



Beijing

ebook Edition

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Damian Harper

Damian first arrived in Běijīng in 1992 via a degree in Chinese from London's School of Oriental African Studies. Since then he has shacked up in a *sìhéyuàn* (courtyard house), worked as a Beijing Radio presenter, lived in Shànghǎi, wrestled with the Cantonese dialect in Hong Kong, chewed the fat with Shaolin monks and knocked back bags of beer in Qīngdǎo. Married to an outstanding Shāndōng lass, Damian has been authoring for Lonely Planet for over 12 years, exploring China with a constant swarm of deadlines (*Beijing, China, China's Southwest, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Lonely Planet's Best in Travel*) in pursuit.

DAMIAN'S TOP BĚIJĪNG DAY

I like to rise early to join the shuffling queue for *yóutiáo* (deep-fried dough stick) to chew en route to practising several forms of *tàijíquán* (taichi) in the park. The pulse-quickening Yang-style long form (108 moves) takes around 20 minutes to perform. For fresh coffee afterwards, I'll make my way to Nanluogu Xiang after picking up a copy of 参考消息 (*Reference News*), one of the few Chinese-language newspapers worth reading. Fortified by caffeine I'll disappear into the city's *hútòng* (alleyways), which is *the* best way to rummage through Běijīng's past. I'll always find something extraordinary buried away here whether I'm deliberately exploring or just idly meandering. I'll certainly go temple hunting in the *hútòng*, as some temples – such as Huguo Temple in Xīchéng district – are well disguised, their disparate halls divided up among live-in residents or converted for other functions. Others, such as Zhihua Temple ([Click here](#)), are authentic and almost neglected. To catch up with currents in Chinese art, I'll bookmark the 798 Art District ([Click here](#)) but for hiking I'll opt for Bādàchù ([Click here](#)) or Fragrant Hills Park ([Click here](#)). In fact in spring or autumn, I may devote the entire day to visiting Jiankou Great Wall ([Click here](#)) for absolute tranquillity and premier views of the brick bastion. Tiananmen Square ([Click here](#)) at twilight is a magical spot to stop if I've time, and I'll always visit the Forbidden City

beforehand – you can never explore the palace enough. I'll have dinner with friends in the Hòuhai area before sinking late-night drinks in Nanluogu Xiang again and chatting till the witching hour and beyond.

Contributing Author

DAVID EIMER

David made his first trip to China in 1988, when both Westerners and cars were in short supply. After graduating with a law degree from University College London, he abandoned the idea of becoming a barrister for a career as a freelance journalist. That took him from London to LA for five years, where he wrote for a variety of newspapers and magazines. Back in London, David began to be intrigued by the world's increasing focus on China. Returning there for the first time in 14 years, he found a country that had changed beyond almost all recognition. He moved to Běijīng in early 2005, where he contributes to the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *South China Morning Post*. He co-wrote the previous editions of *Beijing* and *Shanghai* for Lonely Planet, as well as working on the last edition of the *China* guide.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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GETTING STARTED

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From backpacking expeditions to luxury stopovers and every point in between, Běijīng cater to each and every budget. First you'll need a visa ([Click here](#)), and you'll also need to know when to go (below) and what weather to expect. Běijīng doesn't do the English language at all well (this is no Thailand or Malaysia), so you'll need to prepare for excruciating lingo problems – consult the Language chapter ([Click here](#)) at the back of the book and the language section in the Background chapter ([Click here](#)). We have put a considerable amount of written Chinese in this book. When in doubt, showing the Chinese characters to local passers-by is far more immediate than trying to pronounce Chinese (unless you can speak the language). Try to allow time to explore China outside Běijīng; engineering an itinerary is an excellent idea. If you plan on visiting Tibet, check on any travel restrictions. For essentials, you should be able to find most of what you need in Běijīng, but it's advisable to take along any prescription medicines and cannot-live-without reading material. Last but not least, Běijīng is often surprising and endlessly fascinating – so don't forget to pack a sense of adventure!

WHEN TO GO

‘Climate is what you expect; weather is what you get.’

Robert A Heinle

Climate-wise, autumn (September and October) is Běijīng's finest, but shortest, season. Skies are blue, the weather is cooling down and the mad summer rush has exhausted itself, so fewer visitors are in town. Locals muse that this is the season of *'tiāngāo qìshuāng'*, literally 'high skies and the air is fresh', with trademark blue skies and crisp air. Arid spring (March t

April/May) can be pleasant, apart from the scouring sandstorms (see the Dust Devil [boxed text](#)) gusting in from Inner Mongolia, and the ubiquitous static electricity discharging everywhere. Spring also sees the snow-like *liǔxù* (willow catkins) wafting through the Běijīng air. Summer (May to August) is a blistering, drawn-out event, but it's also the peak tourist season. From May onwards the mercury can surge above 30°C, reaching over 40°C in midsummer; heavy rainstorms appear late in the season. Face-numbing winter (November to February/March) sees far fewer tourists in town, and some hotels may offer substantial discounts – but it's glacial outside (dipping as low as -20°C) and the northern winds cut like a knife through bean curd. Heating in public buildings is officially turned on only in mid-November, no matter how cold it gets. Air pollution can be very harsh in both summer and winter (see [Click here](#)).

