

THE GREAT CITIES/**PEKING**

TIM LEE



# PEKING

By David Bonavia  
and the Editors of Time-Life Books

Photographs by  
Peter John Griffiths

**The Author:** David Bonavia was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1940. After graduation from Cambridge University, where he took First Class Honours in Modern Languages and in Chinese, he worked as a journalist in Africa and Asia. He became Moscow correspondent for *The Times* of London in 1969, but was expelled from the U.S.S.R. in 1972 for his reporting on Soviet dissidents. His study of the Soviet protest movement, *Fat Sasha and the Urban Guerilla*, was published soon afterwards. From 1972 to 1976 he was correspondent for *The Times* in Peking.

**The Photographer:** Peter John Griffiths was born in London in 1947 and studied Modern Chinese at Leeds University. He worked as a correspondent in Peking for two-and-a-half years and has photographed throughout South-east Asia and India.

*EDITOR:* George Constable  
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The captions and text of the picture essays were written by the staff of TIME LIFE Books.

Published by TIME LIFE International (Nederland) B.V.  
 Ottho Heldringstraat 5, Amsterdam 1018.

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 Second European English language printing, 1979.

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ISBN 7054 0491 9

*Cover:* Golden-yellow palace and temple roofs in the heart of Peking blaze against a summer sky. During the city's imperial past, tiles of this colour appeared only on buildings into which the emperor might set foot.

*First end paper:* Fired in delicate shades of green and ivory, a ceramic mandarin duck—a species traditionally symbolic of marital fidelity—floats upon the stylized waves of a tiled screen in the imperial gardens of Peking's Forbidden City. Screens were placed in front of entranceways to keep out malevolent spirits, which supposedly could move only in straight lines.

*Last end paper:* Ranks of neatly aligned and nearly identical bicycles—Peking's prime mode of transport—fill a city-centre parking lot. There are an estimated two million bicycles in the capital.



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## Alleys and Palaces

The Peking dawn is unlike any other I have seen. At certain times of the year, most commonly in the spring, an almost imperceptible pall of fine dust lingers over the capital. It produces a quality of light, both grey and yellow, that is to be found only in this city and its surrounding Hopei province. The light is breathed as much as seen, and its effects are oddly equivocal; objects suddenly blur or sharpen, as though some superhuman finger were tampering with the focus. Whenever I think of Peking, I remember this mesmerizing phenomenon. The city and its first morning light seem perfectly attuned—at once unique, at once hazy and sharp, suggestive of a new beginning.

It may sound strange to liken so venerable a place to the dawn. After all, the first of many cities to rise on the site of Peking probably began forming in the Eighth Century B.C., at about the time of the legendary founding of Rome. In terms of historical attractions, Peking remains deeply fascinating. Among the surviving wonders of its past are the Great Wall of China—begun more than 2,000 years ago and still the only man-made structure on earth that is visible to the naked eyes of astronauts in outer space—and the Forbidden City, a central, 250-acre complex where feudal emperors isolated themselves in ultra-extravagant courts. Yet Peking derives little spiritual sustenance from its ancient roots. In a sense, this is a city at the dawn of its history, for Peking effectively turned its back on the past in 1949, when the Communists chose it as the capital of the People's Republic of China.

Since then, the city has experienced the most dramatic metamorphosis imaginable, changing more rapidly and profoundly than any other capital city on earth. In 1949 it had a population of roughly two million, but it lacked major industries and had lost its status as the seat of government to the larger and more southerly city of Nanking a quarter of a century earlier. In today's China, Peking is second only to Shanghai in size and population: its main built-up area and suburban farms hold more than seven million inhabitants. As an industrial city, Peking ranks fifth in China, boasting enormous steel, petrochemical and textile plants, plus many hundreds of smaller factories.

The quality of life has undergone equally momentous alterations. In 1949, by the most conservative estimates, a quarter of Peking's population was suffering from malnutrition. The greater part of the city was scarred by slum conditions and, amid the grinding poverty, stood a mass of brothels, opium dens, gaming houses and seedy taverns. Today no one

**A huge portrait of Mao Tse-tung, mounted on the Gate of Heavenly Peace in central Peking, seems to monitor a gentle snowfall. From the balcony of this 15th-Century portal, Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China in October, 1949.**





Ch'ang An avenue, the main east-west axis of central Peking, follows the wall of the old Imperial City towards huge state buildings modelled on Soviet styles.





need starve in Peking. Plenty of near-slum housing remains, but there are virtually no beggars or prostitutes and almost certainly no drug-peddlars on the streets, and I personally do not know of a single bordello or gaming house in town.

