



Beijing Record

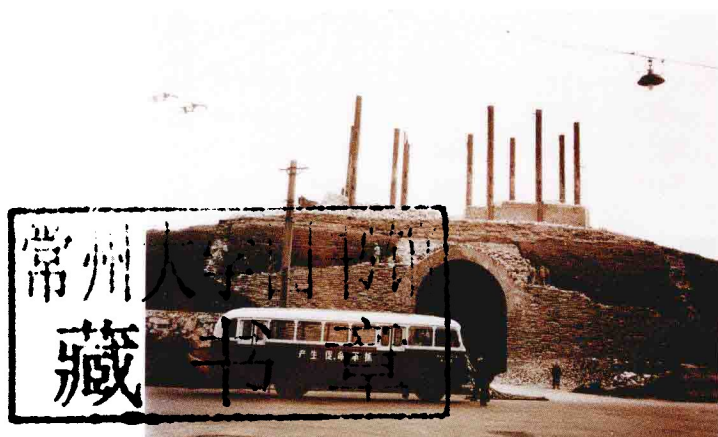
A Physical and Political History of Planning Modern Beijing

WANG Jun



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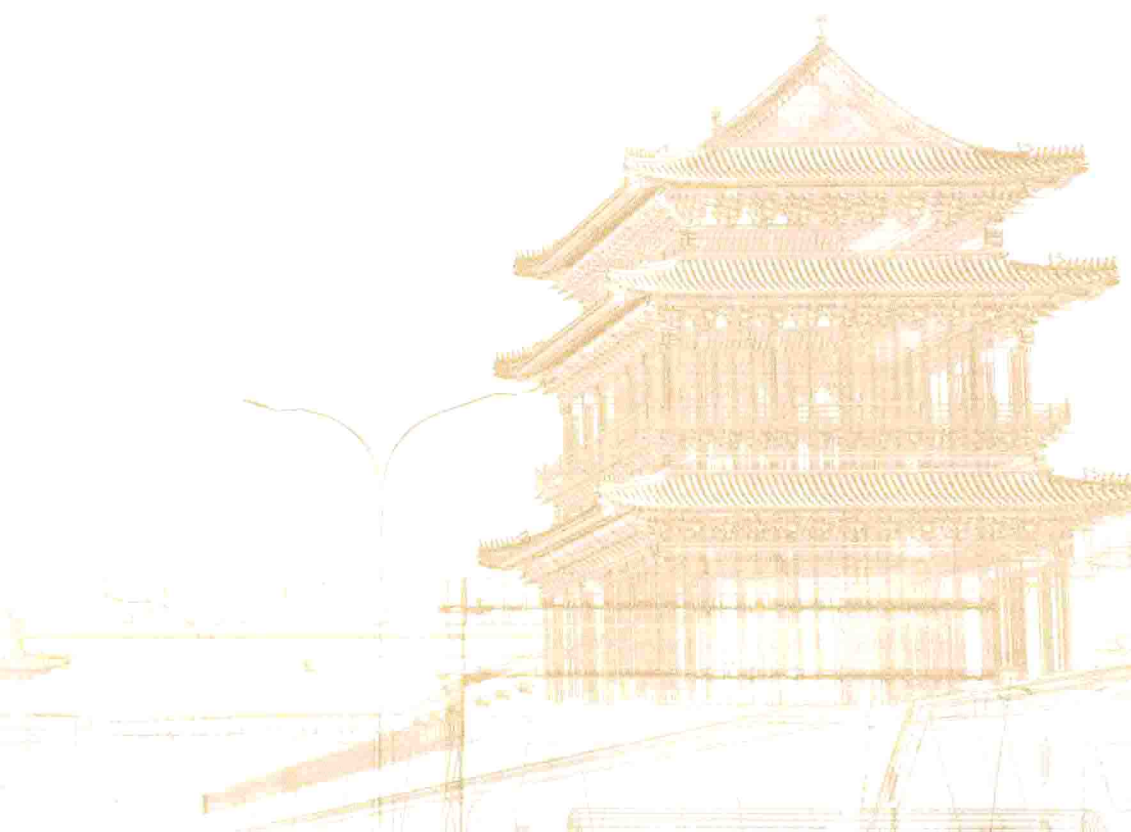
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For You, My Dear Son Kuankuan