Avoid visiting the capital during the first week of October and the first three days of March ([Click here](#)), as the entire nation is on holiday – rooms are in short (and expensive) supply and attractions are swamped. Be warned that the Spring Festival (below) is China's biggest holiday and transport outside Běijīng can be hellish; many people take a week off work. But it can also be a great time to see the Chinese celebrating with all stops out – be sure to book your room in advance.

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FESTIVALS & EVENTS

China follows both the *yánglì* (Gregorian) and the *yīnlì* (lunar) calendars. Traditional Chinese festivals are calculated according to the lunar calendar and fall on different days each year according to the Gregorian calendar. The three huge holiday periods begin with the Spring Festival, on 1 May and 1 October, respectively.

January & February

WESTERN NEW YEAR 1 Jan

元旦 Yuándàn

The Spring Festival is China's big New Year's bash, but the Western New Year is also wildly celebrated throughout town.

SPRING FESTIVAL 14 Feb 2010 & 3 Feb 2011

春节 Chūn Jié

As big in China as Christmas in the West, the family-oriented Spring Festival celebrates the arrival of the new lunar New Year. The festival commences on the first day of the first month in the lunar calendar, which usually falls sometime between late January and mid-February, ushering in one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. The long build-up to the festival is an explosion of colour, with *chūnlián* (spring couplets) pasted on door posts, door gods brightening up *hútòng* (alleyways) and shops glistening with red and gold decorations. Work colleagues and relatives present each other with red envelopes of *hóngbāo* (money), the streets ring with cries of ‘*gōngxǐ fācái*’ (‘congratulations – make money’). At midnight of the New Year a long cavalcade of fireworks illuminates the sky. The **White Cloud Temple** ([Click here](#)), the **Lama Temple** ([Click here](#)) and other temples in Běijīng stage entertaining *miàohuì* (temple fairs). Celebrations are also held in parks, such as **Ditan Park** ([Click here](#)).

VALENTINE’S DAY 14 Feb

情人节 Qíng rén Jié

China’s traditional festival for lovers (the seventh day of the seventh lunar month) simply doesn’t attract the same kind of dewy-eyed fascination. Jewellery stores are busy with white collar suits blowing a month’s salary on rings, while flower shops do a roaring trade in roses (in bunches of eleven, symbolising loyalty). If eating out, book early or make do with a takeaway. With fortuitous synchronicity, Valentine’s Day in 2010 exactly coincides with the first day of the Spring Festival (so book that table *months* ahead).

LANTERN FESTIVAL 28 Feb 2010 & 17 Feb 2011

元宵节 Yuánxiāo Jié

Celebrated two weeks after the first day of the Spring Festival, this family-oriented festival is not a public holiday, but can be a very colourful time to visit Běijīng. The Chinese devour gorgeous *yuánxiāo* (glutinous rice dumplings with soft, sweet fillings) while evening fireworks shows explode over town.

March & April

INTERNATIONAL LITERARY FESTIVAL Mar

国际文学节 Guójì Wénxué Jié

This excellent festival sees writers, readers and bibliophiles convening at the fabulous **Bookworm** ([Click here](#)) – where else? – for a two-week bonanza of readings and discussions. Hosting a gaggle of prize-winning international authors and local writers, the event has been going strong since 2006. The festival sells out quickly so bookmark it early for tickets: see www.chinabookworm.com for details.

GUANYIN'S BIRTHDAY 3 Apr 2010 & 23 Mar 2011

观世音生日 Guānshìyīn Shēngrì

Held on the 19th day of the second moon, the birthday of Guanyin, the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, is a fine time to visit Buddhist temples. Dedicated to the goddess, Puning Temple ([Click here](#)) in Chéngdé province holds suitably big celebrations.

TOMB SWEEPING DAY 5 Apr (4 Apr in leap years)

清明节 Qīngmíng Jié

A day for worshipping ancestors, the festival falls near the date of Easter. People visit and clean the graves (*sāomù*) of their departed relatives, placing flowers on tombs and burning ghost money for the departed. There may be increased vigilance in Tiananmen Square during the festival, as public displays of mourning for the dead of 4 June 1989 remain sensitive. The festival has now become an official public holiday.

May

MAY DAY 1 May

五一 Wūyī

May Day kicks off a much-needed three-day national holiday for Chinese, who swamp tourist sights the length and breadth of the nation.

GREAT WALL MARATHON May

长城马拉松 Chángchéng Mǎlāsōng

The hike up Sīmǎtái is like a walk to the local shops compared to the thigh-juddering, knee-wrecking agony of this main and half marathon. See www.great-wall-marathon.com.