This absence of vice in itself makes Peking an unusual 20th-Century city. More extraordinary, it is a city without privately owned cars, without churches (excluding two relics, one Catholic and one Protestant), without commercial advertising, and without any night-life (even most restaurants are closed by 8.30 p.m.). It is also a city where few birds sing, and flies rarely fly. Why? Because they have no place in the essentially new order of things. In the 1950s, the germ-carrying fly suffered a terrible blow when a government campaign exhorted the people of China—about 600 million at the time—to make a point of swatting 10 flies each and every day. The government also decided that birds had been consuming too much grain from the fields. A decree went out, and the entire population, working in relays, maintained a 24-hour din by blowing whistles and beating tin cans, trays and Chinese gongs. In fright, millions upon millions of birds took wing and remained in the air until they dropped dead from heart failure. Most of the birds now seen in Peking are caged canaries or other avian pets.

The ability of the authorities to mobilize most of the populace into working for a common purpose explains how Peking, along with the rest of China, has managed to change more in a few decades than it had done during the preceding 500 years of imperial rule. It should be added, however, that the people of Peking are not always the paragons of obedience, energy and co-ordinated dedication that the government would have the world believe them to be. I have seen workers idling on building sites and in factories in a way that would hardly be tolerated even in Britain; and I know of strikes, go-slows and brawls that have disrupted Chinese factories for months on end.

However, it is not my purpose here to make a political analysis of life in Peking or to weigh up the merits and demerits of the Communist system. Principally, my aim is to describe the city itself and how it feels to live in the middle of China today, in the heart of a capital that exemplifies a new way of life for some 900 million people.

Geographically, Peking occupies roughly the same position in China as does New York in North America—both verging on the 40th Parallel, both having their most comfortable temperatures in autumn and spring. But there all similarity ends. Located on the edge of the North China Plain, Peking is essentially a huddled city, sheltering behind hills and mountains to its north and west, and gazing proudly but a shade wistfully towards the warm and fertile lands of southern China. It stands neither on a significant river nor beside the sea. The nearest port is Tientsin, which lies about 70 miles away to the south-east.





The choice of this remote and relatively infertile spot as a city-site was perfectly logical in terms of China's needs some 27 centuries ago. The ancestor-city of Peking was built as a frontier outpost—a garrison to guard the North China Plain against marauding barbarian tribes, which could attack only via the Nan-k'ou and Ku-pei-k'ou passes in the Mongolian mountains to the north. The city was able to win a larger status only through centuries of beehive labours against its natural handicaps. Beginning in the Seventh Century B.C., great irrigation schemes transformed the dusty North China Plain into a creditable agricultural region; in the Seventh Century A.D., a 1,000-mile canal was dug to link the city with the rice-bowl of the Yangtze Valley to the south; in the 20th Century communications were further improved by the construction of an extensive railroad network, with Peking as China's principal northern junction.

Only one natural handicap has sternly defied all Chinese ingenuity and endeavour. That is the capital's unfortunate climate: oppressive in summer, frigid in winter, with too short an autumn and spring, and too much dust for a large part of the year.

The winter lasts a full five months—from the beginning of November until the end of March. Although Peking enjoys a clear blue sky on most winter days, temperatures frequently drop below 20°F.—and sometimes well below zero. Some of the new apartment blocks have central heating, but most dwellings are still warmed by old-fashioned iron stoves, sparingly fuelled with rolled-up balls made by mixing anthracite dust and tar. Household temperatures hover at a level that Westerners would find intolerably cold and outer clothing is very often worn in the house.

