

Understand Běijīng

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Having emerged as a true world city in a dizzyingly short space of time, Běijīng now finds itself having to deal with the consequences of rapid development.

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From the Mongol hordes to decadent dynasties and revolutionary fervour, the history of Běijīng couldn't be more dramatic.

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The living, breathing heart of Běijīng and almost as old as the city itself.

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A buzzing contemporary arts scene, grungy live music, a wealth of literature and Peking opera too.

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Imperial palaces, socialist realist behemoths and soaring new buildings combine in eye-popping splendour.

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From Lao-Tzu's *dào* (the way) to communist sloganeering, via the filial piety of Confucianism, Beijingers have always had plenty to get their heads around.

Běijīng Today

Běijīng has been transformed over the past 20 years. Unprecedented investment and massive population growth has helped fuel breakneck development. In terms of wealth and opportunities, Beijingers have never had it so good, but rapid transformation has come at a cost. Transport systems are full to bursting, pollution levels are at an all-time high, and the very fabric of traditional society is being threatened as age-old *hútòng* (narrow lanes) districts continue to make way for more modern alternatives.

Best on Film

Beijing Bicycle (2001) Follows a young and hapless Běijīng courier on the trail of his stolen mountain bike.

Lost in Beijing (2007) Close-to-the-bone, modern-day tale of a ménage-a-quatre. Banned in China.

The Last Emperor (1987) Bernardo Bertolucci's multi-Oscar-winning epic, charting the life of Puyi and the disintegration of dynastic China.

The Gate of Heavenly Peace (1995) Moving three-hour documentary that uses original footage from the six weeks preceding the 1989 Tiān'ānmén Square crackdown.

Best in Print

The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited (Louisa Lim; 2014) Engaging analyses of the social impact of the Tiān'ānmén crackdown.

Midnight in Peking (Paul French; 2012) Gripping account of the mystery surrounding the brutal murder in 1937 of Englishwoman Pamela Werner.

Rickshaw Boy (Lao She, translated by Shi Xiqiong; 1981) A masterpiece by one of Běijīng's most beloved writers about a rickshaw-puller living in early-20th-century Běijīng.

Beijing Coma (Ma Jian; 2008) Novel revolving around the democracy protests of 1989 and the political coma that ensues.

Demolition & Gentrification

Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), the so-called 'father of modern Chinese architecture', once described Běijīng as an 'unparalleled masterpiece of city planning'. Běijīng – the last of China's imperial capitals – functioned as the moral and spiritual centre of the entire country; a cosmic focal point where the 'Son of Heaven' (the emperor) mediated between earthly and heavenly realms. Due to the city's divine nature, Chinese leaders throughout history paid special attention to the design of their capital. Even the slightest change to the configuration of the imperial city was regarded as an affront to tradition and thus to the established world order.

How times have changed. Today, shimmering superstructures, designed as free-standing landmarks, spring up around the city like individual monuments of modernity, jeopardising the forces of architectural yin and yang that once harmonised the whole structure of the city. Often making way for them are the older, more rundown neighbourhoods found in the city's ancient *hútòng*. The most recent high-profile example is the *hútòng* housing that was demolished to make way for the dazzling Galaxy Soho building.

Historic buildings, including *sìhéyuàn* (四合院; traditional courtyard houses), are often protected, and quite rightly so, but it's the *dàzāyuàn* (大杂院; densified courtyard compounds with many families living together) that continue to be threatened, either by being demolished to make way for modern superstructures, or by having their essence as residential communities squeezed out of them by large-scale gentrification projects.

Qiánmén, until recently the largest uninterrupted *hútòng* block in Běijīng, was demolished and rebuilt as a Qīng-style shopping and residential district, just before the 2008 Olympics. Next up for 'renovation' is the