ADVANCE PLANNING

Scroll through some of Běijīng's top websites ([Click here](#)) and scope government

travel-health websites ([Click here](#)). Check whether your trip coincides with popular festivals or clashes with the big Chinese holiday periods (opposite). Make sure your passport and visa are in order ([Click here](#)). Check that your vaccinations are up-to-date and make a start at learning some Mandarin. If you're going to Běijīng on business, make sure you've got some business cards.

Give some thought to possible excursions ([Click here](#)) outside of town. Scout around for good hotel deals and make a room reservation. On the day before you leave, reconfirm your flight (and cancel the milk).

September

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL 22 Sep 2010 & 12 Sep 2011

中秋节 Zhōngqiū Jié

Also known as the Moon Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival is marked by eating tasty *yuèbǐn* (moon cakes), gazing at the full moon and gathering together with relatives for family reunions. It is also a traditional holiday for lovers. It takes place on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month.

October & November

NATIONAL DAY 1 Oct

国庆节 Guóqìng Jié

Crowds flock to Tiananmen Square for a huge party, followed by a massive week-long national holiday where the Chinese blow their hard-earned savings on travelling and enjoying themselves in what is known as Golden Week.

BEIJING MUSIC FESTIVAL Oct & Nov

圣诞节 Běijīng Guójì Yīnyuè Jié

Usually staged around October and November, this classical-music festival (www.bmf.org.cn) sees foreign orchestras and musicians coming to town for a five-week range of musical events.

December

CHRISTMAS DAY 25 Dec

Not an official Chinese festival perhaps, but the birthday of baby Jesus is a major milestone on the commercial calendar, when Běijīng's big shopping zones sparkle with decorations and glisten with snow. Yuletide is celebrated more by expats and young Chinese than by more elderly locals.

COSTS & MONEY

Běijīng is no longer cheap. In the good-old, bad-old communist days (up to around 15 years ago), you could have survived in town on a pittance and lived like a lord; nowadays you can wince when forking out Y45 for a latte or Y50 for a bowl of noodles at Capital Airport.

BĚIJĪNG'S ECONOMIC STATS

GDP US\$151 billion (2008)

Per capita GDP US\$9000 (2008)

Per capita income US\$1573 (2008)

Expenditure on real estate US\$25.77 billion (2008)

Hotels are the biggest expense, but food and transport can quickly add up, too. Dorm beds start at around Y35 a night, but you will probably pay at least around Y200 for a double room. The underground system is very good value indeed (Y2 flat fee) and taxis are reasonable; hiring a bike is also cheap. Eating at street stalls and small hole-in-the-wall restaurants is cost-effective, and you can eat this way for around Y40 per day or less.

Bank on spending from around Y500 a day for midrange comfort (accommodation, dining and sightseeing). This figure can rapidly expand depending on where you choose to eat and sleep. Further up the spectrum, five-star hotel rooms can cost over Y1500 a night and stylish restaurant meals can cost from Y150.

Entertainment is no longer cheap. Beer bought from corner shops is cheaper than the equivalent size of bottled water, however, costing around Y2.5 for a bottle of Beijing Yanjing Beer. Bars are far pricier, with small bottles of Tsingtao retailing for around Y15 to Y25 (although we have listed some budget-bracket watering holes); imported beers cost much

more. Unlike in countries such as the UK, where prices for cigarettes are by and large the same, there is great variation in Chinese cigarette prices (Y3 to Y70 per pack). Cinema ticket prices are similar to those in the West, so most locals buy pirate DVDs instead, which cost between Y5 and Y10.

HOW MUCH?

Bāozi (steamed meat buns) from street stall Y3

Bus ticket Y1

Metro ticket Y2

Hour in internet cafe Y2-4

Large bottle of Yanjing Beer from a shop Y2.50

Local SIM card Y100

Lamb kebab from Y1

Chinese-language newspaper Y0.50

0.5L bottle of mineral water Y2

Taxi rate (for first 3km) Y10

Great Wall cotton T-shirt from Y15

BEST BLOGS

Beijing Boyce (www.beijingboyce.com) Ins-and-outs of Běijīng's bar and club scene with an avalanche of detail.

Bezdomny ex patria (<http://wangbo.blogtown.co.nz>) 'Ramblings of an expat Kiwi living in one small corner of Beijing'; on learning Chinese and all things Běijīng.

China Blog List (www.chinabloglist.org) A list of China-related blogs.

Danwei (www.danwei.org) Resourceful reflections on Chinese media, advertising and urban life; translations into English from Chinese media.

Pomfret's China

(<http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/postglobal/pomfretschina>) 'A Foreign Devil's take on the Middle Kingdom' by the former *Washington Post* Běijīng

bureau chief.

Quirky Beijing (www.quirkybeijing.com) Does what it says on the packet.

The China Blog (<http://china.blogs.time.com>) Articles and observations from *Time* magazine's China correspondents.

