat plaits, simply lowered her head, remaining silent. The Han man, sporting a warm smile, remarked, "She does not know me." The timid girl managed to

crack a shy smile in response. In the cosy ambiance of restaurants lining Niujie Street, individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds often find themselves sharing tables, enjoying meals together, and engaging in friendly conversations.


For Beijingers, the Xuannan culture holds the essence of Beijing's cultural heritage. It forms the very fabric of everyday life, consisting of familiar and distinctive elements that resonate with all who call this city home. These elements encompass the annual lilac-themed

gatherings at Fayuan Temple, the captivating performances of traditional opera at the Beijing Tianqiao Performing Arts Center, the joyous sounds echoing from the kindergarten in Lanman Hutong, the lively and bustling scenes within local eateries and the delectable crispy crust beef cakes found on Niujie Street. Xuannan culture weaves together a tapestry of popularity, elegance and splendour, and it remains an inclusive and vibrant public culture that binds the people of Beijing together.

Wudaoying Hutong

Fusion of Traditional and Overseas Cultural Highlights

The blending of local and overseas cultures in Wudaoying Hutong has created a unique and harmonious atmosphere that captivates both locals and tourists.



In 2020, the band Candy Monster introduced a T-shirt to promote their latest song, "Women's Martial Art Team." The shirt featured a lyric from the song: "No matter where tomorrow is, let's fight for a dawn." Following its release, the T-shirt gained popularity within the Beijing music scene. It became a must-have item for music enthusiasts, singers and band members alike. Each shirt was adorned with various martial arts movements, reflecting the energetic and dynamic nature of the song, which contributed to its rapid rise in popularity.

Like other young bands, Candy Monster's early performances took place at School, a pub located in Wudaoying Hutong. School is renowned for its distinctive rock-and-roll ambiance, featuring a weathered front door adorned with electric guitars and basses. Inside, patrons are immediately drawn to its striking red and black walls. Upon closer inspection, the red wall

is adorned with a multitude of photographs featuring rock stars against black backgrounds. The bar counter consistently plays classic rock tunes, and it serves as a nightly stage for independent bands to showcase their talents.

Inside School, it's common to hear someone say, "Come, let's have a *sha*." In this context, "*sha*" refers to draining a small glass of a potent overseas alcoholic beverage, akin to what is known as "a shot" in English. Beijingers have transliterated the term "shot" into "*sha*," leading to the popular phrase in local pubs. This is just one example of the cultural blending between China and the West. In this pub, when an exhilarating performance unfolds, both Chinese and foreign patrons, whether sober or slightly inebriated, join in the revelry with activities like moshing and pogoing. This practice originates from the West, where fans often collectively jump up and down during rock concerts as a gesture of appreciation to the bands.

Wudaoying Hutong offers not only trendy pubs and shops but also preserves icons of traditional culture. Dating back to the Ming Dynasty, when the alley was part of Chongjiao Fang, a zone akin to Western city blocks, it was known as Wude Weiyong. Legends suggest that the alley housed the barracks

of city defenders. Today, this 600-metre-long *hutong* is home to King's Joy, a three-Michelin-starred restaurant renowned for high-end Chinese afternoon tea and vegetarian cuisine. It also hosts elegant new-Chinese-style clothing boutiques and stylish China chic jewellery stores. This alley beautifully integrates elements of traditional Chinese culture with international flair.

The exact timing of the introduction of overseas cultural elements in Wudaoying Hutong remains uncertain. However, the alleyway's advantageous geographical location and rich traditional cultural elements made it an attractive destination. In its early days, the *hutong* attracted expatriate investors who had a deep appreciation for Beijing's *hutong* culture. Over the years, some shops changed ownership multiple times, leading to the involvement of foreign investors. As a result, Wudaoying Hutong retains a diverse array of overseas cultural elements, adding to its unique charm.

