



Essay

# Beijing

## The Grey Capital

*Britta Schmitz*

I lived in Beijing for nearly 8 years – from 2007 to the end of 2014. At first I did not like this city. The story of me and Beijing did not start with “love at first sight.” But with the dynamic developments in the course of the preparation for the Olympic Summer Games 2008, the “fear of losing the old Beijing” and the revitalization of the old hutong-quarters I became more and more fond of the Chinese capital and now call it my second home town.

Modern Beijing:  
The Galaxy SOHO  
building along the  
East 2nd Ring Road

Picture source: Stefan Larsson



The first time I travelled to Beijing was 1998 and I don't remember much of it. What I do remember is that it was one of those incredibly hot and humid summer days in China's capital. My friends and I were visiting the Forbidden City – sweating and trotting from one stone-paved courtyard to the next. At that moment this magnificent monument of Chinese architecture seemed to me like a never ending row of stones and tiles. It totally eluded me that the Forbidden City was actually called “the purple forbidden city” in Chinese or that its walls and doors were painted red, not even to mention the yellow-glazed roof tiles. What left an imprint in my brain was the grey colour of those millions of paving stones, and then outside of the palace there was even more grey: the roads, the asphalt and the concrete walls of thousands and thousands of apartment blocks. And last but not least the overwhelming grey of Beijing's hutongs and their maze of endless brick walls. Beijing and me - this was not love at first sight. And whenever I was asked about my thoughts about China's capital after this trip, my answer would be “it seemed so very grey to me.”

It was not until autumn 2007 that I actually moved to Beijing. My first months in the capital were the winter ones. Gone were the green leaves and summer flowers and most of the days the sky had the impenetrable, dull colour of lead. I moved into an apart-

ment right next to Dongzhimen, in the center of Beijing. The neighbourhood consisted mostly of uninspiring apartment blocks from the 1970s and 1980s and if they were not painted grey from the very first, then the dust and pollution from coal heating, the millions of cars and the Eurasian steppe would cover them completely and give them a distinct ashen tone. One of Beijing's hutong quarters was just around the corner. But while I was interested in the city's history, I failed to see the beauty of these traditional alleys. At that time the majority of the traditional courtyards were in a state of disrepair and the originally spacious homes were subdivided and disfigured by informal construction and tacked on additions.

The following year brought the Summer Olympics to the Chinese capital and with it came changes over changes in Beijing's cityscape: A brand-new airport terminal designed by Norman Foster, the opening of a new high-speed railway station, the doubling of subway lines and its capacity, the opening of uncountable brand-new five star hotels, shopping malls, office towers and much more. But the city changed even on a very small level – sometimes overnight. I remember waking up one morning and looking out of my window onto a park, which literally had just popped out of the ground. Construction workers had rolled out lawns and transplanted full-grown trees. All of this happened literally overnight.

Bold new buildings in bright colours and futuristic shapes appeared – and immediately got cheeky nicknames by the Beijing locals. There is the Olympic stadium - the “bird's nest” illuminated in bright red during nighttime, and just next to it the “water cube” the National Aquatics Center in shiny blue. Then you have the National Center of Performing Arts (“巨蛋 = the giant egg”), the China Central Television headquarters (thanks to its extraordinary shape often referred to as “大裤衩 = the big pants”), as well as all the “SOHO” real estate projects, many of them with a visionary design, and all over the city you can now find scores of ‘innovative’ shopping malls like Sanlitun village (the term “innovative” only referring to the design - the retail chains inside those shiny cathedrals of consumption are the same as everywhere else in the developed world).