Zhongnanhai Blog (www.zhongnanhaiblog.com) News, opinion, analysis and articles on China from contributors living in China.

Be extra vigilant against being lured to tea houses or art galleries in tourist areas ([Click here](#)). We have read endless tales of travellers being duped of their entire holiday budgets by extortionate tea houses. Remember, as a foreigner you can be preyed upon and targeted for your hard-earned cash. There's little point in pinching your pennies while shopping only to be conned big time elsewhere.

Běijīng is one of those wonderful cities where tipping is not the norm. This applies throughout China. Midrange restaurants and above have closed the gap with a service charge (*fúwùfèi*), however, so there is no need to indulge them with a tip. Porters at upmarket hotels will, of course, expect a tip. Taxi drivers certainly do not expect a tip and will often refuse.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Beijinger (www.thebeijinger.com) The low-down on Běijīng entertainment.

Beijingpage (www.beijingpage.com) Informative online directory with reams of practical info on the city.

CTrip (www.english.ctrip.com) Discounted hotels and ticketing; recommended.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Useful summaries on travelling through China, plus tips from travellers on the Thorn Tree travel forum.

Wild Wall (www.wildwall.com) Great Wall expert William Lindesay's informative website on the crumbling fortification.

Zhongwen (www.zhongwen.com) Handy primer for students of written Chinese.

SUSTAINABLE BĚIJĪNG

From the city's growing water woes and encroaching desertification to caustic atmospheric

pollution and a long history of environmental neglect, Běijīng is hardly a paragon of
environmental sustainability. However, recent initiatives (such as the banning of free plastic
grocery bags) are having an effect, and China is a world leader in harnessing solar energy.
You can help to lessen the human impact on the environment by buying your own reusable
chopsticks, avoiding shark's fin soup (if it's genuine) and getting around town as much as you
can by bicycle.

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HISTORY

THE RECENT PAST

The 2008 Olympic Games marked Běijīng's modern coming-of-age and the climax of China's greatest urban program since the 14th century. After former president Jiang Zemin launched the project in 1998, China spent at least US\$200 billion, not counting more than US\$40 billion specifically for the 2008 Summer Olympic Games. By lavishing three times the amount Athens spent on hosting the 2004 games, the 2008 games were the costliest in history. Běijīng began ticking the requisite first-world boxes at blinding speed: a well-developed and growing underground network, the world's largest airport terminal, sparkling skyscrapers, a surging

immigrant population, world-class sports facilities, traffic gridlock and a stupefying haze.

The Olympic Games themselves went swimmingly (particularly for Michael Phelps who netted eight gold medals) as China topped the medals table with commendable professionalism. The opening ceremony – choreographed masterfully by Zhang Yimou – drew gasps of amazement from across the globe and Běijīng bathed in the bright glow of international admiration. Fears of a polluted Olympics were blown away as scads of cars were forced off the road and further Draconian measures kept the smog at bay.

Accusations of fakery (fake fireworks and singing at the opening ceremony) could hardly dent the upbeat mood, but other hiccups pointed to deep-rooted problems. Běijīng residents and expats complained about the city being in a virtual state of lockdown as the hands-off government sought to present a suitably squeaky clean Olympics. Hobos were sent packing and the streets were lined by ranks of silent volunteers in the run-up to the games, creating a suffocating mood of vigilance. Chinese embassies kept a tighter hold on visas, visa extensions were hard to acquire and expat numbers fell. Free Tibet campaigners were instantly arrested and the unfettered access to the internet promised to journalists was only fitfully provided.

Recently Běijīng has found itself increasingly preoccupied with the global financial crisis and troubles on China's western frontiers. The deadly 2008 riots in Lhasa and 2009 unrest in Ürümqi prompted Běijīng to point its finger at external enemies, accusations that many Western analysts agree may do little to defuse deep-seated ethnic and social tensions.

HISTORY BOOKS

- *The City of Heavenly Tranquility: Beijing in the History of China* (Jasper Becker) An authoritative and heartbreaking rendering of Běijīng's transformation from magnificent Ming capital to communist-capitalist hybrid.
- *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power 1850–2008* (Jonathan Fenby) Highly readable account of the paroxysms of modern Chinese history.
- *The Siege at Peking* (Peter Fleming) Celebrated account of the Boxer Rebellion and the historic siege of the Foreign Legation Quarter.
- *The Dragon Empress* (Marina Warner) Riveting biography of the scheming Empress Dowager and the fall of the Qing dynasty.

FROM THE BEGINNING

As a youth in the 14th century, the future Emperor Yongle was sent by his father to live as the Prince of Yan in the abandoned ruins of the former capital of the Yuan dynasty (present-day Běijīng), established by Kublai Khan (1215–94). The Mongols called the city Khanbalik, and it was from here that the descendants of Genghis Khan ruled over the largest land empire in history. This is where Marco Polo, one of many thousands of foreigners drafted to help the Mongols govern China, came to serve as an official. Běijīng was really only the winter capital for Kublai Khan, who chose to spend the summer months at Běijīng's sister city, Xanadu, which lay to the north, 1800m up on the steppes. This was called the 'Upper Capital', or 'Shàngdū' in Chinese, while Běijīng was 'Dàdū' or 'Great Capital'.