Wang Jun, was born in 1969 in a mountainous, poverty-stricken area in Guizhou, one of China's least developed provinces. He majored in journalism at Beijing's Renmin University and upon graduation in 1991, he began working at Xinhua News Agency, China's state news agency. Currently, he works with *Outlook*, a weekly news magazine affiliated with the Xinhua.

Wang Jun's time as a journalist coincided with an unprecedented construction boom in the Beijing. He questioned the need to do away with the ancient structures — city walls, lanes and alleys known as *hutong* — in the Chinese capital city in the midst of modernization.

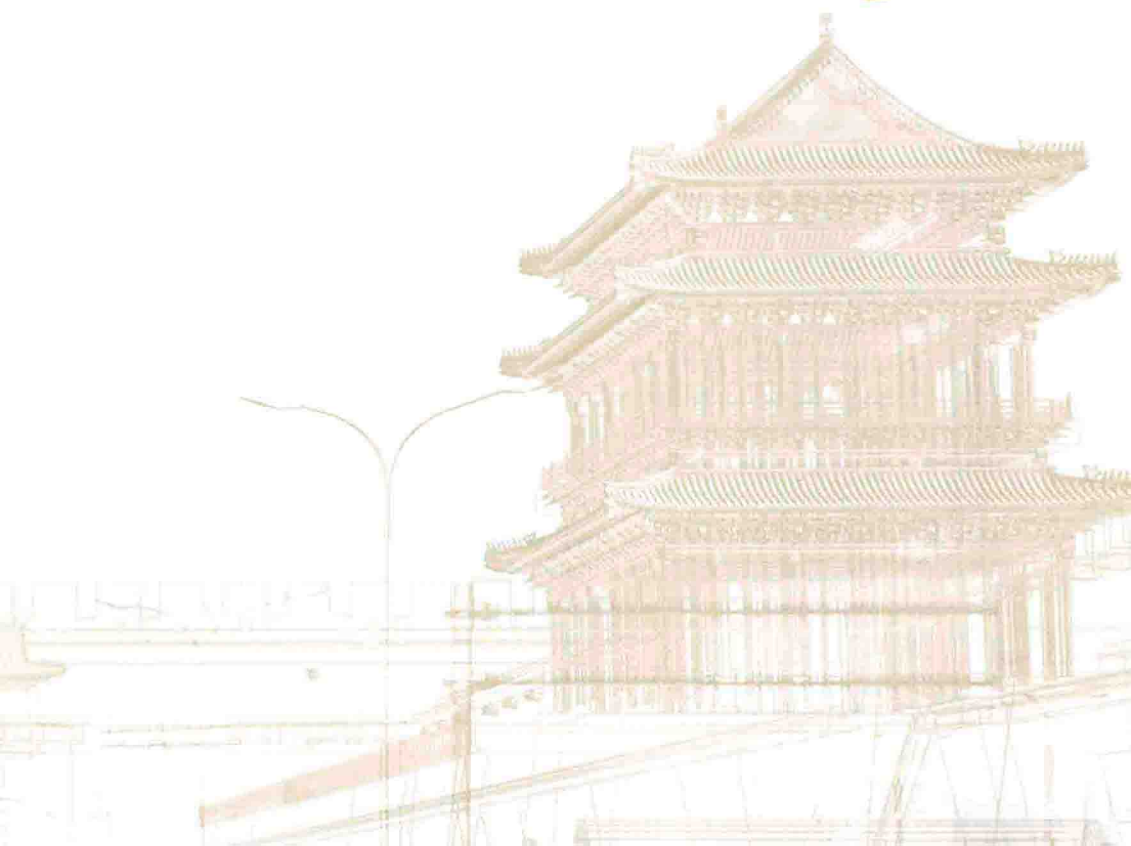
With that in mind, he investigated and dug deep into the labyrinth of Beijing old and new. He did research for nearly ten years and his efforts were culminated in the publication of *Beijing Record* in 2003. The *Beijing Record* became a bestseller in China and has been reprinted for eleven times. In 2008, Shukousha published a Japanese version. This newly-translated English version has the latest update on the author's findings in the area. As the only edition printed in full color with nearly 300 illustrations, the English version powerfully showcases the stunning architecture, culture, and history of China's Dynamic Capital, Beijing.

