



Pictures of Old Beijing

Living Memories of the Ancient Capital

Volume 1. Life in Old Bei

Written & Illustrated by: Fang Yan

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Fang Yan (方 砚) , original name Shi Wanxiang, is a Chinese artist specializing in folk painting. He was born in Luannan county of Hebei province and grew up in Beijing and Tianjing. In his youth, he studied Chinese painting under masters Liu Ziju and Liu Kuiling. He then studied sketch and serial pictures with Fu Nalin, Shen Yi, and Guo Yan. In 1960s and 1970s,

Fang Yan produced numerous serial pictures such as *Father Goriot* and *Colonel Chabert*. He also created Chinese painting scrolls such as *Chinese Ancient History Scroll*, *Chinese Scenic Spots Scroll*, and *The Chinese Scholars Scroll*, which were exhibited and auctioned overseas. After 1978, Fang Yan started to work on recreating the old Beijing through art. During the last decade, he has produced various scrolls portraying the old Beijing. In 1980s, Fan Yan painted Buddhism murals for multiple temples in Japan. He has held his solo exhibitions in Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, etc.

PREFACE

Many people say, “Old people are inclined to be nostalgic.” I do not know how true this statement is, but I am spending more and more time on thinking of past times. Having grown up in Beijing, I am a one hundred percent old Beijinger. Recently, a myriad of images from my childhood often emerge in my mind and bring me back to the old days. Finally, I decide to turn these fond memories into drawings that can be shared with others, especially the younger generations who generally have little understanding of those old days. I believe it is critical for young people to know about the past in order to cherish the present and build the future. My other goal is to provide information and references for history scholars who are dedicated to study the old Beijing.

What I describe in this art book is what I saw and heard in the streets and lanes when I was young. These drawings are loyal portrayals of my personal experiences. Street performers, itinerant craftsmen, peddlers, beggars and food stalls were what I used to see and interact with every day. Despite many years in between, the scenes of juggling, monkey clowns, and peep shows are still vivid in my mind, reminiscent of a carefree childhood. I can still hear peddler’s cries for their goods: low or

high-pitch, simple or fancy words. My tongue still remembers the tastes of the local snacks: bland or spicy, sweet or sour.

In old days, most of common people were living a humble and deprived life. In general, life conditions were direly poor and labors were meagerly paid, needless to say education and culture development. A majority of common people spent their whole lives in Beijing. For them, Beijing meant not only home but also the whole universe. Surrounded by villages, the old Beijing was heavily influenced by the fatalistic life philosophy of countryside. As such, most people were content with things as they were, despite the fact that things did not go well and they had to struggle for subsistence. But the more fundamental reason underlying their passive acceptance of fate and lack of enterprise was that common people were granted neither the rights nor the means to aspire for a better and more dignified life.

Now we are living in a new Beijing where things are drastically different from the past. In our new Beijing, common people are the masters of their own fate and backbones of the society. Looking back at the old Beijing makes us, particularly younger generations, to feel proud of the new Beijing. We, as proud residents of Beijing, now have the rights to dream a better home and have the courage and passion to make it happen.