Běijīng seems a curious place to select as the capital of the Yuan empire, or indeed any empire. For one thing, it lacks a river or access to the sea. It is on the very outer edge of the great northern plain, and very far indeed from the rich rice granaries in the south and the source of China's lucrative exports of tea, silk and porcelain. Throughout history the Han Chinese considered this barbarian territory, home to a series of hostile predatory dynasties such as the Liao (907–1125) and the Jin (1115–1234). To this day Chinese historians describe these peoples as primitive 'tribes' rather than nations, perhaps a prejudice from the ancient antipathy between nomadic pastoralist peoples and the sedentary farmers who are the Chinese.

Běijīng first became a walled settlement in AD 938 when the Khitans, one of the nomadic 'barbarian tribes', established it as an auxiliary southern capital of their Liao dynasty. It was sometimes called Yānjīng, or the 'City of Swallows', and this is still the name of a beer produced by a local brewery. When they were overthrown by Jurchens from Manchuria, the progenitors of the Manchus, it became Zhōngdū or 'Middle Capital'. Each of these three successive barbarian dynasties enlarged the walled city and built palaces and temples, especially Buddhist temples. They secured a supply of water by channelling streams from the dry limestone hills around Běijīng, and stored it in the lakes that still lie at the heart of the city.

The Khitans relied on the Grand Canal to ship goods like silk, porcelain, tea and grain from

the Yangtze Delta. Each successive dynasty shortened the Grand Canal. It was originally 2500km long when it was built in the 5th century by the Chinese Sui dynasty to facilitate the military conquest of northeast China and Korea. From the 10th century it was used for a different purpose: to enable these northern peoples to extract the wealth of central China. Běijīng's role was to be the terminus.

For 1000 years, half a million peasants spent six months a year hauling huge barges from Hángzhōu up the Grand Canal to Běijīng. You can still see the canal after it enters the city from Tōngzhōu, now a suburb of Běijīng, and then winds around the Second Ring Rd. The tax or tribute from central China was then stored in huge warehouses, a few of which still remain. From Běijīng, the goods were carried out of the West Gate or Xīzhí Mén (where Xizhimen Station is today), and taken up the Tanqin Gorge to Bādǎlǐng, which once marked the limits of the Chinese world. Beyond this pass, the caravans took the road to Zhāngjiākǒu 6000ft above sea level where the grasslands of inner Asia begin. The Mongols referred to Zhāngjiākǒu as Kalgan; 'the Gate'.

This pass was also the favourite route chosen by invaders, such as Genghis Khan, who wanted to attack China. The ultimate aim of Khitans, Jurchens, Mongols and Manchus was to control the lucrative international trade in Chinese-made luxuries. Chinese dynasties like the Song faced a choice of paying them off or staging a bloody resistance. The Southern Song did attack and destroy Běijīng, but when it failed to defeat the Liao dynasty of the Khitans, it resorted to a strategy of 'using the barbarian to defeat the barbarian'. It made a pact with the Jurchen, and together they captured Běijīng in 1125. But instead of just helping to defeat the Khitans, the Jurchen carried on south and took the Song capital at Kāifēng. The Jurchen, however, chose not to try to govern China by themselves and instead opted to milk the Southern Song dynasty. The Mongols became the first 'barbarian' tribe to attempt to rule China. They ruled from Běijīng for just short of a century, from 1272 to 1368.

Ming-Dynasty Běijīng

Běijīng can properly be said to be a Chinese city only during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), when the Emperor Yongle – whose name means perpetual happiness – used over 200,000 prisoners of war to rebuild the city, construct its massive battlements, rebuild the imperial palace and establish the magnificent Ming Tombs ([Click here](#)). He forced tens of thousands of leading Chinese families to relocate from Nánjīng, the capital founded by his father, and unwillingly settle in what they considered an alien land at the extremity of the Chinese

world. Throughout the Ming dynasty it was constantly under attack by the Mongols, and on many occasions their horsemen reached the very gates of Běijīng. Mongol bandits roamed the countryside or hid out in the marshes south of the city, threatening communications with the empire.

Everything needed for this gigantic enterprise, even tiles, bricks and timber, had to be shipped up the Grand Canal, but in time Běijīng grew into a city of nearly a million residents. Although farms and greenhouses sprang up around the city, it always depended on the Grand Canal as a life-line. Most of the canal was required to ship the huge amounts of food needed to supply the garrison of more than a million men that Yongle press-ganged into building and manning the new Great Wall ([Click here](#)). This Wall, unlike earlier walls, was clad in brick and stone, not pounded earth, and the Ming emperors kept enlarging it for the next 250 years, adding loops, spurs and watchtowers. For long stretches, the fortifications run in two parallel bands.