**During one of the duststorms that strike Peking in winter and spring, a haze of soil particles blown in from the Gobi Desert envelops factories on the city's outskirts. At right, soldiers sweep up the layer of grit dropped outside their barracks by the north-westerly winds.**





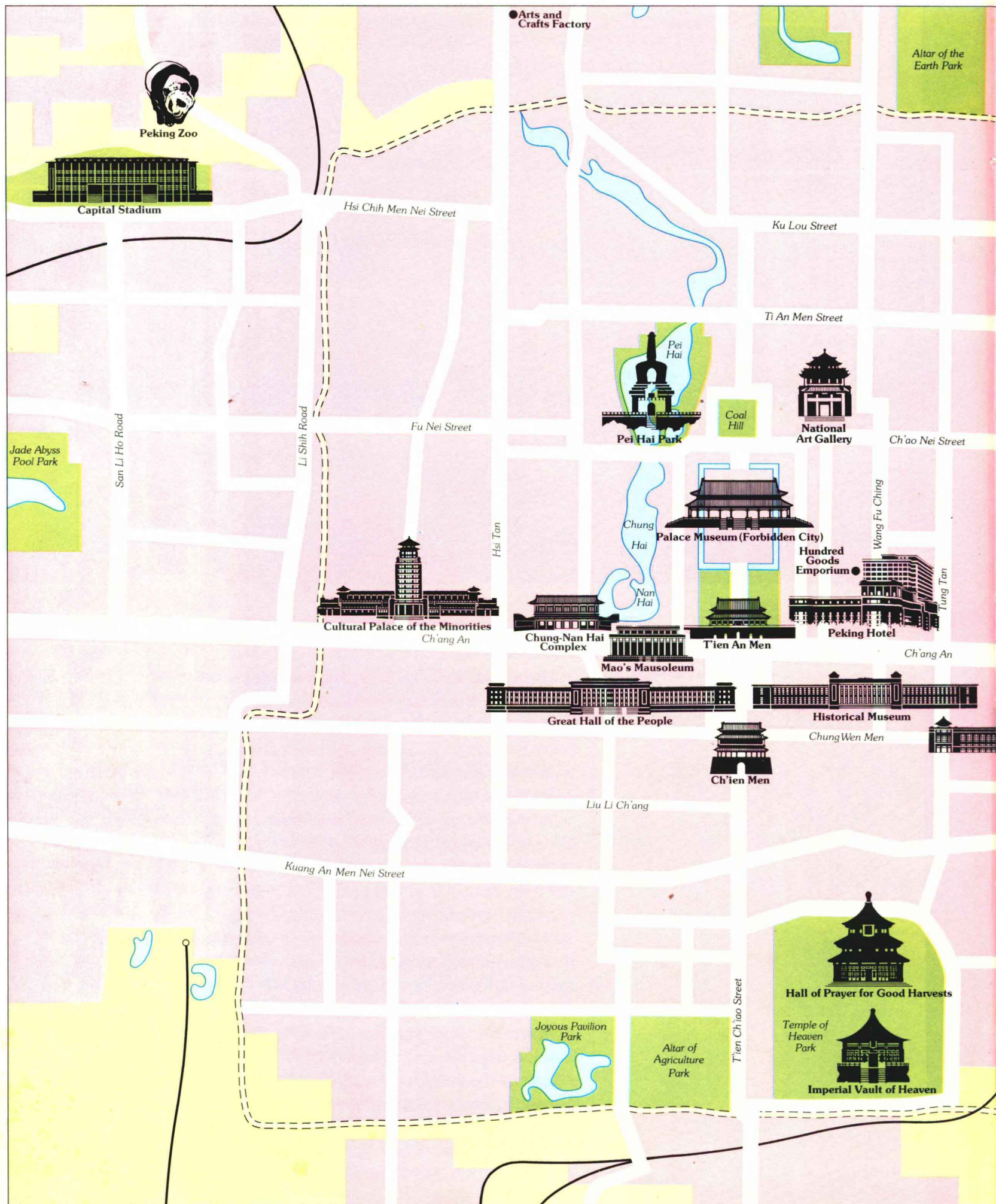
Throughout the winter months, a huge proportion of the population suffers visibly from colds, coughs and influenza.

There is virtually no rain in winter, and very little snow. If and when snow falls, it is welcome in the surrounding countryside because it means moisture for the early summer wheat crops and the rice and sorghum fields. But in the city it is detested as an impediment to bicycles—the chief means of personal transport in Peking. Armies of citizens sweep up the snow so fast that hardly a bicycle tyre or boot has time to mark its tread.

