

T H E C H A R M O F B E I J I N G

BEIJING'S SIHEYUAN



CHINA PICTORIAL PUBLISHING HOUSE



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Text by Wang Lanshun
Photographs by Cao Lijun
Translated by Hanting Gaho



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BEIJING'S SIHEYUAN

PREFACE

Beijing is one of the world's most famous capitals. Located on a plain but surrounded on three sides by mountain ranges, the city has an architectural history of nearly 3,000 years, 850 years of which have been spent as the capital city of China. The old city of Beijing, like most pre-modern cities, was once encircled by high walls. The imperial city within was crisscrossed by a myriad of *hutong* (alleys) and *jiedao* (streets) arranged parallel and perpendicular to a south-north central axis, a network structure which in essence survives to this day.

The history of this *hutong* (alleys) and *jiedao* (streets) network can be traced back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), better known in the West as the Mongols, when the streets and byways of the city of Dadu (the name the Mongols gave to what is now Beijing) were laid out according to a strict design for the construction of this great imperial city. Alleys which run in an east-west direction are called *hutong*, while streets which run along a south-north axis are named *jiedao*. Houses and courtyards are located on both sides of *hutong* (alleys) and *jiedao* (streets). The houses and courtyards in *hutong* (alleys) are mainly residential houses, which we call *siheyuan* (quadrangles); and the buildings in *jiedao* (streets) are by and large commercial buildings, which provide services for the people living in *hutong* (alleys). Such buildings are generally referred to as *pumianfang* (shops). As commercial streets at the ends of *hutong* (alleys), *jiedao* (streets) are usually very broad and prosperous. By contrast, *hutong* (alleys) are places where people live, so they are comparatively narrow and tend to be quieter on the whole. People in *siheyuan* lead a quiet agreeable life: they are surrounded by flowers in early spring; they enjoy the cool breeze on summer nights; they can gaze upon the pale moon in autumn; and they look on in rapture at the dancing snowflakes in winter. This mode of life in which man and nature exist in harmonious balance is one that is looked on with a good deal of nostalgic fondness by people consumed by the stress of 21st century city life. It is a mode of life that more and more people these days would like to return to.





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SIHEYUAN——A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO CHINESE CULTURE







The *siheyuan* (quadrangle) is Beijing's unique contribution to the architecture of residential dwellings and has rightly become famous all around the world.

The *siheyuan* (quadrangle), as its name implies, is a courtyard with rooms on four sides. Thus with a main room on the north side; another room facing it on the south and two rooms on the west and east, you have the essential traditional Beijing *siheyuan* structure: a courtyard (*yuanzi*) surrounded on all four sides by rooms.

The pattern of Beijing *siheyuan* was initially prescribed by the Yuan construction of their capital, Dadu. The pattern would be further developed and perfected during the Ming and Qing Dynasties (1368-1644). According to the original plans for the city of Dadu, *hutong* (alleys) and *jiedao* (streets) were neatly arranged like the lines of a chessboard. The widths of *hutong* (alleys) and *jiedao* (streets) were strictly regulated: big streets were to be 24 *bu* (a measure of distance) wide, little streets 12 *bu* wide, and *hutong* (alleys) 6 *bu* wide. The average distance between two parallel *hutong* (alleys) was to be 50 *bu* (about 77 meters), which thus would serve as the length of the living area of a typical *siheyuan*.

An integrated *siheyuan* can be combined both on a north-south and an east-west matrix with several sub-*siheyuans*. The north-south combination is a longitudinal combination, in which one sub-*siheyuan* is called a *jin*. In Beijing a big *siheyuan* complex often consists of as many as five *jin*. Meanwhile the east-west arrangement is known as a transverse combination. One sub-*siheyuan* in such combination is called a *lu*, which is designated according to their different locations: for example eastern *lu*, middle *lu*, western *lu*.

The design of *siheyuan* had reached maturity by the time of the Ming and Qing Dynasties. In fact, most of the old *siheyuan* we see in Beijing today date from the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). This was a time when the centrality of Confucian ideas on society and hierarchical rank made ritual and ceremony a vital part of everyday existence. Such notions even pervaded the world of *siheyuan* design with strictly-enforced guidelines being set for the number of rooms one could have, the pattern of tiles one might use and





even the type of entranceway one was permitted to have in his or her *siheyuan*. Even for an official of the first rank, only one gate was permitted for a *siheyuan*, the same as for a common person. However, strict controls were imposed on the decoration and style of *siheyuan*, controls that were determined based on one's position within the social hierarchy. Top-ranking officials could, for the style of their entranceway, adopt the dignified and glorious *Guangliang* (literally broad and

bright) style gate or the *Jinzhu* (golden column) gate while common people could not. The classic Beijing *siheyuan* is a brick and tile construction like any other edifice, but it is infused with thousands of years of culture and cultivation; it embodies a harmonious relationship between man and nature, as well as evoking a cultural ambience that is unique to Beijing.