Běijīng grew from a forward defence military headquarters into an administrative centre staffed by an elite corps of mandarins. They had to pass gruelling examinations that tested candidates' understanding of classical and Confucian literature. Then they were either assigned to the provinces or selected to work in the central government ministries, situated at what is now Tiananmen Square, south of the Meridian Gate and the entrance to the Forbidden City ([Click here](#)). Each day the mandarins and the generals entered the 'Great Wall Within' and kowtowed at an audience before the emperor. He lived inside, like a male version of a queen bee, served by thousands of women and eunuchs. Ming emperors were the only males permitted to live in the palace. Yongle established rigid rules and dreary rituals, and many of his successors rebelled against the constrictions.

Under later Ming emperors, the eunuchs came to be more trusted and more powerful than the mandarins. There were 100,000 by the end of the Ming dynasty – more than any other civilisation in history. A few became so powerful they virtually ruled the empire, but many died poor and destitute. Some used their wealth to build grandiose residences and tombs, or to patronise temples and monasteries located in hills outside the walls. The eunuchs tended to be Buddhists (while the mandarins honoured Confucius), as it gave them hope they would return as whole men in a future reincarnation.

Over time Běijīng became the most important religious centre in Asia, graced by more than 2000 temples and shrines. Daoists and Buddhists vied for the favour of the emperor who, as

divine being, was automatically the patron of every approved religious institution in the empire. As the residence of the emperor, Běijīng was regarded by the Chinese as the centre of the universe. The best poets and painters also flocked to Běijīng to seek court patronage. The Forbidden City required the finest porcelain, furniture and silverware, and its workshops grew in skill and design. Literature, drama, music, medicine, map-making, astrology and astronomy flourished, too, so the imperial city became a centre for arts and sciences.

Although early visitors complained about the dust and the beggars, as they do now, most were awed and inspired by the city's size, magnificence and wealth. Ming culture was very influential in Japan, Korea, Vietnam and with other neighbouring countries. By the close of the 15th century the Ming capital, which had started out as a remote and isolated military outpost, had become a wealthy and sophisticated Chinese city.

Despite the Great Wall, the threat from the north intensified. The Manchus (formerly the Jurchens) established a new and powerful state based in Shěnyáng (currently the capital of Liáoníng province) and watched as the Ming empire decayed. The Ming had one of the most elaborate tax codes in history, but corrupt eunuchs abused their growing power. Excessive taxation sparked a series of peasant revolts. Silver, the main form of exchange, was devalued by the import of silver from the new world, leading to inflation.

One peasant rebel army, led by Li Zicheng (1606–45), actually captured Běijīng. The last Ming emperor, Chongzhen (1611–44), called on the Manchus for help and after crossing the Great Wall at Shānhàiɡuān ([Click here](#)) they helped rout Li Zicheng's army. The Manchus then marched on Běijīng, where Emperor Chongzhen hung himself on a tree on Coal, or Prospect Hill ([Click here](#)), which overlooks the Forbidden City. Chongzhen lies buried in the Ming tomb a short distance from the grander Ming tomb complex, and now there's a small artificial snowfield near his tomb.

Qing-Dynasty Běijīng

The Manchus established their Qing dynasty in 1664, although it took several decades before they completed the conquest of the Ming empire. As a foreign dynasty, they took great pains to present themselves as legitimate successors to the Chinese Ming dynasty. For this reason they kept Běijīng as their capital and changed very little, effectively preserving Yongle's city. The Manchu imperial family, the Aisin Gioro Clan, moved in to the Forbidden City, and imperial princes took large courtyard palaces.

Soon the Aisin Gioro family began to feel that living inside the confines of the Forbidden

City was claustrophobic. The great Emperor Kangxi (1654–1722) effectively moved the court to what is now called the Old Summer Palace ([Click here](#)), a vast parkland of lakes, canals and palaces linked to the city by the Jade Canal. The Manchus, like the Mongols, enjoyed hunting, riding, hawking, skating and archery. In summer, when Běijīng became hot and steamy, the court moved to Chéngdé ([Click here](#); formerly Jehol or Rehol), a week's ride to the north. At Chéngdé the court spent three months living in felt tents (or yurts) in a walled parkland.

The Manchu army was divided into regiments called banners, so the troops were called Bannermen (Qírén). Each banner had a separate colour by which it was known and settled in a particular residential area in Běijīng. The Embroidered Yellow Bannermen, for example, lived near the Confucius Temple ([Click here](#)), and a few are still there today. Only a minority were actually ethnic Manchus – the rest were Mongols or Han Chinese.

A BEASTLY AFFAIR

In February 2009 there was an uproar in China about the sale of two bronze animal heads by the auction house Christie's. The sale was the latest twist in a saga stretching back to 1860, when the Old Summer Palace ([Click here](#)) was torched by Anglo-French troops and the animal heads were presumably pilfered.

