

Life and People in Old Beijing

--Through the Eyes
of a Painter

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老北京市井
风情画

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盛锡珊绘画

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外文出版社电子邮件地址:

info@flp.com.cn

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Text by Zhu Jiajin Shu Yi Sheng Xishan

Paintings by Sheng Xishan

Translated by Huang Lin

Edited by Zhou Daguang

Designed by Zhou Daguang

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Life and People in Old Beijing
— Through the Eyes of a Painter

老北京·市井风情画



Entrance to Menkuang Lane
门框胡同口



Life and People in Old Beijing

--Through the Eyes of a Painter

Sheng Xishan

Foreign Languages Press Beijing

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Preface

I was both surprised and excited when I saw the *Life and People in Old Beijing--Through the Eyes of a Painter*, an art book of paintings by Mr. Sheng Xishan, soon to be released by Foreign Languages Press. I could not help reading the manuscript more than once and was reluctant to put it down. Though my family's roots are way in the south, I was born and have lived in Beijing for more than eighty years. Beijing is my hometown and I love everything about the city. Many sights of this ancient city, however, are no longer to be seen. Now, luckily, Mr. Sheng has brought back the vanished scenes with his painting brush. To my generation of Beijingers, his paintings are particularly attractive and meaningful.

This art book vividly reflects the city, its people, their lives, customs and habits in the early decades of the 20th century. Well composed and designed, the four parts of the book are equally informative in their own way. The first part, *The Town and Its Streets*, presents vanished major structures in the axis lines of the city. Though the streets of the city are still there, the decorated archways spanning them at Dongdan and Xisi, the Chang'an Avenue and at Jingdefang have been taken down. The paintings not only simply record these historical sights, but every painting is a masterwork itself.

The second part, *Work in the Alleys*, presents peddlers, craftsmen, coolies and street artists of various types who performed in the open streets and alleys. In short, they were the people who worked in the street or delivered what they sold to customers and made art available at the grassroots level, all for a meager income. Take the food peddlers for example. Their customers were mostly the deprived and impoverished, but some of the foods they sold could not be priced low enough to be within the means of the working poor. Zen's cakes, for instance, were made from rice ground without the use of any water and then the rice flour was steamed into small buns which gave a uniquely delicious taste not to be found among any foods sold in any restaurants or pastry stores. Foods like this were sold at a very high price. Drawings depicting this have no kitchen as the background but show only figures and the actual objects. Such a way of presentation makes the scenes vivid and lifelike.

The third part, *Customs and Habits*, begins with scenes in the last month of the year when preparations for the Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) celebration are just starting. There are stands in the streets featuring New Year merchandise, activities

in every house preparing for the arrival of the New Year's Day and what streets looked like during major holidays.... There were temple fairs in the third and fourth months of the year of the lunar calendar (usually one month after March and April respectively), the Dragon Boat Festival, the Zhongyuan Festival (the 5th day of the 7th month) the day for remembering one's deceased relatives and the Mid-Autumn Festival.... There were weddings, birthday parties and funerals, as well as people from below the poverty line who struggled hard to stay alive. These can also be called "festival activities in Beijing."

The last part, *Shops and Stores*, recreates some of the most familiar old store sites in the city. At the time, in each of the western and eastern districts in Beijing there was a steamed buns shop. In front of the Baoruixing stood a huge gourd painted in red lacquer. It was so eye catching that people referred to this famed pickle shop as "The Big Gourd". It was known for both pickles and soya bean paste. The paintings of these places and their products bring back fond memories. The facades of different shops and stores bore marked variations, with some being elaborate in appearance and others looking quite simple, maintaining their harmony with their businesses. These drawings are included in the book not only to induce reminiscences, but to also serve as references for today's designers working on shop designs so that they will not suddenly bring the design of an inside-courtyard entrance to the street or make all the shops look like palaces, as if such incoherent designs could reflect national styles.

The Palace Museum once produced a large-format book entitled *Scenes in the Ancient Capital* with photos taken during the last years of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). That book mostly dealt with the city layout, royal residences and imperial gardens. Mr. Sheng's work, in most cases, is what that book lacked. By presenting scenes that only exist in one's memories of old Beijing, Mr. Sheng has accomplished something extremely difficult but highly valuable and thus he deserves cheers and congratulations.