Wang Jun's second book, *Cities as Recorded by a Journalist*, published in 2008, reveals the secret of urbanization in China's reform era — the most massive of its kind in human history. "For communication, humans rely on journalists who are faithful to facts," wrote Wang Jun. "Barriers inherent in the human race can be overcome only in societies where journalists can work as journalists, where communication is truly possible."

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Foreword

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Foreword

Over the course of its long and eventful history, Beijing has been called many things: *The City of Splendor*; *Beijing the Magnificent*; *Beijing the Sacred City*; the *city of grand and harmonious design*, the *frontier city*, or the *ultimate capital city of China*, to name but a few. Recently, however, labels and attributes related to Beijing have dramatically changed in tone and nature. One particular attribute deserves, alas, to be mentioned here, for it is a ubiquitous sentiment: Beijing, a city being lost before our very eyes. From *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing* (Wu Liangyong, 1999), “Remaking Beijing” (Wu Hung, 2005), to *The Last Days of Old Beijing* (Michael Meyer, 2008) and *The Concrete Dragon* (Thomas Campanella, 2009), historians, urban planners and journalists both in China and abroad have written, lamented, lectured and blogged about the transformative (internal and external) powers that triggered the development of the old city of Beijing into a modern, global city consisting of different, and oftentimes, conflicting aspirations and temporalities.

Wang Jun’s book *Beijing Record*, at long last, brings to an extended western audience the inside story of the key decisions that led to Beijing’s present urban fragmentation and its loss of memory and history in the form of the bulldozing of its architectural heritage.

Beijing Record is a remarkable achievement. It was researched and compiled mainly in the 1990s, when many archives reformulated and loosened their access policies; it, therefore, incorporates a huge amount of previously unpublished (or “classified”) data; it draws some of its most vivid perspectives and insights from eyewitness accounts, in the form of interviews, with a great variety of actors on the stage of Beijing’s economic and urban development; finally, numerous illustrations, many of them published here for the first time, supplement the narrative of a city exposed to highly volatile ideological and market forces.

First and foremost, *Beijing Record* is about the engaged curiosity and determination of a Xinhua News Agency’s journalist to get to the bottom of things. Wang Jun engages the authorities in debate; he makes Beijing residents aware of current and historical events; he follows decision-making

processes devised by the Beijing Municipal Government or by real estate developers, and evaluates their respective consequences; he publishes opinion pieces in major journals and newspapers, and his blog at blog.sina.com.cn/wangjun constitutes a treasure trove of materials on heritage sites and preservation planning (or, rather, the lack thereof) in China as a whole. His reports and factual accounts both galvanize and offend. They galvanize public opinion, and offend developers and authorities. Over the course of our acquaintance, I have witnessed Wang Jun coming under strong attack by colleagues using language derived straight from the rhetoric of the days of the Cultural Revolution; I have similarly (and in short order) witnessed him succeed, with the support he managed to solicit from the public and government departments, in stopping the demolition of countless structures of historical significance.