Wudaoying is home to numerous vintage and jewellery shops, where shop assistants warmly greet customers, creating a comfortable shopping atmosphere. Many of these shops offer unique and interesting experiences. For instance, Delia International Second-hand Department Store, a vintage

shop, prominently displays vintage books at its entrance with a sign that reads, "If you don't want to purchase, don't touch," emphasising the value of these books. The shop features vintage clothing from various countries and is owned by a Taiwanese proprietor with a penchant for intellectual conversations. "I have run the shop for 14 years, and all the items here have been collected by us," the shop's owner said. "I once gave *Beijing Daily* an interview."

Wudaoying Hutong is home to foreign restaurants, adding a diverse culinary dimension to the area. Pebbles Courtyard stands out as one of the oldest Mexican restaurants in Beijing. Its unique interior design mimics a garage, complete with a pebble-covered floor, reflecting the owner's passion for motor rallies. Not far from Pebbles Courtyard is Saffron, acclaimed by many food enthusiasts as the best Spanish restaurant in the

capital city. This restaurant, with over a decade of history, is renowned for its authentic seafood rice, which keeps regular customers coming back for more. One satisfied diner shared, "Saffron is like an old friend to me. When I started my career, the prices seemed high, and I dreamed of a time when I wouldn't have to worry about the cost. After over a decade, I've realised that dream, and the restaurant's dishes remain as delicious as ever."



Adorable Creatures in Hutong

Translated by Li Shasha Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi
Photo by Jiang Litian

In my view, Beijing's *hutong*, the traditional alleyways of the city, are similar to a zoo. The city's residents have a penchant for keeping a variety of animals, ranging from cats and dogs to crickets. In the past, when courtyards in *hutong* were more spacious, people even raised pigs, chickens and ducks. Cats and dogs were not commonly sold in Beijing; instead, they were exchanged as gifts among friends and relatives. Selling one's cats and dogs was often seen as a sign of financial hardship. Due to cultural influences from ethnic groups like the Manchu and Mongolian, many Beijing residents refrain from consuming dog meat. Even those who followed Buddhism preferred to remove flies or mosquitoes from their homes rather than causing harm to them.

In my *hutong* neighbourhood, after a refreshing rainfall, snails make their appearance from the base of the walls. Inchworms, often humorously referred to as "hanging ghosts," gracefully sway from tree branches, suspended by their elongated silk threads. Approach a tree trunk, and one might witness a recently transformed cicada, known as a "seasonal bird," gracefully taking flight, leaving behind its discarded exoskeleton as a testament to its growth. Centipedes and woodlice are common inhabitants of our homes. During my childhood, I took delight in flipping over woodlice with their rounded heads, meticulously counting their legs and antennae while curiously peering into their eyes. My father once mentioned that in his youth, he would catch and sell them to traditional Chinese medicine shops for a modest five fen (0.05 yuan) each.

In *hutong* communities, it is not uncommon for cats, dogs, chickens, ducks and

geese to be considered part of the extended family. One of my neighbours has a special companion, a goose, which receives its daily morning walk under attentive care of its owner. This goose, a plump and snow-white fellow, follows its owner closely, its vigilant eyes scanning its surroundings. At times, when the owner quickens her pace, the goose spreads its wings and waddles from side to side, bearing a charming resemblance to a small penguin. Along the way, other neighbours exchange greetings with this extraordinary goose, which acknowledges them with a knowing gaze, displaying neither fear nor trepidation but maintaining a watchful stance. This particular goose is a male, distinguished by its size, larger than the average female geese. Typically, a male goose forms a small group with four or five female geese. In this dynamic, the male goose assumes a leadership role, ensuring that the female geese are given priority during meals.

In our *hutong*, the male goose has





not have its female companions, but has a unique role, queuing on behalf of its owner. Whenever the owner grows weary of waiting in line to purchase sugar-roasted chestnuts, she entrusts this task to the goose while she takes a well-deserved break. One day, this impatient goose happened upon a few lingering strands of grass stubbornly growing between the cracks of the square brick pathway. Without regard for its owner's presence, the goose bent its neck and began pecking at the grass with its broad beak, engrossed in this newfound culinary discovery. Observing this audacious behaviour, the owner approached the goose, gently addressing it with the words, "Big goose, big goose," in an attempt to remind it of its queue duties. In response, the goose merely lowered its head and emitted a defiant honk, unabashedly committed to its newfound feast, refusing to comply with the owner's instructions.