January 1998

Zhu Jiajin

Research Fellow of the Palace Museum

Member of the State Cultural Relics Authentication

Committee

序

外文出版社编辑的盛锡珊先生画作《老北京·市井风情画》，我读了又惊又喜，不禁又看了多遍，简直不忍释手。我是一个生长在北京八十余年的浙江萧山人，北京等于我的第二故乡，我爱北京的一切。而现在许多景物已经没有了，盛先生的画又大都是已经消失的景物。他的画在我们这般年纪的北京人看来，可谓是“不着一字尽得风流”了。所以就特别引人入胜。

画册生动地重现了北京20世纪的城建、市井和市民生活。整个画册的构思与布局得当，四组内容分述详尽、各有侧重。开卷就是《城池街市》如永定门、五牌楼、中华门、地安门……这是中轴线已经消失的大建筑物。还有德胜门、德胜门水关、西直门、东直门、东便门、左安门、左安门角楼……这都随着固若金汤的城墙一起拆掉了。城内的街道虽然存在，但东单、西四的牌楼、长安街牌楼、景德坊等牌楼也都拆了，这些景物在画册中不仅仅是个记录，更是一幅幅历史性的佳作。

第二部分是《胡同百业》，绘有小贩、个体耍手艺、卖苦力以及练把式卖艺的。总之都是街面上露天干活的，他们的经营方式，现实叫做送货上门，服务到家，艺术家在基层。这一切连同叫卖声朝夕伴随着老北京人的生活。以卖食品的而论，销售的对象也是劳苦大众，但其中也有些食品，不是劳苦大众常常购买的，例如：甑儿糕，是用米磨面不合水，倒在木模式的小蒸锅里干蒸的食品，任何饭馆或糕点店都没有这个美味的食品。上述一些食品用当时的物价来衡量，价钱是相当高的。这些画大多没有景，只是人和物，可谓气韵生动，呼之欲出。

第三部份《世象风俗》，这一部份从年前腊月开始，也可以叫做年景。街上的年货摊贩，家里准

备过年的各方面活动，正月里家中和街面上的活动。三月四月的进香朝山走会，端午节、中元节、中秋节的各种点缀。办喜事、办生日、办丧事，以及在饥饿线上挣扎的人们是怎样的活着。这一部份也可以叫做“北京岁时记”。

第四部份，标题为《店堂楼苑》，这部份最熟悉的有东兴楼、文美斋、宝瑞兴酱园，合顺斋蜂糕铺、月盛斋酱牛肉，天福号酱肘子、王致和臭豆腐……各有特长。东兴楼是最典型的京式山东饭馆、菜做得非常好，服务异常周到。文美斋是西城最著名的满汉饽饽铺，当时东西南北城都有第一流的满汉饽饽铺，是近年产品望尘莫及的。宝瑞兴门前有一个大红漆葫芦，顾客不称他的字号，称他“大葫芦”，他的腌菜和酱菜都非常好。这些都是令人怀念的。商店的店面俗称“门脸”，也是各式各样，有的豪华，有的简朴，风格又都很协调。这些式样保留在画册中，不单单是令人发思古之幽情，还可以给一些新店面的设计者做参考资料，免得把住宅垂花门搬到大街上，或者突然地出现所谓宫殿式，仿佛这些不伦不类的就足以体现民族风格似的。

故宫博物院曾经用旧照片出版过一大本《帝京旧影》，照片都是清代末年拍的，内容是城廓、宫室、苑圃、王府等，而盛先生作品的绝大部分正是《帝京旧影》所不具备的内容。所以这部画册，又可以叫做《北京梦华录》，因为已经消失的景物只能相逢于我们这些人的梦中了。而今盛先生能够把我们说不出的梦境展现给读者及后人看，当然是难能可贵而又可喜可贺了。