One such *victory* over the authorities, if the word may be permitted, came when, in July 2009, Wang Jun published an article denouncing the pending demolition of Liang Sicheng's courtyard house. Liang Sicheng, it should be pointed out, was modern China's founding father of the discipline of architectural history and preservation. *Beijing Record* is largely about Liang Sicheng's ultimately futile attempt to save traditional Beijing from the wrecking balls of Mao's socialist revolutionary projections. While Wang Jun's 2009 article was hotly debated in Beijing, I had the privilege to travel with him and his family in Hebei province. We had undertaken several trips together in the past, but July 28, 2009 turned out to be a significant day: the head of Beijing's Cultural Preservation Bureau personally intervened in the demolition of Liang Sicheng's old courtyard house, and, over the course of the next week, a moratorium was called on the destruction of traditional structures in Beijing, especially those known to be associated with famous personae both past and present. Liang Sicheng's old home, which, curiously, had not been placed under the protective envelope of the Cultural Relics Bureau, was spared.

It was a victory of symbolic impact, albeit it must be placed to the far right of an envisioned temporal axis of such events; the far left of that same axis is occupied by what Wang Jun and Wu Hung (quoting Chen Gan, a senior engineer instrumental in formulating Beijing's post-Liberation construction plan) describes as the shift of "point zero", namely, the consequential shift of the seat of power from the throne hall in the imperial palace onto the open, public stage of the newly constructed Tiananmen Square in 1950. By then, Mao's decision to anchor his authority within the realm of the old city had already been made. The changes Beijing underwent in the 1950s were not subtle. It lost its magnificent archways along Chang'an Avenue. They

were taken down overnight, in clandestine fashion, “because it was realized that their destruction would be unpopular and it was thought preferable that there should be as short a time possible during which people could see them actually being demolished.” By 1952, one of the few remaining foreigners pointedly observed that “the People’s Government seems to have a lack of taste and a narrow-minded suburbanism more often associated with a government of the lower middle class than a government of workers.” (Peter Lum, aka Lady Crowe, *Peking 1950–1953*, London 1958) Yet, during these same years, urban planners and architects at Qinghua University and state planning bureaus, most of them familiar with western (and Russian) planning principles and fully aware of Beijing’s traditional urban fabric, imaginatively designed community spaces, administrative compounds and individual residential buildings which, if executed, would have stood any capital city in the world in good stead. However, as far as I am aware, these very creative and adaptive designs (that left the cell structure and overall grid of Beijing intact), were never implemented, reputedly due to lack of funding.

Beijing’s architectural heritage trajectory of the 1950s continues downwards, and, with much anxiety, Pearl S. Buck, noting in general how Beijing’s monuments were falling into decay, remembers a visit to the old Summer Palace on the outskirts of Beijing:

“It was under guard, for the new government, as we still called it, was conscious of its national treasures and the great imperial buildings of the past were all under military guard. On this day I had lingered long in the Forbidden City, the idle soldiers staring at me curiously, and at last one of them beckoned me to follow him around the corner of a palace. Thinking that he wanted to show me something I had not yet seen, I followed. But when I reached the place where he stood, he put up his hand and pulled down a magnificent porcelain tile from the edge of a low roof, a tile of the old imperial yellow, stamped with a dragon. ‘One silver dollar’, he said.”
(Pearl S. Buck, *My Several Worlds*, 1954)

The story of the 1950s ends with a number of significant events: the smelting of iron for a projected but ill-advised and devastating Great Leap Forward campaign, resulting in the loss of massive quantities of building timber pulled from historic temples and traditional residential housing; the first phase of the sustained and irreversible tearing down of Beijing’s city walls and gates (as illustrated by the cover photo); and the construction of the Ten Great Buildings to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the People’s Republic in 1959. The latter were decidedly not of a structural style,

“regulated by a harmony so subtle, that after having looked at it, you bend your head as if to listen to it.” (Abel Bonnard, commenting on the dignity and harmonious coherence of traditional Chinese architecture in 1926.)