At times the dry winter cold is invigorating, the scene idyllic. Ice sheaths the trees. Lakes and moats become playgrounds for tens of thousands of children; bundled up in heavily padded clothes and mufflers, they cavort about on skates or on home-made ski-boards, which they propel from a squatting position with two short sticks. Mostly, however, the season is made thoroughly uncomfortable by freezing blasts sweeping down from Mongolia. From a foreigner's roomy, central-heated apartment, it is easy to tell which way the wind is blowing—by watching the Chinese cyclists, who are either free-wheeling at a merry pace or, heads down and dismounted, pushing their bikes against the lung-freezing gusts. Even without this clue, you can safely bet that the wind is blowing from the north-west.

Spring—the briefest of seasons in Peking—arrives in early April, when the poplar trees suddenly sprout long, furry-looking excrescences that drop to the street and are promptly swept up. The change brings welcome relief from the cold, but it also brings a new menace: a deluge of dust—actually fine soil from the Gobi Desert and from the suburban communes, where much of the food of Peking is produced. When high winds





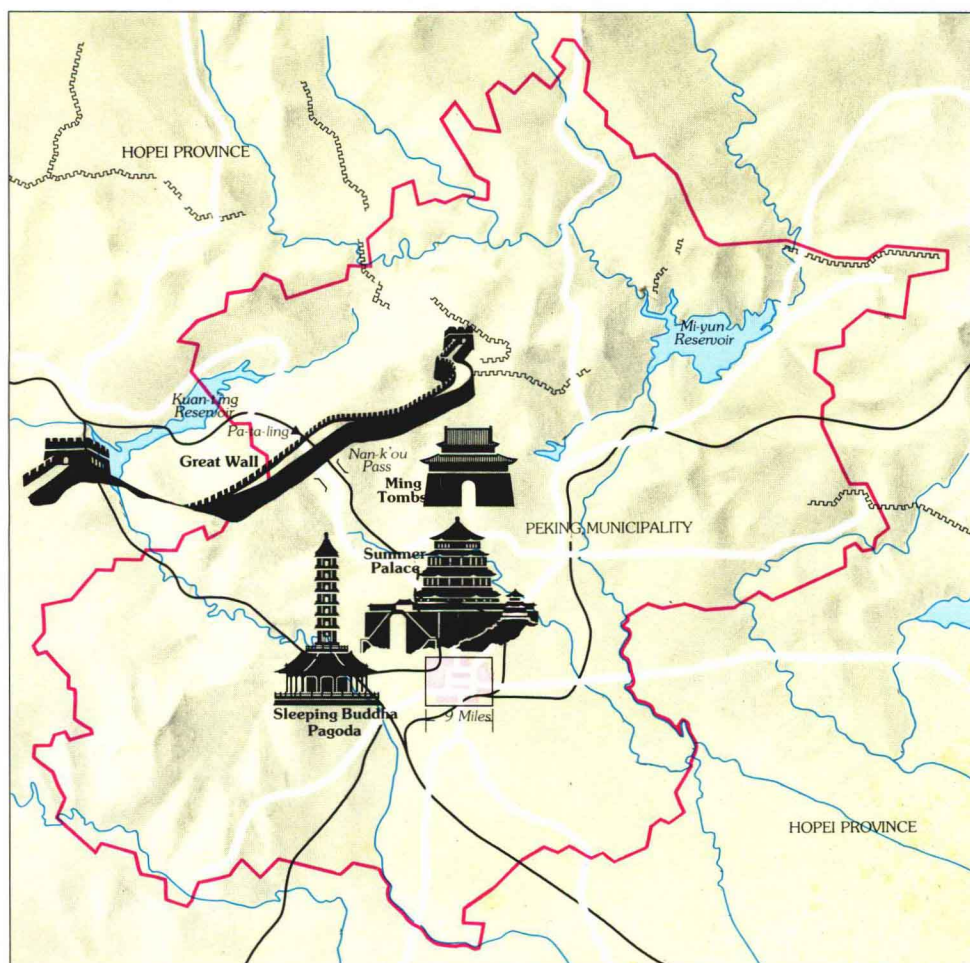
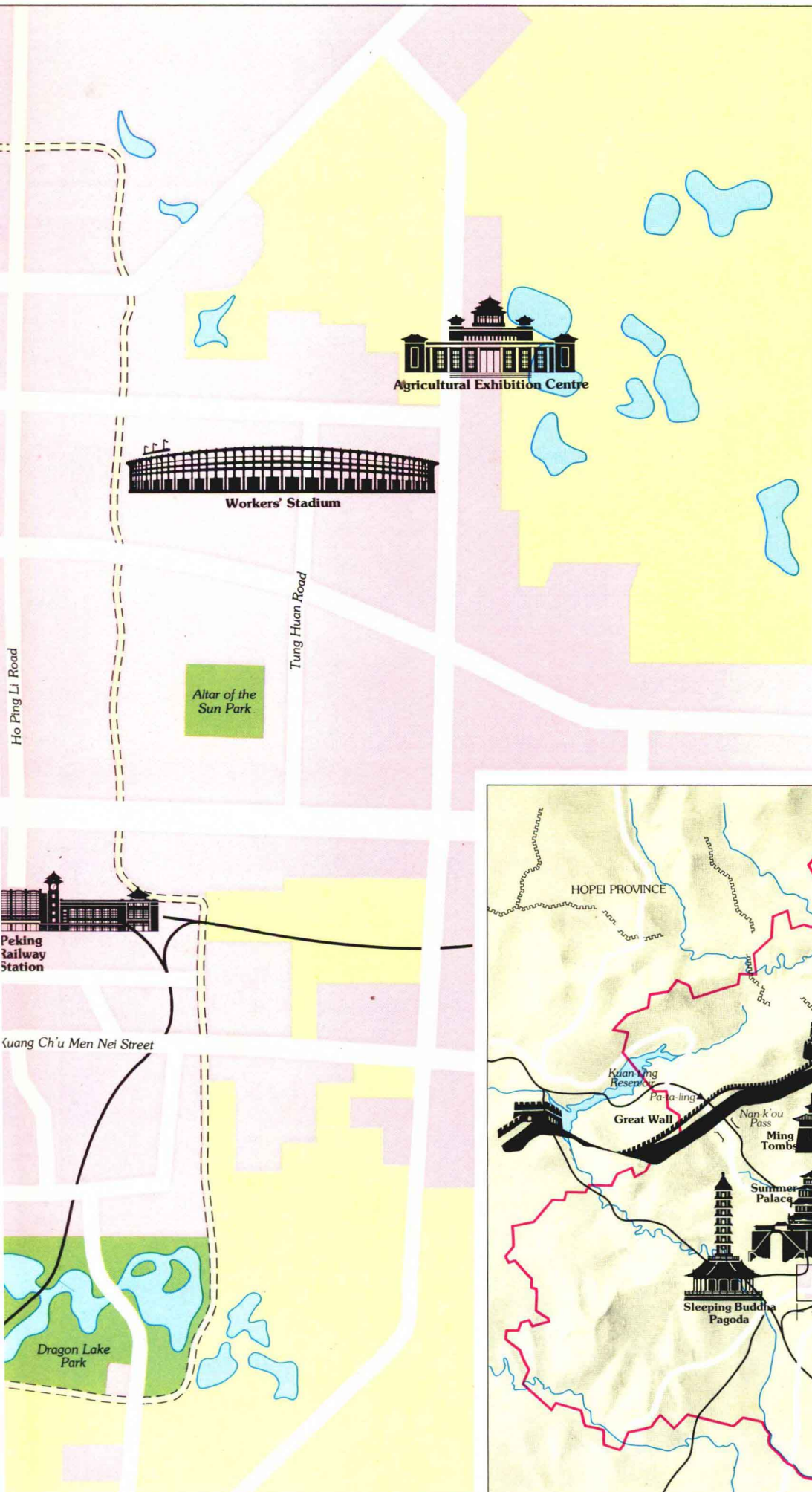


## A Compass-planned City

Although much has changed in Peking since the Communist takeover in 1949, the city still retains the grid plan—oriented according to the cardinal points of the compass—given to it in the 15th Century. At that time, a pattern of straight avenues was laid out around the central palace complex that became known as the Forbidden City. A walled belt of fortifications (dotted black line on the map at left) marked the perimeter of the capital, then about 26 square miles in area.