朱家溍 一九九八年元月

朱家溍：故宫博物院研究员，国家文物鉴定委员会委员。

**Greeting the sunrise at the Thousand-Spring
Pavilion.**

**Bidding good-bye to the sunset at the Bridge
of Silver Ingot.**

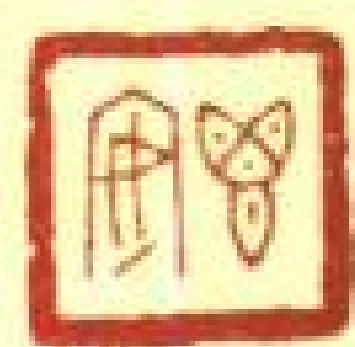
**While few of the sights of the ancient capital
remain,**

**paintings are drawn to review the past and
enlighten the future.**

Calligraphy by Wang Shixiang
Research Fellow of the Cultural Relics Research Institute
State Cultural Relics Bureau

萬春亭上迎朝旭
銀錠橋頭攬夕嵐
勝蹟京華餘幾許
五圖待與夢同參

暢安王世襄題



萬春亭上迎朝旭
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五圖待與夢同參

暢安王世襄題

王世襄：国家文物局文物研究所研究员，中央文史研究馆馆员。

Intimate Echoes of the Past

Shu Yi

Those who try to keep the memories of the beauty and wonder of history alive forever by employing their special skills whenever history turns a new page are true heroes and wise men.

This is particularly true in the case of Beijing.

Beijing during the 1930s was a world different from this city toward the end of the 20th century. In fact there is hardly any resemblance at all. The reason is simple. The Beijing of that day was unique and stood out by itself with its particular features. On the contrary, the same city at the end of the 20th century seems to have lost all that which only belonged to her, leaving her without any features that cannot be found elsewhere.

Then why Beijing of the 1930s? Why not the city of the 1920s? Or the 1940s? Or any time earlier or later than that decade?

Nobody who is still alive today experienced the kind of life that existed here before the 20th century, the life of the 19th century for example. Beijing of that era cannot strike any sentimental reminiscences among people alive today. Life at that time simply belonged to a different time and a different world and has nothing genuinely comparable to life nowadays.

Beijing in the 1930s was a mature city, like a ripe persimmon in deep autumn, golden in color and with transparent skin while soft and juicy inside, and as sweet as ice cream. These would fall from the tree when swept by the gentlest breeze. Beijing then was everything, having acquired whatever it should have. Of course, Beijing at that time was about to change its color and flavor as it had been under the impact of all kinds of forces from outside as a result of the progress of time. Beijing was about to step out of its old pattern of life as it found its feet on a major threshold. We must capture Beijing of that time together with its door frame, so to speak, in order to see the Beijing of that particular time. For the Beijing of that era was most typical and its significance is not to be missed.

Those born in the late 1920s and early 1930s are all in their 60s and 70s. Their memory of Beijing was acquired during their childhood, something remaining most vivid and solid. Without any effort to squeeze it, their memories of old Beijing will come flowing. It is most intelligent to have one of these people tell the story of this ancient town.

And so here is a truly intelligent old Beijinger by the name of Sheng Xishan, a painter. In the years of the late 20th century, he used his brush to present Beijing of the 1930s.

Not everybody can do what he has achieved for such a person

must have three qualities:

First, there must be an idea, a proposal, a strong opinion. With such an idea, he can do a great job, seize the opportunity and catch the history at the last minute when history is about to turn a new chapter;

Second, he must have rich experience and profound knowledge. He must be a born and bred old Beijinger who has a true love for the city, someone who is well informed of the details of everything that happened here. In short, he must be a quintessential old Beijinger, knowing every corner of the town, and;

Third, he must be equipped with the special skills to portray the old Beijing, skills that must be more than ordinary with which he can easily do what he has in his mind.

It happens that all these qualifications can be found in Sheng Xishan. As a result, what seemed accidental gave birth to an inevitable and wonderful art book about the old Beijing.

To achieve this, Sheng Xishan worked for five years completing more than 500 paintings, whose rich content set a record among works of the same subject matter. It must be borne in mind that these were no ordinary five years. With the special skills he has, Sheng could have easily become wealthy in the commercial upsurge. But he endured a simple life and loneliness, working at his painting desk every day creating one piece of the work every four to five days, overcoming impetuosity and shortsightedness with reason and vision and producing a great achievement.