The white goose scene captures the daytime essence, while a midnight scenario unfolds around an elderly man and his ageing dog in the neighbourhood. The man, recognisable by his hunched back and spectacles, is a familiar figure. His loyal companion, the

dog, surpasses him in age, boasting an estimated 18 years, equivalent to 90 in human years. Each day, the old man embarks on a slow-paced walk with his diminutive steps, mirroring the even smaller strides of his dog. Their progress inches forward, and the man carries a small cart for vegetable shopping. One evening, returning home late, I witnessed the old dog's inability to continue walking, presenting the old man with the challenging task of assisting it onto a low step. With care, he repositioned the cart beside the step, allowing the dog to crawl onto it gradually. Despite the man's slender frame, his dog bore a plump physique, resembling a hefty roll of lamb. The dog panted, tongue protruding, displaying numerous wrinkles and deep nasolabial folds, and only a few teeth remained. It attempted to bark or glare fiercely, but its voice grew hoarse, and it appeared listless. The old man urged the dog to descend from the step quickly, but the dog struggled to move with haste. After a while, the plump creature managed to half-crawl and half-roll itself down onto the cart. Greetings were exchanged with me, and the elderly man pushed his cherished dog back home.

Even in the midst of a winter midnight, when the earth is veiled in a snowy quilt, the elderly man remains unwavering in his commitment to walk his dog. Draped in his coat, he is resolute in ensuring his furry companion, also adorned in a small jacket, gets its daily exercise. Despite his hunched back, the old man takes pride in his strength, underlining the significance of their daily routine. He expresses concern that their leisurely pace might impede the bustling daytime traffic. His finger extends towards the dog, leaving room for interpretation as to whether he is alluding to himself or his canine companion as the potential hindrance.

Many a time, bathed in the mesmerising hues of the setting sun and beneath the canopy of fiery clouds,



amid the soft radiance of streetlights, and serenaded by the melodic calls of cuckoos and the rhythmic swish of street cleaners' brooms, I have been privileged to witness the heart-warming spectacle of the elderly man and his devoted canine companion. Their existence instils in me a yearning to continue to witness their unbreakable bond. In their midst, I have come to fathom that we, as humans, are but insignificant beings in the vast tapestry of the *hutong*.





Unforgettable Beijing

Translated by Li Shasha Edited by Brad Green, Anne Ruisi Photo by Wu Chaoying

When I walk in Beijing now, I often think of the then city.

Six decades ago, our family owned a bicycle and a petite bamboo pram. The bicycle, often referred to as “big 28” because of its 28-inch wheels, served as my father’s means of transportation for commuting between our residence and his workplace. He was employed at the terminus of the Beijing subway in Gucheng, Shijingshan District, situated in the western segment of Chang’an Avenue, which is regarded as the city’s primary thoroughfare.

Our home was located near the terminus of tram no. 113 in Dabeyao, just a short distance from the eastern stretch of Chang’an Avenue. Rain or shine, my mother would accompany me and my siblings to welcome my father back home as we gathered in front of the First Machine Tool Factory, adjacent to the avenue. While waiting, I would push my younger brother in the small bamboo pram, and other family members would join us. Together, we would gaze westward and engage in a counting game, keeping track of the passing bicycles. It was not uncommon for us to tally over 1,000 bicycles before finally spotting my father. This counting activity proved beneficial for enhancing my siblings’ maths skills.

Instead of eagerly awaiting my father’s arrival, it was, in fact, his bicycle’s appearance that I anticipated. The moment he rode up to us, I would pass the small bamboo pram to my mother and enthusiastically lay claim to my father’s bicycle. Stepping onto one of its pedals, I would glide along, relishing

the pure joy of riding it, cherishing it like a precious treasure. Whenever my father’s bicycle became dirty, I would find a reason to take my younger siblings to Erzha (No. 2 Water Gate) to clean it.