The 12 heads belonged to a dozen statues with human bodies and animal heads (representing the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac) that jetted water from their mouths for two hours in a 12-hour sequence and formed part of a structure called the Hǎiyàntáng.

Four of the original 12 animal heads have been repatriated (by being bought at auction or donated) and can be seen at the Poly Art Museum ([Click here](#)). Of the eight still abroad, the rat and rabbit heads that appeared at Christie's became the focus of a powerful Chinese sense of injustice.

A convincing moral argument exists that the animal heads should be returned to China; however some people have pointed to the lack of conclusive evidence that the animal heads were stolen by French or British troops; the possibility exists, others argue, that they were plundered by Chinese eager to get back at Manchu rule or to sell to international clients.

Although it is probable French or British troops carried off the booty, the evidence is largely circumstantial. The torching of the Old Summer Palace was a shocking act of vandalism (revenge for killing a correspondent from the *Times*) and most of the wooden Chinese-style buildings were burned to the ground. But the Old Summer Palace's famous Jesuit-designed Western-style palaces were built of stone and far harder to destroy. It is these that we can still see today in their jumble of ruins in the northeast corner of the palace park. Records indicate that a considerable number of these buildings survived the torching, but progressive theft by locals over the subsequent decades gradually reduced what remained.

The heads themselves are perhaps a peculiar choice of national ire for the Chinese, considering they are Western in fashion, styled by the Jesuits, who also designed the Western palace buildings at the Old Summer Palace. It has also been suggested that the Empress Dowager disliked the heads so much that she had them pulled down; if that story is true, where were they stored?

What is evident is that the ruins, and the animal heads, have become symbols of China's humiliation at the hands of foreign powers, and icons that increasingly resonate as the country assumes a more central role in international affairs.

Běijīng was a Manchu city and foreigners used to call it the 'Tartar City': 'Tartars' being the label given to any nomadic race from inner Asia. The Han Chinese, forced to wear their hair in a queue (pigtail) as a symbol of their subjugation, lived in the 'Chinese city' to the south of Tiananmen Square. It was the liveliest, most densely populated area, packed with market shops, theatres, brothels and hostels for provincial visitors. If Chinese people wanted to go to north Běijīng, they had to go all the way round the outside walls. The Bannermen posted at the gates prevented anyone from entering without permission. Up to 1900, the state provided all Bannermen families with clothing and free food that was shipped up the Grand Canal and stored in grain warehouses.

It was the Manchu Bannermen who really created a Běijīng culture. They loved Beijing opera, and the city once had over 40 opera houses and many training schools. The sleeveless *qípáo* dress is really a Manchu dress. The Bannermen, who loved animals, raised songbirds and pigeons and bred exotic-looking goldfish and miniature dogs such as the Pekinese. And after the downfall of the Qing empire, they kept up traditional arts such as painting and

calligraphy.

Through the centuries of Qing rule, the Manchus tried to keep themselves cultural separate from the Chinese, speaking a different language, wearing different clothes and following different customs. For instance, Manchu women did not bind their feet, wore raised platform patens (shoes), and wore their hair coiled in distinctive and elaborate styles. At court documents were composed in the Manchu script; Manchu, Chinese and Mongolian scripts were used to write name signs in such places as the Forbidden City.

At the same time, the Qing copied the Ming's religious and bureaucratic institutions. The eight key ministries (Board of Works, Board of Revenue, Board of State Ceremonies, Board of War, Board of Rites, Board of Astronomy, Board of Medicines and Prefecture of Imperial Clan Affairs) continued to operate from the same buildings in what is now Tiananmen Square. The Qing dynasty worshipped their ancestors at rites held in a temple, which is now in the Workers Cultural Palace ([Click here](#)), south of the Forbidden City. They also built a second ancestral temple devoted to the spirits of every Chinese emperor that ever ruled. For some time it was a girls' school but it has since been turned back into a museum.

The study of Confucius was encouraged in order to strengthen the loyalty of the mandarins employed by the state bureaucracy. And the Manchus carried out the customary rituals at the great state temples, such as the Temple of Heaven ([Click here](#)). By inclination, however many of the Manchu emperors were either Shamanists or followers of Tibetan Buddhism. The Shamanist shrines have disappeared, but Běijīng is full of temples and stupas connected with Tibetan Buddhism. The Emperor Qianlong considered himself the incarnation of the Bodhisattva Manjusri and cultivated strong links with various Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas. Many visited – a round trip usually lasted three years, and special palaces were built for them. The Dalai Lama's ex-palace is now rented out by the government of the Tibet Autonomous Region. The Manchus deliberately fostered the spread of Tibetan Buddhism among the war-like Mongols in the hope of pacifying them. Běijīng therefore developed into a holy city attracting pilgrims of all kinds.