The Forbidden City lost its focal importance, along with its imperial residents, after the republican revolution of 1911, and has since become the Palace Museum. The walls of Peking have been demolished, and the built-up area (shaded pink on the large map) stretches far beyond its old limits in a sprawl of industrial developments and suburbs.

In spite of its rapid growth, urban Peking accounts for only a fraction of the territory that now bears the city's name. By an administrative decision of 1959, Peking's boundaries have been extended to cover a 6,600-square-mile municipality (outlined in red on the inset map) that includes satellite towns and agricultural communes as well as such tourist attractions as the Ming Tombs and a much-visited section of the Great Wall.





blow, watch out. The fine carpet of yellow powder covering Peking is churned into howling sandstorms that choke the city, flay the skin, mat the hair, and penetrate everywhere—through windows, doors, clothing and into books and papers. During these storms the inelegant style of Peking clothing is fully appreciated. The high-collared, quilted tunics and the baggy trousers (sometimes tied with string at the ankles) are an excellent defence against dust as well as cold. Many people gain further protection by wearing padded white surgical masks, taped around the ears.

A flush of yellow and pink on the parkland shrubs announces the arrival of springtime proper. The city authorities send out workmen to water the roots of trees that have been planted by the millions to serve as windbreaks and to provide shade in the summertime. Unfortunately, most of these trees are deciduous—ash, willow and poplar—and in winter they give hardly any protection against wind-blown dust. Moreover, as soon as they reach a worthwhile size, they are chopped down for valuable timber and replaced with fresh saplings.

The summer lasts from May until September. It is the only time of the year when any appreciable amount of rain falls; and it moistens the soil enough—with supplementary water from reservoirs and artesian wells—to permit the planting of a second grain crop for autumn reaping. Between June and August, however, the climate is uncomfortably hot and humid. Much of the populace seeks relief outdoors—sitting on walls and doorsteps, hiring rowing-boats on the artificial lakes that were once reserved for the Imperial court, and lazing in the parks.

Autumn in the Peking parks is not like autumn in any ordinary wooded place. Here, one may never enjoy wading ankle-deep in a sea of rust-coloured leaves. The fallen leaves—like everything else—are swept up almost as soon as they touch the ground. Even small children go around picking them up, one by one, using pointed sticks. The foliage is not wasted. Any dry organic matter is useful as fuel and kindling, both for warmth and for cooking; and certain kinds of leaves may be fermented to make fertilizer or hog-feed for the communes. Peking's miracle-workers cannot control the weather, but they do their utmost to turn it to advantage.

I came to Peking for the first time in autumn. It was 1972, shortly after Richard Nixon broke down the insular policies that had barred most Westerners from China since the 1949 revolution. In the wake of President Nixon's visit, foreign governments fell over each other to withdraw recognition from Taiwan and extend it to Peking. Diplomats, journalists, language teachers, translators and airline representatives began to arrive in the city in droves. My mission was to open a bureau for *The Times* of London. China had always intrigued me. As a boy I had developed an interest in Chinese poetry; and at Cambridge University in the early 1960s, I studied Chinese language, literature and history.





Against a backdrop of dilapidated, identical huts, ice-cutters working on the frozen moat around the Forbidden City manoeuvre square floes towards the bank.



At the moat's edge, the floes are cut into blocks and dispatched to storage cellars. The ice will be used during the summer to refrigerate perishable foods.



Peking remained my professional and personal stamping ground for the next three-and-a-half years. After a spell of that length in Peking, one is regarded by most other foreigners as being almost a veteran resident; only a few score devotees of the Chinese Communist system stay on as foreign residents for more than four years. Most of the others are rotated to other postings by their employers or leave of their own free will, feeling that they have learned as much about China as that circumspect country is prepared to allow them to.

Peking does not yield itself readily to the new observer. Its subtle beauty and character are unobtrusive, and the city unfolds itself by way of a confusion of hazy and totally strange images that slowly merge to shape something less than a clearly defined picture. I remember my first long look at Peking as an anticlimax. From my sixth-floor apartment about two miles from the metropolitan centre, I gazed out on to a cityscape that was flat, rectangular and frankly monotonous. My abiding impression was of one enormous rabbit-warren: acre upon acre of labyrinthine *hu-t'ung* (alleyways) flanked by a confusion of interlocking courtyards. Not exactly what Marco Polo had led one to expect. When that 13th-Century Venetian globe-trotter feasted his eyes on Kublai Khan's Peking (then called Ta-tu, meaning Great Capital), he was inspired to write about a city with "the greatest and most wonderful palaces that were ever seen".