Suddenly nothing seemed to be impossible regarding the shape, colour and structure of the new Beijing landmarks. But while the architecture of the new Beijing got more and more adventurous, the soul – the essence of Beijing being Beijing – was still to be found in the hutongs. And maybe it was the rapid speed of Beijing's modernization and the fear of losing the old Beijing, which made me and others long for the simple, more “traditional” things. We were more and more looking for the hard to describe “Beijing-feeling” with its make-shift-barbeque grills selling the famous



Grey Beijing:  
Traffic along 2nd Ring Road

Source: Stefan Larsson



“Chuan” (串 = meat skewers), the distinct sound of the local language “Beijinghua” (北京话) with its r-coloured vowels. Men walking around in the hot summer months wearing muscle tank shirts half rolled up exposing their bellies, groups of old aunties singing and dancing in the evening hours, stacks of cabbage piled up in front of those typical Beijing brick walls. All those are things we long-term foreigners in Beijing would describe as “typical Beijing”. With this in mind the Beijing-grey suddenly seemed to be like a canvas or the perfect backdrop for the colourful scenes of everyday life in the capital.

Alleys, pavements, parks and other public or semi-public spaces are the places where the better part of the actual life of many Beijingers takes place. And there are thousands and thousands of such places for everyone in Beijing. Go to any Beijing park in the early morning or evening hours and you will find people enjoying all kinds of sports, hobbies and entertainment. A Beijing park, and the people, who meet there, has something to offer everyone. Just have a look around and you will see Mrs. Xu’s group of fitness enthusiasts, practicing Taiji every day at the crack of dawn. Or Uncle Chen, who will stand somewhere in a quiet corner by himself, writing Chinese calligraphy with a gigantic paintbrush dipped in water directly on the pavement - no need for a desk, ink or paper. And of course you will not miss

the choir, singing love songs in Russian every night at eight or the group of grandfathers playing Chinese chess under some trees.

But it does not need to be a park, really. Any open (or quasi-open) space would do. There was a time, when my bus to work would pass a certain traffic island at the second ring road and every morning at seven there was a man standing there in the midst of this six-lane-road practicing his trumpet.

Just in front of the Beijing Worker’s Stadium is the meeting point for a group of dance buffs, who practice their ballrooms moves several times a week. One night I was standing right next to them, waiting to flag down a taxi, when one of them approached me. He introduced himself as Lao Chen and then asked me if I would not like to join. His female dance partner had not showed up that night. I declined politely, but this example shows that it is easy to become part of one of the groups and join their activities. After all, everything is taking place in public and most of it is for free.

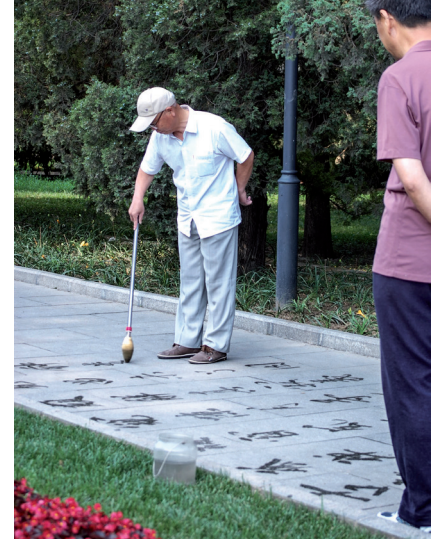
But while the open-air activities are for many Beijingers a much-loved part of their daily routine and a way to connect to each other, there are others who see them as annoying and backward. For many white-collar Chinese the groups of middle-aged “damas” (= 大妈, literally meaning “big mamas”) dancing their way through Gangnam-Style or Michael-Jackson-songs coming from homemade sound systems,

are often a mere nuisance. During the recent months, domestic and foreign newspapers and websites reported repeatedly about protests against amateur dance groups in Chinese cities. On the one hand there are the groups of mostly retired, elderly folk with a lot of time but too little money to spend it in fancy indoor sport facilities; their values mostly shaped by the collective ideals of the Mao-era. On the other hand you have the younger, hard-working or studying city-dwellers, who grew up with more individualistic ideas and a sense of personal space. To put it bluntly: the conflict of residents versus dancing aunties can be seen as a clash of generations, with China’s generational cohorts comprising only 10-15 years and each of them showing huge differences in regards to upbringing, opinions, values.