Sheng has surprisingly good memories. One set of the pictures that were drawn to reflect sites of scenic and historical interest that had completely disappeared from sight runs for as many as 79 pieces, all based upon his memories of the past. The facades of old shops, presented in a group of 78 pictures, are mostly no longer in existence. Not only the shops are gone, but even the trades no longer exist. Their very names sound rather strange and distant to the ear of the younger generation today. There are also more than a hundred pictures portraying street peddlers, handicraftsmen, street performers and coolies. All of them are now recorded for history through these paintings. In addition, there are about 150 pictures of customs and habits of the bygone days. It certainly was no easy task to create on paper so many images without the help of real people, real things and real sites from which he could draw sketches. He did it all purely out of his own recollections.

Precisely because of this, this publication is most valuable in the sense of serving as an historical document. It can also be used as a reference book when people build props, do make-up and recreate scenes of the old Beijing.

Customs and habits are most reflective of the distinctive characteristics of a nation. There is no uniform custom and habit in the world. Whatever falls into the category of customs and habits will invariably differ from region to region. And this very characteristic has made customs and habits a special subject for academic study and renders it necessary to introduce and study customs and habits of different places. It is this characteristic that makes customs and habits in one place interesting to people in another place as something new, special and mysterious.

And among customs and habits, those of Beijing are particularly interesting.

Then what are the most distinctive characteristics of the customs and habits in Beijing? First and foremost it is their idyllic side.

If I'm asked to name one city in the world that was closely linked with the countryside, I would not hesitate to cite Beijing. Before the day broke, large numbers of country folk were already swarming into the city from outside the city center, bringing vegetables, fruits and flowers to the door steps of city dwellers. Country folk carried their goods of beautiful colors on carrying poles, and there was green cabbage, Chinese cabbage, beans, cucumbers, spinach, turnips carried in one after another. There were also people coming to deliver yellow earth on carts. Beijingers then all had courtyards and they needed the fresh earth to cultivate flowers, grass and trees. Flower seeds and saplings were very inexpensive and one could easily afford to have a whole courtyard planted. Walls were covered with morning glories. Four-o'clocks and fragrant plantain lilies grew against the foot of the walls. With very little money and effort, one could have enough plants to attract large swarms of bees and butterflies.

Fruits were in abundance in old Beijing. Many of them were picked from the Western Hills and Northern Hills, fruits such as Chinese pear-leaved crabapples and ordinary crabapples from the Western Hills; date plum persimmons and large persimmons from the Northern Hills; Jingbai (Beijing white) pears, large-fruited Chinese hawthorns, big cherries and rose-scented grapes, plums and sweet apricots that were so fresh they still carried a layer of frost like powder on their surfaces, a quality that

immediately made the paper-wrapped oranges imported from the US second class. On rainy days, leek leaves carried mud splashed on them by rain drops. Cucumbers still bore the yellow flowers on their tips. Beijingers at the time were really fortunate for they ate the freshest food harvested on the same day. This was possible because the inner city of Beijing was surrounded by gardens, vegetable fields, flower houses and a vast rural land free from the pollution of factories and their black smoky chimneys. Remember the poem with lines going like this: "Picking chrysanthemums from the fence in the east and viewing the gentle hills in the south"? Simply change the words "east" and "south" into "north" and "west" and you have a true description of the serene life of old Beijingers.

Beijing was typically close to nature. Its small lanes and alleyways, built mostly straight, linked up all the city districts. An occasional slanting road would immediately be named such and such slanting lane. Pedestrians did not have to worry about losing their way. Lining the lanes were adjacent quadrangle houses with courtyards in the middle. Built in strictly measured directions, they all had rooms on every side opening into the central courtyards, which apart from walkways were dominated by flowers, grass and trees. In foreign countries, villas are usually built in the suburbs. Beijingers were different. They had their "villas" right in the city center where they could smell the fragrance of natural plants. The little quadrangle houses were in total conformity with modern ecological demands for they preserved moisture, regulated the air and kept out noises. Simply put, every family had its own filter which adjusted the climate for the house owners. Moreover, amidst such a gratifying environment, one could see the hills in the north and west of the city simply by standing in the middle of the city roads.