Wang Jun’s *Beijing Record*, first published in 2003, has won a number of awards not long after its release. It was recently voted book of the year by the China Readers’ Journal *Zhonghua dushu bao*, an influential trade publication, and thus occupies an illustrious position within the pantheon of the most influential books published since the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949. It is still in print, now in its 9th print run, fully seven years after first being published. It was translated into Japanese in 2008, and there is a Taiwanese edition. This English translation is a result of conversations dating back to 2006. With the Olympic Games sitting squarely in the middle of the project as a distracting event, it took over two years to complete. Looking from afar, one could have the impression that with Rem Koolhaas’ CCTV tower entering the skyline in that same time span, Beijing’s transformation from a coherently conceived imperial capital city to an international stage for disaggregated and locally, stylistically disconnected architectural forms, urban functions and community designs, is complete. However, by way of juxtaposition, Beijing’s recent efforts regarding preservation policies can be benchmarked by pointing to the regulatory framework of defining Beijing’s Historic Preservation Districts (2002), and by making historic preservation one of the priorities in the latest version of the Beijing masterplan (2004–2020).

Among all the chatter about urban renewal, among this cacophony of construction noises permeating modern Beijing day and night (regrettably, or perhaps fortunately, Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin remained largely silent on the matter of urban regeneration!), Wang Jun’s voice is all the more important for our understanding of a city which may well become the capital of the world’s largest economy in the not too distant future. The undeniably precious place of the past in this future is being negotiated and re-negotiated for all of us, by citizens like Wang Jun, on the ground level of Beijing’s streets, on a daily basis.