Modern Peking does not lend itself to superlatives; indeed, any architectural judgment tends to be tinged by regret. The array of ceremonial gateways and towering boundary walls that Marco Polo saw has almost completely disappeared—a sad but perhaps necessary sacrifice to redevelopment schemes. Those schemes have introduced much banal architecture to central Peking: modern apartment blocks and administration buildings of starkly utilitarian design. And in suburbs to the south and especially to the east, the enormous industrial growth is marked by wide-ranging chimney stacks belching smoke into the dust-filled air.

Most foreign residents are required to live and work in high-rise compounds located mostly in eastern and north-eastern Peking. These compounds are modern in style and extremely luxurious by local standards, but they are prone to such ills as falling masonry, recalcitrant elevators and malfunctioning drains. When I arrived, the construction of the apartment blocks was in full swing and pile drivers, manned by military construction crews, thumped through the night under blazing lights. A Greek diplomat, infuriated by the noise, temporarily disrupted the proceedings one night by parking his car across the entrance to a construction site in order to block trucks—a deed whose audacity astounded the workers. Having made his point, he consented to remove his car and return to bed—whereupon the din of construction resumed.

The most serious drawback to these compounds is their isolation from the everyday affairs of the city. All Chinese are prevented from entering



With his personal means of transport kept close at hand, a white-jacketed policeman directs traffic on Ch'ang An avenue. Although Peking has no private cars, the main thoroughfares are crowded with buses, lorries and military vehicles, and in narrow streets the authorities sometimes have to put up signs (right) that ban just about everything except bicycles.







the foreigners' quarters unless they have a special pass. If you met a Chinese in a park and tried to bring him home for tea, not only would he be stopped by the uniformed soldier at the gate, but there would be an extensive investigation into his motives and background.

Outside the compounds, foreigners are continually frustrated in their efforts to penetrate the life of the people. They are encouraged by officialdom to use stores and shops catering exclusively to the non-Chinese and they are steered to restaurants that have specially secluded rooms for alien patrons. The attitude of the authorities is that foreigners should be treated as privileged but suspect visitors—housed, fed and chauffeured in a style completely denied to the ordinary citizens of Peking. Foreigners who venture to regular shops are usually served ahead of other customers; and in restaurants lacking secluded rooms, they will often be given tables to themselves, even if it means reshuffling Chinese patrons. Again and again, the outsiders come up against a wall of courtesy combined with control; and eventually it drives many of them, psychologically and physically, back into their compounds—back to their more familiar life of cocktail parties, swimming, tennis, paper-pushing, politics, gossip and adultery.

For those newcomers who are determined to get to know the city, the most logical course of action is to import a car or borrow a bicycle—but this approach presents its own hazards and frustrations. Who would imagine that a city without any private cars could be as confusing as any other great metropolis during the rush-hour? Yet such is the case: for most of the daylight hours, central Peking is a nightmarish vortex of bicycles, pedicabs, three-wheeled vans, red trolley buses, lorries, Toyota taxis, and the occasional Shanghai limousines and old Russian-built Volga cars carrying Party or government officials on some unknowable business. Driving or cycling through the city is like swimming in a river full of bobbing, floating objects—all of unpredictable behaviour. Cyclists blatantly ignore traffic lights. Pedestrians jay-walk recklessly. And the majority of drivers seem to have no conception of practicable speeds.

The Chinese philosophy of traffic control is fundamentally a humane one. It purports that self-powered human beings are the ultimate owners of the road and that the onus is on motor-powered beings to take exceptional care not to strike those on bicycles or on foot. The traffic code bans drivers from eating, smoking or talking while driving—though not, astonishingly, from drinking! And every driver in Peking, male or female, observes to excess the chief rule of the road: *Honk!* Chinese drivers also have some curious techniques. Many of them start off in second gear on the flat and shift into top gear just as soon as the engine stops shuddering; very often they will cut the ignition long before reaching a red light and then free-wheel to a halt. In both cases, presumably, they imagine that they are conserving fuel.