Such an arrangement, which made the city as close to nature as possible, kept the city to the right size, not very crowded nor too sparsely populated, neither very noisy nor depressively quiet. There was enough space here and there, beautiful views wherever you focused your eyes, facilities that made life easy whenever you moved about. You never felt too far away from either the downtown area or the residential quarters. This idyllic feature made Beijing stand out among the world's largest cities. Indeed, Beijing was a place of great activity and liveliness, but it was also a city of tranquillity. Like shadow boxing, Beijing had its most exciting spots as well as its gentle parts. Like scented tea, it contained the sense of gentleness within its great strength.

The city's idyllic characteristics were also reflected by its people's strict observance of the twenty-four solar terms of the year. These terms were particularly important to agriculture. For centuries, the Chinese people had conducted their life and work accurately according to the change of the terms, planting or harvesting the right kind of crops on the right day, without missing their time by even one day. As time went by, they had found for themselves a fixed and precise timetable in their lives. And Beijingers were most typical in observing this timetable. Naturally they had twenty-four festivals during the year, celebrating them with all sincerity and earnestness year after year. Obviously the original meanings of the festivals in agriculture were no longer important. They seemed to be just empty shells, or excuses, or symbols, or traditions whose job was to make life interesting with variations, creating a rich culture in the process.

To Beijingers, the twenty-four lunar festivals meant a great deal and were complicated enough to fill a whole book. Actually the festivities around the Spring Festival itself were enough to make a book. Just think of it. More than a week before the festival, actually starting with the 23rd day of the last month of the previous year, the day designated to make sacrifices to the kitchen god, people in the whole city were mobilized to take part in uniform actions specified for each day. The first such day of preparation was a time for a thorough house cleaning. The next day saw people making steamed buns for later consumption. On the third day, people slaughtered chickens and ducks, and such interesting holiday preparations went on and on in great magnitude and with increasing momentum.

This prelude to the Spring Festival, which really began on the 8th day of the lunar month, had a strong cultural color. To put it lightly, it was simply rather dramatic.

On the 8th day of the last month in the year, people made something called 8th Day Porridge. It seemed this particular kind of porridge was designed with the purpose of demonstrating the bumper harvest people had just enjoyed. To make this congee, rice, millet, water caltrop cubes, Job's tear seeds, sorghum, corn, an assortment of beans (red beans, green beans, soya beans, colored beans and kidney beans), various kinds of nuts (walnuts, chestnuts, hazelnuts, pine nuts, melon seeds and peanuts) raisins, dried longans, red dates, and candied fruits were cooked together in water. It is not hard to imagine that a pot of all of these ingredients stewed together would be fragrant, colorful and great

fun. Its very look and aroma made one's mouth water. Every house would spend a whole night preparing this congee as family members gathered to remove peanut and walnut shells. Children would eat them as they helped on the job and invariably they ate more nuts and did less work. When the congee was ready, it was customary to divide it among friends and consequently it almost became a competition of congee making.

Originally it was a Buddhist tradition to make this kind of stew as a sacrifice to the gods. People then used huge pots to make it and also took part of the stew to divide among the poor people. There was also the tradition of emperors giving away this kind of congee as a reward to court officials. When congee making struck roots among the general populace, it assumed a feature of merrymaking and harvest celebration.

What was more dramatic was making sacrifices to the kitchen god on the 23rd day of the last lunar month. In the old days, every household had an image of a kitchen god placed in their home. The god was said to take a trip to heaven to report the situation on earth to the heavenly god on every 23rd day of the last lunar month. Consequently, people always bought some malt sugar which they put on the mouth of the statue of the kitchen god in the hope that, with his sweetened tongue, the kitchen god would only report the good deeds of mankind. Interestingly, people did this almost fun-making ceremony with great sincerity. It should be noted that children were the real beneficiaries of what was offered to the kitchen god on the altar.

Every festival has its own story, its particular symbol and unique food, its game and sites to see. The Dragon Boat Festival on the 5th day of the 5th month of the lunar calendar features pyramid-shaped dumplings made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves, as well as yellow rice wine, calamus and Chinese mugwort braided together and colored silk tigers. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, people make and eat moon cakes, buy rabbit dolls, eat fruits and fresh soya beans, and keep cockscomb flowers. The Double Ninth Festival is a time to climb hills, eat roast meat and crabs, view chrysanthemums, compose poems over cups of wine. Where osmanthus trees grow, their special fragrance makes the occasion quite intoxicatingly enjoyable.