Erzha was the second of the five water gates located along the Tonghui River, a section of the Grand Canal. During the summer, the riverbanks would flourish with dense shrubs and trees. On many occasions, we would remove my younger brother from his pram and playfully pretend to hide him among the grasses, teasing him by saying, “You’ve been abandoned.” This would often frighten him, prompting loud cries until we comforted him by catching dragonflies.

An elderly gentleman could often be spotted rowing a small wooden boat on the river, accompanied by an osprey. He would deftly enlist the bird’s assistance in catching fish, while we stood on the shore, observing and tallying the fish he reeled in. This offered another opportunity for my younger siblings to hone their counting skills. On misty days following rain, the fisherman on the river resembled a figure from traditional Chinese paintings, evoking a sense of timelessness. One of the most captivating sights was the reed flowers in autumn. We would gather them and bring them home, placing them in a coal bucket. The contrast between the jet-black coal and the white reeds was truly striking. Our method of catching fish at the river’s No. 2 Water Gate was simple. My father would secure a rope to the mouth of a tin can, load it with bait and



submerge it in the river. This would attract small fish and river shrimp. During my childhood, this section of the river was one of the most breath-taking natural landscapes I had ever encountered in the city. I was familiar with a poem from the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) that vividly depicted the scenery around the No. 2 Water Gate, likening it to the stunning vistas of the southern Yangtze River region. During the summer, we would wholeheartedly revel in these moments, returning home only when the night echoed with the harmonious chorus of frogs. Before heading home, we would diligently clean the bicycle and pram.

The bicycle also served as a means of family transportation for sightseeing. Occasionally, when my father had to work on holidays, he would take one of us along to his workplace. I would sit on the rear rack of the bicycle, which my mother had covered with a small cushion she had sewn. Despite the cushion, my bottom would still ache for a considerable amount of time after dismounting the bicycle. Our journey would take us from the city's eastern section to its western section, following Chang'an Avenue via Nanchizi, Tian'anmen Square, Xinhua Gate, Xidan and Gongzhufen.

This full-day excursion allowed me to explore the entire avenue and savour the sights along the way.

The small bamboo pram served a significant purpose beyond transportation. It was employed for moving heavy items like coal for heating and vegetables for winter storage. The bicycle, with its two wheels, and the small bamboo stroller, with its four wheels, symbolised the hopes and dreams of our family of six. These essential tools supported our daily lives and embodied our aspirations. After the completion of Beijing subway Line 1, we started meeting our father at a nearby subway station.

As a native of Beijing, I find myself delighted by one iteration of the city for its remarkable changes and improvements over the span of 60 years. Yet, another version of Beijing continues to reside in my heart, evoking cherished memories brimming with warmth and nostalgia.



Beneath the Red Banner Comes Back on Stage



On January 19, the renowned drama *Beneath the Red Banner* graced the stage once more at the Capital Theatre. This captivating production is scheduled to play to audiences until February 13, aligning with the festive celebrations of the Year of the Dragon in 2024.

This drama, directed by Feng Yuanzheng and Yan Rui, boasts a stellar cast that includes Pu Cunxin and Yang Lixin. *Beneath the Red Banner* originally sprang from a 1962 novel by Lao She (1899–1966). Playwright Li Longyun (1948–2012), renowned for his contri-

butions to the theatre and works like *Xiaojing Hutong*, took on the task of adapting and continuing the narrative, ultimately crafting a comprehensive theatrical script.

The drama is comprised of nine main scenes, and owing to the intricate scene changes, the creative team integrated elements of traditional Beijing architecture. This work draws a parallel between the tumultuous late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) and the comfort-seeking natives of Beijing during that era.

Crossroads Reappears on the Capital City's Stage

From February 3 to 7, the National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) will present the drama *Crossroads*. This production boasts Huang Ying and Xu Weixin as the playwrights, with Huang also assuming the role of its director. The cast of the drama is composed of NCPA performers.

