

# Beijing from Below - Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center

## Author: Harriet Evans

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**Abstract:** This review discusses Harriet Evans's book „Beijing from Below - Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center“ in which the author traces the social, economic, and architectural transformation of Beijing's Dashalar district. Dashalar street, which gave name to the district, lies just South of Tian'anmen Square, China's center of power and often seen as the quintessence of old Beijing. Since the 1950s the area fell more and more into disrepair, following intense densification due to the influx of outsiders (外地人) and years of neglect by the original residents. Uncertain land tenure after the communist revolution in 1949 and restructuring of space as a result of the economic reforms of the 1980s lead to the emergence of *dazayuan* (大杂院 - "big, cluttered courtyards"): Housing compounds occupied by different families, many of them living in only one room without running water, toilet or kitchen. In the early 2000s, the possible former glory of the buildings which had been teahouses, brothels, or merchant homes was long gone - the district became an ever-worsening eyesore to the municipal government, leading to a complete makeover, and consequently to forced relocation of most of the inhabitants. The author, Harriet Evans, visited the hutong (alleyway) and surrounding district regularly from 2007 to 2014, and the results of her anthropological fieldwork are gathered in this book published in 2020 by Duke University Press.

**Keywords:** China, old Beijing, hutong, urban development, anthropology, oral history.

Harriet Evans is Emeritus Professor of Chinese Cultural Studies at the University of Westminster and Visiting Professor in Anthropology at the London School of Economics. During her regular research visits in China, she became witness to the fundamental changes to Beijing's cityscape which she not

only wanted to document, but also see through the lens of the local population. This led her to interviewing a group of Dashalar residents over a period of several years, resulting in a series of oral histories collected in the recently (2020) published volume *Beijing from Below*.

The author describes the aims of her book as such: "This book emerged from a desire to understand how non-elite, working-class people in Beijing have accommodated the relentless pace and scale of change in their everyday lives in recent decades. What memories of childhood and growing up do they hold on to when the physical and social spaces of those memories have been destroyed?"

For the reader, it is fascinating to see how Evans was able to build up confidential relationships with her Chinese interview partners of six different Dashalar households. In fact, it is surprising the extent to which courtyard residents share memories touching on very private topics like family grudges, love affairs, or even politically-sensitive subjects like the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protests. Meanwhile, she doesn't conceal the problems which

arose during her fieldwork. One example is the language-hurdles she regularly encountered when dealing with the Beijing dialect of her interview partners. Another difficulty was cultural barriers, which demanded a great deal of reading between the lines, especially in situations where the boundaries between her roles as interviewer and family friend became blurred. This aspect of the book gives the readers interesting insights into the fieldwork and practical problems of anthropological research.

*Beijing from Below* consists of seven chapters as means to move away from showing a big picture of Beijing's recent development and instead put the focus on individual fates. Still, the author found a way to put the life stories of her protagonists in the historical context. Each chapter comprises the oral testimony of one individual family and links it with a second more theoretic part ("interlude") in which the author incorporates analytical discussions and the information from different official and academic sources. Readers who are mostly interested in the oral

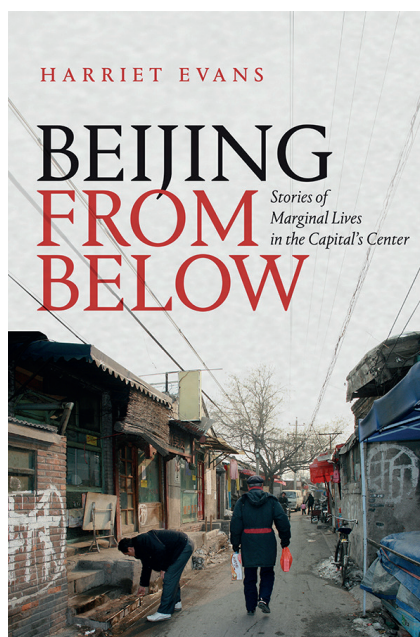


Figure 1: book cover



Figure 2: Refurbished Qianmen dajie with white street lanterns.

history part can easily skip the more theoretical interludes. The individual narratives are quite engrossing and moving, and some of them go back as far as to the 1920s, making this work an interesting English-language document of contemporary Beijing history. Furthermore, they are a rare source of underclass (社会底层) biographies, recounting the lives of a population group which historically has been neglected by the elite.

Nearly all of Evans's interview partners have a working-class background but fell into poverty after becoming unemployed with the onset of the privatization of state factories after which many jobs became redundant. At the time of the interviews, most of them live at the border of formal and informal economy, struggling to make their living as illegal pedicab drivers, cleaners, or sellers of cheap souvenirs and the like.

The hutong-life portrayed in this book is not romantic at all; it is char-

acterized by inconvenience, poverty, and daily conflicts with the authorities (especially with the 城管 - Beijing's notorious law enforcement officers). The reader soon understands that the inhabitants of Dashalar don't stay in their courtyard houses because of sentimental reasons, but because they have literally nowhere else to go.

However, many of the residents never had the chance to live outside of Dashalar, and so the hutong is the only social and emotional center of their lives. Thus, it is not surprising that they cling to their homes – and it is clear that there will be no future for them in a radically modernized and upgraded hutong environment.

It is significant that only very few of the book's featured individuals – mainly the hobby calligrapher Wang Wenli and the restaurateur and photographer Jia Yong – have the educational and cultural prerequisites to reflect and analyze the changes of their direct environment in a wider context. Those two

are also the only ones who have found ways to keep the memories of hutong-life alive. Or as Jia Yong, the photographer puts it: "Without the buildings, there is nothing left, so what you have to do is keep a record of those buildings, otherwise no one will know that there was once an old Beijing."

The prose in *Beijing from Below* sometimes lacks a higher literary quality, but nevertheless it makes good and gripping read. Furthermore, Evans' work is a valuable contribution in making the voices of a highly marginalized community heard, and I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in Beijing's recent history, cultural anthropology or a sociological perspective on urbanization.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Evans, Harriet (2020) *Beijing from Below - Stories of Marginal Lives in the Capital's Center*. Duke University Press, 288 pages. Paper ISBN: 978-1-4780-0815-6. Cloth ISBN: 978-1-4780-0687-9.

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