Moreover, the construction of *siheyuan* involved taking into consideration a wide range of factors, the most important of which were climate, civic culture and architectural style. In the winter months bitter winds blow into Beijing from the northwest and the climate is both cold and arid, while in summer the winds come from the south bringing hot, humid weather with an abundance of rainfall. The Beijing *siheyuan* were designed and built in a way that could minimize the worst effects of these natural conditions. Firstly the designers realized that the north walls would have to bear the brunt of the legendary sand storms blown over the city by a merciless northern wind. With this in mind, the main room of the *siheyuan*, the north room, is usually built with higher walls and given a deeper foundation than the other three sides. No window is constructed on the northern side so as to deny the piercing wind a chance to penetrate to the interior of the residence. In the summer time, the fact that the northern end of the *siheyuan* is slightly higher than the other sides means that it is ideally placed to accept the cooling breeze that blows from the southeast making it the perfect location for a spot of sunbathing. Warm in winter and cool in summer, this ingenious design minimizes the

harshness and accentuates the positives of Beijing's varied climate. To facilitate activity and passage from one side to another on rainy days, a corridor was built linking the two sides from the *er'men* (*chuihuamen*) to the main room. This corridor also connects the eastern and western rooms, which not only prevents people from being drenched in any downpours which may occur but also lends the *siheyuan* a wonderful feeling of connectedness: a comfortable and warm feeling of being linked with the other rooms of the residence.

In Beijing there are many buildings which take the *siheyuan* model as the inspiration for their design. Opulent structures like royal palaces, official mansions and Buddhist and Taoist temples take up dozens of *mu* (15*mu* = 1hectare) with very often over one hundred rooms, five or six *jin* of courtyards and a garden for good measure. To take one example, one must first cross many courtyards of various sizes before entering the central court of the famous palatial residence of Prince Gong. These courtyards are all constructed with infinite care; their breathtaking craftsmanship in terms of carving and layout rivaling that of nature itself.

The interior decoration of a *siheyuan* varies with the status, taste and naturally the finances of the person who lives there. However passers-by may get a taste of what lies within just from its exterior appearance.

The three-*jin* *siheyuan* is the most common form of *siheyuan* found in Beijing. It consists of a gate, a screen wall, a screen door, an *er'men* (*chuihuamen*), a circular corridor, a main room, a room opposite, rooms on either wing, an entrance hall and some low rooms behind the main room. Some *siheyuan* even have a little garden, as well as a garage and a gatehouse in the front courtyard where can often be found canopies, fish tanks and even pomegranate trees.

According to statistics, Beijing in the 1950s boasted some 17 million square meters of *siheyuan*, accounting for 90-plus percent of total residential space in Beijing. Now after decades of neglect and the vicissitudes of history, there are only 1,200 *siheyuans* remaining under protection.

If one can scale the walls of one of Beijing's many *siheyuan*, one may enter an enchanted world, which embodies the very best elements of Chinese civilization and culture. Beijing's *siheyuan* are an organic reflection of the central importance of blood ties and the patriarchal clan system among Chinese people. Stretched out, one after another like so many little perfectly-formed cities, a network of *siheyuan* can come to resemble the many branches of a great and rich family tree.





FINDING SIHEYUAN HOTELS

With the continuing development of Beijing as an international city replete with towering skyscrapers and high-rise apartment blocks, *siheyuan* have come to seem like more and more a relic of a bygone era. Because of the extensive area a typical *siheyuan* covers in a city where land is so precious; because of the privacy they afford; because they are an evocative symbol of the very soul of Beijing life, the price of most *siheyuan* is extremely high.

Some *siheyuan* hotels have been established to give local and foreign guests a taste of what it is like to live in such a unique residence without the expense of having to purchase one. What follows is a brief introduction to some of the better-known *siheyuan* hotels.



The Lusongyuan Hotel: Once a Prince's Residence



Situated at No.22 Banchang Hutong in the area of Nanluogu Street is the well-known Lusongyuan Hotel. Once a part of the residence of a Mongolian prince, General Seng-ko-lin-ch'in, during the Qing Dynasty, this *siheyuan*-style hotel has everything that the traditional *siheyuan* has, in terms of furniture and facilities, as well as plants, artificial hills, fish tanks and so on. Staying at the hotel, gives one a taste of the unique flavor of Beijing *siheyuan* life. One can also enjoy spectacularly beautiful sights a short walk away from the hotel. For one thing, it's located in the heart of Beijing near Jingshan Hill and Beihai Park, once a well-known imperial garden. For another, on both side of Nanluogu Street, an old commercial street, are eight complete hutongs all symmetrically aligned. These *jiedao* and *hutongs* date to as far back as the Yuan Dynasty and remain in pretty good condition today due to numerous protection orders.

Banchang Hutong lies immediately to the east of this street; to the north lies Mao'er Hutong, the former residence of China's last empress, Wanrong; to the south the front door of Prince Seng-ko-lin-ch'in's residence. Because it is situated at the northern side of Ping'an Street, the Lusongyuan Hotel is very convenient for traffic. For many foreigners it affords the most accessible and attractive opportunity to experience firsthand the unique joy of staying awhile in a *siheyuan*.