At that time, many craftsmen, peddlers and artists were particularly busy acting as if they were simply part of the festivities. Take the Spring Festival for example. There were people selling almanacs, New Year prints, firecrackers, portraits

or statues of the kitchen god and fortune god and door god, the couplets hanging down from the door lintel, preserved fruits, lanterns, glass trumpets, diabolos, sugarcoated haws held on a bamboo strips, fresh haws and the colorful toys called pinwheels. Artistic performers demonstrated their skills in folk dances such as "boats running on dry land," walking on stilts, dragon dances, lion dances, kicking the shuttlecock, balancing the huge flagpole, *yangge* dancing, wrestling, beating *taiping* drums, enacting the role of big-headed monks, etc.

To celebrate the Spring Festival, every household prepared special holiday foods for this particular occasion, and in Beijing spicy preserved Chinese cabbage, soya bean paste, crispy fish, steamed rice flour pork and pheasant meat cubes were most popular. There were three kinds of food that were musts: boiled dumplings on New Year's Eve, thin spring pancakes on the Beginning of Spring (usually falling in early February) and sweet glutinous rice flour dumplings.

Spring pancakes, either baked or steamed, made an especially delicious food. To go with the thin pancakes, there were sliced spring onions and soya bean paste, stir-fried spinach with bean noodles, stir-fried day lilies and wood fungi, stir-fried bean sprouts with young garlic shoots, shredded meat and shredded animal stomachs. A bit of each of these dishes was placed on the pancake and wrapped up in it. The effect was a delicious and refreshing taste that could not be matched by any other dish in the world.

The Spring Festival meant a time of rest for all the people, old and young. No one was supposed to do any work or use any tools. They did not even have to empty their dustbins. The purpose of this was to give working people a chance, the only chance in the year, to totally relax. How humane!

There were many things to see during this great holiday. Women went to see the colored lanterns and firecracker displays, or took a collective outing. A stroll was referred to as a "walk to get rid of all ailments." To cross a bridge was considered a trip of good luck. One of the popular things to do was to go and touch the huge door nails at the entrance of the Zhengyangmen Tower. Since the nails represented the images of women's breasts, to touch them suggested that they would soon give birth to baby boys. During the daytime people visited the market in the Liulichang Cultural Street, or attended temple fairs at the White Cloud Temple and the Big Bell Temple, going on donkey back. They could go to the Yonghe Palace to see ghost chasing. When

they became tired or thirsty while doing these things, they might eat the juicy sweet "red-hearted" turnips, which suggested that they would be free from the drowsiness many suffered during the spring. In short, every action and every activity had some interesting and humorous interpretation or significance.

On the 2nd day of the 2nd lunar month, an occasion said to be the day when the dragon woke up from its winter hibernation, the customary food was pancakes or noodles or the meat of a pig's head.

During the Qingming or Pure Brightness Festival, which falls in early April, people visited the cemeteries to remember their deceased relatives and plant willow trees. There were many places to go during the 3rd lunar month such as the Peach Palace, East Mountain Temple, Tanzhe Temple, Jietai Temple and the Tiantai Hill. The big yellow croaker fish was considered the delicacy for this period.

The following month seemed to have been reserved specially for outings in the suburbs. The Longevity Temple was the nearest site while the Miaofeng Mountain was most distant. The first crop of tender shoots from certain trees and edible flowers were ingredients for food during this period. These included the tender leaves from Chinese toon tree, Chinese wisteria flowers (which were mixed with wheat flour to make the most tasty pancakes) and elm tree blossoms whose resemblance to the shape of coins earned them their popularity.

When orioles singing was heard in the 5th lunar month and fruits and cherries were ripe, it was time to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival.

The 6th lunar month was already summer. The Shishahai Lake Park was a popular place. In fashion was the "ice bowl." This was a ceramic bowl in which was placed a block of ice on top of which was a piece of lotus leaf topped with fresh lotus roots, seeds, water caltrop, fresh walnut, and fresh almond. These mostly pure white goodies on top of a piece of green lotus leaf was like an exhibition of the most fresh types of produce on land and in water.

The 15th day of the 7th lunar month was the Ghost Festival. People then burned toy boats and released lanterns to drift on the river.

