

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 Laotzu'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 have fuelled breakneck development. In terms of wealth and opportunities, Beijingers have never had it so good, but rapid change 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 alleyway) districts continue to make way for more modern alternatives.

Best on Film

In the Heat of the Sun (1994) Dreamlike, evocative tale of Běijīng youth running wild during the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s.

Lost in Beijing (2007) Raw and explicit, modern-day tale of a ménage à quatre involving a young woman, her boss, her husband and her boss's wife. Banned in China.

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

Mr Six (2015) An ageing gangster struggles to adapt to modern Běijīng as he settles his son's debts.

Best in Print

The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited (Louisa Lim; 2014) The social impact of the Tian'anmén crackdown, told through eyewitness accounts.

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

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

Maintaining Harmony

Inevitably, nonstop development brings increased pollution. The condition of the region's soil and water causes much concern to locals (Beijingers never drink their tap water), but perhaps most depressing is the sustained levels of the city's now infamous smog.

Air pollution counts hit record levels in January 2013, a month dubbed 'Airlpocalypse' by the world's media. Expatriates began leaving in droves, but Beijingers are equally unimpressed with the often dire situation – it is a major topic of conversation, as well as complaints to local authorities. Any repeat visitor to the city will notice a marked rise in the number of people wearing face masks.

The smog isn't continual – Běijīng still experiences days of wonderfully clear blue skies – but worryingly, the smog seems to be increasing rather than diminishing.

Continued Economic Growth

The authorities can be commended for their continued investment in an increasingly impressive public transport system. Běijīng has an extensive fleet of natural-gas-powered and electric-powered buses, and its subway system is now the world's second-largest (behind Shànghǎi) and is still expanding, with another 12 lines set to open by 2021. Plans for a monorail system in the eastern outskirts of the city have also been mooted, although protests from local residents have seen the scheme shelved for now; a rare case of people power triumphing over the state in China.

Demolition & Gentrification

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