The growing complaints about noise pollution even led the Communist Party to action. Plans were voiced in March 2015 for restricted dance times and a stricter control of the volume in parks and open-spaces. “Square-dancing represents the collective aspect of Chinese culture, but now it seems that the overenthusiasm of participants has dealt it a harmful blow with disputes over noise and venues. So we have to guide it with national standards and regulations,” Liu Guoyong, chief of the General Administration of Sport of China’s mass fitness department said to China Daily (“Time for square-dancing to face the music” by Sun







### Traditional Beijing

Xiaochen, China Daily, 24.03.2015). According to the newspaper China Daily, the government has even ordered a panel of experts to work out unified choreographies for the dancing aunties.

But will this stop the “damas” or anyone else from their open-air activities? No, I think they will continue dancing wherever and whenever they want. During all my years in Beijing, I have seen a lot of political actions against many of the Beijingers’ favorite outdoor activities: The bans against BBQs, kebab-stalls and street foot hawkers? Not effective at all. The standardization of breakfast stands? Barely a lukewarm success. And even the “chengguan” (represents of the local law enforcement agency infamous for their aggressive behavior) can’t stop people from selling everything from clothing to calligraphies on Beijing’s streets.

Even the extreme smog in the last years did not stop a lot of Beijingers from living parts of their lives outside. Sadly, the smog stands for another kind of grey dominating the Chinese capital. While the government succeeded to drastically reduce the pollution during the time of the Olympic Summer Games by closing factories and coal-fired power plants, introducing strict driving bans and exchanging old buses against more environmentally-friendly ones, the pollution returned soon after the games ended. Since 2009 the air quality in Beijing and whole Northern China started to considerably deteriorate again and pollution became an everyday topic of conversation. In the years before the Olympics talking about air pollution had been a kind of taboo – the smog being euphemized

as “the typical China fog”. People started discussing the unhealthy air conditions with their friends, neighbours and coworkers. Even for the government, it became more and more difficult to publicly deny the seriousness of the situation. People compared their memories of clean air during the Olympics with their new reality of near-daily smog. The American embassy installed an air quality-monitoring device and began tweeting about pollution’s severity, but the official measurements of the Chinese Ministry of Environmental Protection (the former State Environmental Protection Administration, SEPA) often showed different, lower levels. In 2010 it became official that the capital’s air pollution levels were “crazy bad” when the pollution exceeded the embassy’s index. Today, most Beijingers start their day checking special apps on their smart phones to see if they have to deal with another “airpocalypse”, forcing them to wear their face masks or if they can enjoy one of the not too many “blue sky days.”

Smog and traffic situation aside, I fell more and more for the charm of Beijing. With the ever increasing modernization, I began longing and looking for this special and hard-to-describe “hutong feeling,” and I was not alone: Suddenly more and more Chinese youngsters started to fall for the charm of Beijing’s old town. What was once regarded as backwards became trendy. Small cafes styled in cozy retro designs popped up in the old parts of town. Young owners opened new little shops in the courtyards – selling tea, art, handicrafts, stationery or just nostalgic items from 1950s and 60s China

– comfort objects for the uprooted Chinese youth. But one also has to admit the downsides of this rapid hutong-boom which are of course the over-commercialization of traditional neighbourhoods, exploding real estate prices in the old town as well as the tearing down and rebuilding of old structures, and a decrease of community feeling.

So, what is it that I am missing about Beijing after I left last year? First of all the food – and I am sure every Chinese living abroad will agree with me on this. But it is not only the food itself, it is the many different possibilities of eating and drinking out in Beijing – from fancy restaurants to sitting on tiny folding chairs next to a busy street drinking local Yanjing-beer and eating donkey burgers. To put it more generally, I miss the stark contrasts of tradition and modernity, rapid development and down-to-earth daily life, high tech and history. These contrasts and the dynamics stemming from Beijing being one of the biggest cities in the world make the life there so exciting and also challenging. I am convinced that one can only survive in China’s capital with a lot of flexibility and optimism - the two character traits I love and admire most in the typical Beijing inhabitant.

Looking back on my first impression of Beijing being the big grey city, I can see now that the essence of what I miss from Beijing – the “soul of Beijing” – is to be found in the hutongs and in between their grey walls. And if I now call Beijing the grey capital, then I say it with affection, because I know now that this is an elegant grey, which helps us to see the savvy in the ordinary and mundane.

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