The 8th and 9th months constitute the golden season in Beijing. The sky is high, the air fresh. It is time for all kinds of fruits to ripen and flowers to blossom. It is also a time of many insects singing in concert. There are crickets and katydids to

name just a few. For old Beijingers, autumn was also an ideal time to go hunting or flying kites. Chestnuts and sweet potatoes ripen in this period, so do red dates and grapes. Quince, which looks like cherries and are as sweet as honey and *chibao* (a local fruit) also are harvested at this time. This last type of fruit turns red in early winter, is soft and has an elastic quality. Thus it often is something people play with in their hands. Migrant birds including the wild goose fly past Beijing on their southbound journey at this time.

To eat wonton in winter, like eating noodles in summer, was the rule in old Beijing. Once the Winter Solstice (in late December) came, the skating season was here too.

The idyllic characteristics of the folk customs in Beijing are fully demonstrated by the people's intimate relationship with plants, trees, flowers, grass, fruits, animals including livestock, insects and birds. Loving nature has been a basic instinct of people in Beijing. And this instinct deserves much acclaim!

There are four distinctive seasons in Beijing: its summer being very hot, winter very cold, spring tenderly refreshing and autumn rich. There are strong winds, rain storms and days of great sunshine, providing an ever changing ideal environment for the folk customs of the people and testifying to the fact why the folk customs here are so rich and varied.

Eating was the major aspect of Beijing's old folk customs. Just looking at the great varieties of local delicacies, feeling the warmth, hardship and courtesy of the craftsmen who produced this wonderful range of food and listening to their melodious chanting to attract customers would reveal why eating held such an important position in the life of Beijingers. It is no wonder that out of 150 portraits Sheng Xishan did of peddlers and small businessmen, as many as 58 describe food sellers. It also proves one truth: folk customs in Beijing are refined and deliberate and embody profound meaning.

Beijing was the capital of six ancient dynasties in Chinese history and four of these dynasties--the Liao, Jin, Yuan and Qing--were ruled by minorities respectively called the Khitans, the Nuzhens, Mongols and Manchurians. Obviously Beijing was a place where ethnic groups lived in mixed communities and exchanged with each other their cultures and traditions. This also explains the pluralism, richness and specialties of the folk customs in this ancient city.

Almost all of these aspects in the life of old Beijingers can be

found in Sheng Xishan's paintings. Sheng Xishan seems to be a man of great creativity, and every step he takes in this city, both ancient and young, brings back memories to him of great details and vividness. And these reflections of the past, in turn, constitute the steps of history. As he continues along this historic path and leaves behind solid footprints, he is imbued with great aspirations that encourage him to portray the historic path.

Sheng Xishan's paintings emphasize great detail but are not static. They are realistic but not unimaginative. They are beautiful and reflective of high spirits. Every piece is done with an emphasis on composition, layout and an effort to bring out something new to the eye and mind. Ordinarily speaking, works of the same theme often have three drawbacks: being rather sketchy, they pursue likeness in spirit and overlook likeness in appearance; limited in angle of presentation, they pay great attention to a certain part and lose magnitude and momentum; and they are usually incomplete in selection because they simply do not cover enough subjects. But in Sheng Xishan's works, we see none of these problems. His works are a superb breakthrough.

More than 500 of Sheng's works are gouache paintings that pose their unique difficulties to complete. It has not been an easy job for him! During a period of five years, I have seen with my own eyes Sheng completing one piece after another. Towards the end, he could not carry all of them on his back and had to hire taxies or to ask his son to help him carry the paintings. All the time, my surprise, joy and respect for him kept growing. I knew for sure that I had come in touch with a series of uniquely outstanding works. Because they represent a famous historic city to today's viewers; they have captured a chapter in history for a city that has already changed; they have portrayed a mind and heart of lofty compassion, and they echo a period in history of a blood relationship.

It is with great enthusiasm that I have had the good fortune of coming across this event of artistic creation. During one's entire lifetime, how many times can one be this fortunate.

This is why I have written this essay to share my thoughts with readers of this book.

September 27, 1997

By the Andingmen Overpass, Beijing

(The writer is a research fellow and executive deputy director of the China Modern Literature Museum)