This production is an adaptation of the acclaimed black-and-white film of the same name, which was directed by Shen Xiling (1904–1940) in 1937. Serving as the theatrical rendition of the film, its primary goal is to pay homage to its original source. The creative team places significant emphasis on mirroring

reality, capturing the essence of youth and fostering a sense of positive energy through their choice of themes and content. *Crossroads* represents another noteworthy masterpiece exclusively tailored for NCPA performers, building upon the triumphs of previous productions, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Looking West to Chang'an*.

Since its premiere in 2020, *Crossroads* has received acclaim from various segments of society and has consistently been a source of inspiration for the personal development of young individuals during its university tour.



Embarking on a Winter Fairy Tale Journey



The Beijing Performing Arts Centre has quickly become a popular destination since its recent opening. On January 27 and 28, audiences can look forward to a special collaboration between the Beijing Acrobatic Troupe and Xiaobudian Dashijie (Little Dot • Big Vision), as they present *Time Runner*. This acrobatic performance promises to provide children with delightful surprises.

This captivating performance

seamlessly combines silk suspension, hoop diving and contortion, taking the audience on an adventurous journey. The acrobatics are not just for show; they are an integral part of the plot. By blending entertaining stories with unique stage forms, this production delves into the realm of time from ancient Chinese mythology, with the goal of nurturing an interest in traditional Chinese culture among the city's youth.



Presenting a Concert Themed *Spring Festival Overture*

The highly anticipated *Spring Festival Overture* is poised to grace the stage of the Beijing Concert Hall on February 3.

In this extraordinary concert, the Beijing Union Symphony, under the baton of conductor Fan Tao, endeavours to immerse the audience in the profound joy and celebratory spirit embedded within this iconic composition. The event promises to be a veritable feast for classical music enthusiasts, featur-

ing an exquisite selection of globally acclaimed masterpieces, including the evocative *Voices of Spring* and the enchanting *Blue Danube*. Moreover, the concert will also spotlight beloved domestic classics such as the *White Haired Girl Suite* and the *Spring Festival Overture*. With a diverse range of melodies, this performance offers a unique opportunity to revel in the splendour of classical music from around the world.

Exploring European Modern Art in the 20th Century

Modern Time: Masterpieces from the Collection of Museum Berggruen/Nationalgalerie Berlin is currently being exhibited at the UCCA Centre for Contemporary Art, attracting art enthusiasts from across the city.

Following its successful debut at UCCA Edge in Shanghai, the exhibition features nearly 100 representative works by 6 influential modern art masters of the 20th century, including Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) and Paul Cézanne (1839–1906). By showcasing these works in chronological order and presenting various forms of expression, including Cubism and Surrealism, the exhibition

offers a captivating exploration of the development of European modern art in the 20th century.

The event presents a collection of exquisite artworks spanning various mediums, from paintings to sculptures and intricate paper cuttings, being displayed together in China for the first time. As the latest stop on the International Tour of the Museum Berggruen/Nationalgalerie Berlin's collection, this exhibition provides a unique opportunity for viewers to engage in a visual dialogue with the works of six illustrious artists across different periods. The exhibition will conclude on February 25.



Showing Fine Glassware Collections

Until March 10, residents of the capital city have the exceptional chance to marvel at the exquisite glass masterpieces the Palace Museum houses. This exhibition is a collaborative effort between the Guardian Art Centre and the Palace Museum, representing the fifth partnership between these institutions.

This exhibition offers an extensive array of ancient Chinese and foreign glass artefacts spanning from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Drawing upon the wealth of the Palace Museum's collection and incorporating the latest research findings, it presents a compre-

hensive exploration of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) glassware. Through collaboration with scholars from across the globe, the exhibition selected 122 culturally significant relics, organised to provide a comprehensive perspective on the traditional and innovative facets of Qing glassware, encompassing considerations of colour, shape, decoration, craftsmanship and imperial court usage. This exhibition offers an opportunity for visitors to compare Chinese and Western glass craftsmanship and to trace the introduction and evolution of glass technologies.





天樂園
高相
LUX SHINE