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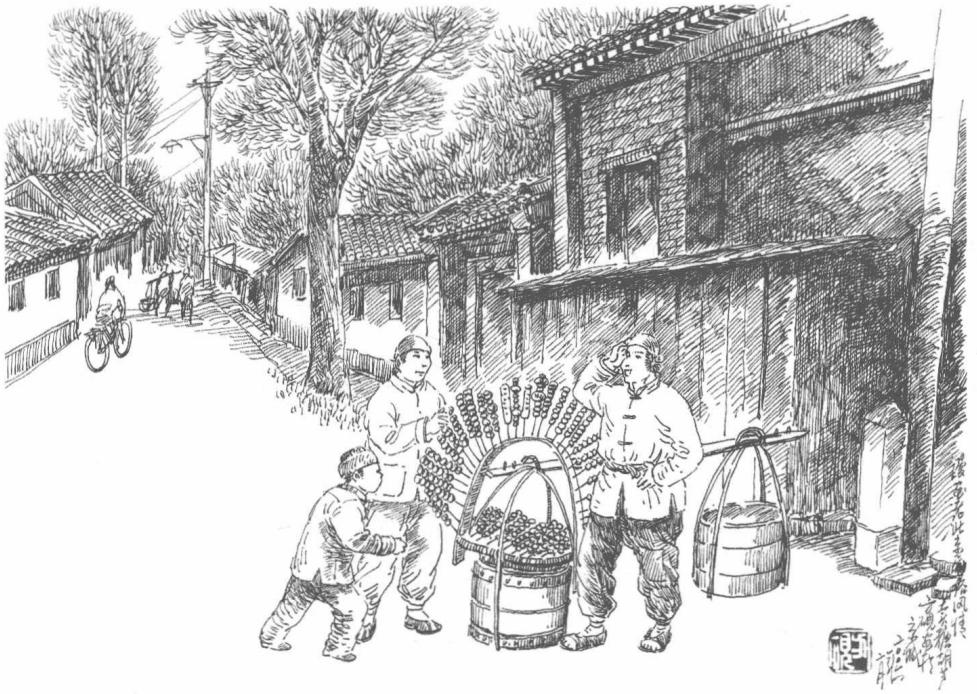
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1. Sugar-coated fruit on a stick

A stick of sugar-coated haws, or *bingtang hulu* in Chinese, is a very popular local delicacy in Beijing. Several pieces of fruit are coated with malt sugar and served on a stick. Other fruits such as crab apples, Chinese yams and water chestnuts are also served in this way. Its predecessor was a snack called *bingtang zi'er*, or sugar-coated seeds. Eventually the sugar-coated seeds were threaded on a thin bamboo stick, and then dipped in syrup. In the light, the sugar coating sparkled like diamonds.

Vendors peddled their wares in baskets fixed to either end of a pole. In the baskets were 2-inch wide bamboo pieces with holes where the sticks were affixed. Vendors toured the *hutongs* from mid-afternoon to night, with their resounding cries of “Big *bingtang hulu!*” echoing throughout the alleys.



2. Stand of broom corn millet gruel and seasoned millet mush

At the corner of the *hutong*, a stand was set up to sell broom corn millet gruel and seasoned millet mush. Its huge red copper kettle was a real eye-catcher. It stood almost one meter tall and shined brightly. Two yellow dragons wriggled along the handle and above the spout respectively. The mouth of the dragon over the spout merged into it so that water seemed to be spurted by the dragon. The two dragons were products of exquisite craftsmanship. Their eyes glittered and were full of life. Their scales were so distinctly engraved that one could do a count. Two red pompons quivering at the top of the dragons' whiskers added more perkiness to the dragons. The stand owner was also a delight to eyes, with his cap, apron and oversleeves that were all clean white. He could hold two bowls in his left hand, and poured water into the bowls from half a meter away. The pouring show was such a spectacular scene.

Broom corn millet gruel was made by simply pouring hot water on ground broom corn millet. To make seasoned millet mush, the millet was roasted in sesame oil or ox bone marrow oil before adding hot water. Both snacks can be eaten with brown sugar, white sugar or rose petals, depending on personal preference.



漢家此亭
同情亦滿
一疏而於
...



3. Mung bean milk

Mung bean milk was widely enjoyed in old Beijing, where vendors would set up a stand or tour the *hutongs* to sell the milk. Mung bean milk was a popular drink for some, though it was disliked by many Beijingers because of its taste. Mung bean milk looked similar to soy bean milk, except that it was thinner and had a green tint. It was made from fermented leftover mung bean flour and cooking starch. As the milk tasted and smelled a bit sour, drinking it was an acquired taste. Some people who tried it for the first time had to force themselves to drink the beverage at all. Interestingly, it seems that after several forced cups of the milk, people started to appreciate its distinct flavor. On chilly days in Beijing, a sip of warm mung bean milk and a bite of a spicy pickle was enough to feel warm and cozy.