Of course, the arrival of the first Jesuits and other Christians made Běijīng an important centre of Christianity in China. Emperor Qianlong employed many Jesuits who, among other things, built for him the baroque palaces that can still be seen in the ruins of the Old Summer Palace (Yuánmíng Yuán; the Garden of Perfect Happiness; [Click here](#)), which was burnt down by a combined force of British and French troops in 1860 during the Second Opium War.

Foreign Devils & Empress Dowager Cixi

After the military defeats of the Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60), the Western nations forced the Qing emperors to allow them to open formal embassies or legations in the capital. Hitherto, the emperor had had no equal in the world – foreign powers could only send embassies to deliver tribute, and they were housed in tributary hostels.

The British legation was the first to open after 1860. It lay on the east side of Tiananmen Square and stayed there until the 1950s when its grounds were taken over by the Ministry of State Security. By 1900, there were a dozen legations in an odd foreign ghetto with an eclectic mixture of European architecture. The Foreign Legation Quarter ([Click here](#)) never became a foreign concession like those in Shànghǎi or Tiānjīn, but it had banks, schools, shops, post offices, hospitals and military parade grounds. Much of it was reduced to rubble when the army of Boxers (a quasi-religious cult) besieged it in the summer of 1900. It was later rebuilt. The last of these foreign embassies did not leave until 1967 and much of the Legation Quarter has been destroyed during the past decade.

The Empress Dowager Cixi (1835–1908), a daughter of a Bordered Blue Bannerman, was a young concubine when the Old Summer Palace was burned down by foreign troops in 1860. Cixi allowed the palace to fall into decay, associating it with a humiliation, and instead built herself the new Summer Palace (Yíhé Yuán; [Click here](#)). She was left with a profound hatred and distrust of the Western barbarians and their ways.

Over the four decades in which Cixi ruled China ‘from behind the curtain’ through a series of proxy emperors, she resisted pressure to change and reform. After a naval defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1895, young Chinese officials put forward a modernisation program. She had some of them executed outside Běijīng’s walls then imprisoned their patron and her nephew, Emperor Guangxu (1871–1908). She encouraged the Boxers to attack Westerners, especially foreign missionaries in northern China, and when Boxers besieged the Foreign Legation Quarter in 1900, she stood by. When the allied forces marched in to Běijīng to end the siege, she fled in disguise, an ignominious retreat that marked the final humiliation that doomed the Qing dynasty. When Cixi returned in disgrace a year later, China’s modernisation had begun in earnest, but it was too late to save the Qing dynasty – it fell in 1911.

Republican China

After 1900, the last tribute barges arrived in Běijīng and a railway line ran along the traditional invasion route through the Juyong Pass to Bādǎlǐng. You can see the handsome

clocktower and sheds of Běijīng's first railway station (Qian Men Railway Station), recently restored, on the southeast corner of Tiananmen Square. Běijīng never became an industrial or commercial centre – that role went to nearby Tiānjīn, as it lies on the coast. Yet it remained the leading political and intellectual centre of China until the late 1920s. China's first (and only) parliament was established in Běijīng in what was once the imperial elephant house, now out of sight in the sprawling headquarters of Xinhua, the state news agency.

In the settlement imposed after 1900, China had to pay the victors heavy indemnities. Some of this money was returned to China and used to build the first modern universities, including what are now the Oxford and Cambridge of China – Qinghua and Peking Universities. Běijīng's university quarter is in the Hǎidiàn district, near the Old Summer Palace (some campuses are actually in the imperial parkland). Intellectuals from all over China continued to gravitate to Běijīng, including the young Mao Zedong, who arrived to work as a librarian in 1921.

Běijīng students and professors were at the forefront of the 1919 May Fourth Movement. This was at once a student protest against the Versailles Treaty, which had awarded Germany's concessions in China to Japan, and an intellectual movement to jettison the Confucian feudal heritage and Westernise China. Mao himself declared that to modernise China it was first necessary to destroy it. China's intellectuals looked around the world for models to copy. Some went to Japan, others to the USA, Britain, Germany or, like Deng Xiaoping and Zhou Enlai, France. Many, of course, went to study Marxism in Moscow.

As the warlords marched armies in and out of Běijīng, the almost medieval city began to change. Temples were closed down and turned into schools. The last emperor, Puyi, left the Forbidden City in 1924 with his eunuchs and concubines. As the Manchus adapted to the changes, they tried to assimilate and their presence faded. Western-style brick houses, shops and restaurants were built. City gates were widened and new ones added, including one at Jianguomenwai to make way for the motorcar. Běijīng acquired nightclubs, cinemas, racecourses and a stock exchange; brothels and theatres flourished. Despite political and diplomatic crises, this was a period when people had fun and enjoyed a unique period of individual freedom.

Generalissimo Chiang Kaishek united most of the country under Chinese National Party (KMT or Kuomintang in Chinese) rule and moved the capital to Nánjīng. Even after 1929 Běijīng's romantic air of decaying grandeur attracted Chinese and Western writers and

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