Thomas H. Hahn

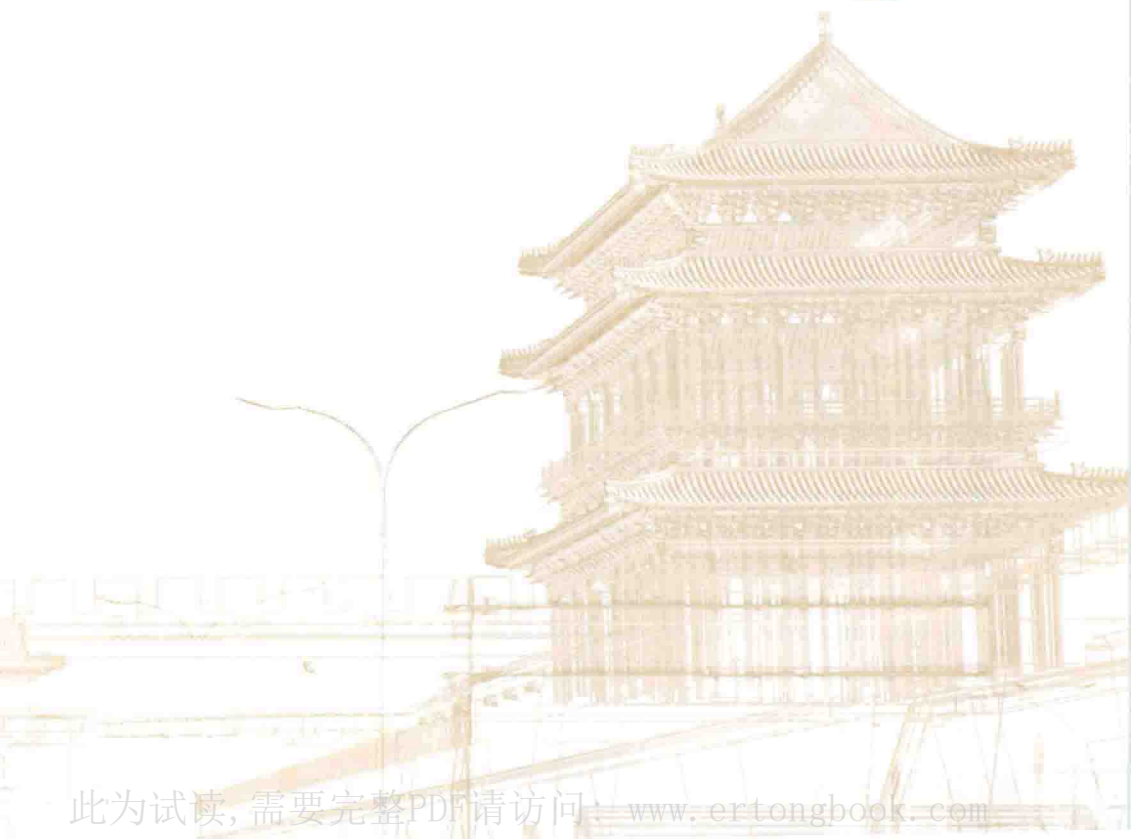
Cornell University

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Preface

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Preface

The City of Beijing: in the Twinkling of an Eye

I really don't know what prompted me to write this book, impetuosity or God's will. In March 2001, I received a letter from Qinghua (Tsinghua) University School of Architecture, asking me to submit a paper to a forthcoming academic symposium to mark the centenary of the birth of Liang Sicheng (1901–1972), a most prominent architect of contemporary China. Shortly afterwards, Ms. Lin Zhu, Liang's widow, called me, urging me to be quick. "Hurry up," she said. "Otherwise you'll be late!"

So I began writing, resolved to accomplish the assignment. To my own surprise, barely one week had passed before I put down somewhere between 40,000 and 50,000 words, and I still couldn't stop wielding my pen. That period of history I was writing about was indeed too heavy, with myriad changes in society, with the rise and fall of so many individuals, which made it a real challenge to record it. Digging into old archives while trying to offer a sort of new interpretation of that period, I felt as if I was brought back to those bygone years, unable to shun this question those involved seemed to keep asking me: What would you have done had you yourself been involved? The job was so painful, as time and again I was compelled to "communicate" with those tragic heroes of history.

The 20th century that ended not too long ago witnessed sweeping changes in Beijing. For this historical, culturally rich city, those bygone 100 years seemed so short, just like the twinkling of an eye. Yet the force resulting from the changes that took place in this short period was so great that the city still maintains a kind of inertia powerful enough to shape it now and in the future, to affect, in a tangible way, the life of every person living in it. Though short, this period, I believe, will be an eternal subject of discussion by members of China's intellectual community of all generations to come. To know what the future will look like, we, prompted by human nature, invariably look back. I hope that my pygmy effort would end up with a rough sketch of what happened to Beijing in the past century. Rough as it is, the "sketch," so to speak, may become increasingly precise along with the opening of more and more archives to the public.

I do not dare to make hasty comments on this period of history. What I have done, in my capacity, was to collect and screen historical records on the subject, with sources of information ranging from old newspapers, magazines and books, unpublished writings to interviews with those who had survived those changes.

This book is divided into ten parts which, starting from the current realities of Beijing, attempts to record the history of the city's urban construction over the past 50 years, by using those debates that occurred at different times as the principal line of narration. To be more precise, the book focuses on telling what happened in the 1950s and 1960s, interwoven with stories about the lives of architects and planners including Liang Sicheng, Lin Huiyin (*alias* Lin Whei-yin), Chen Zhanxiang (*alias* Charlie Chen) and Hua Lanhong (*alias* Leon Hoa). By doing so, I attempted to decipher the antecedents and consequences of the "Liang (Sicheng)-Chen (Zhanxiang) Proposal," to explain how Beijing's city planning was done in the 1950s and how, on that basis, the current pattern of Beijing's expansion was formed. The book also records the mushrooming of structures capped by *dawuding* (large palace- or temple-like concave curved roofs) and the demolition of Beijing's city walls along with many other ancient structures. These came at different times of that period in history, with different events to feature: the call of the ruling Communist Party for "transforming Beijing from a consumption city to a production city," criticism of the so-called "attempt to restore the ancient," the "Great Leap Forward Movement" in the late 1950s and the "Cultural Revolution" from 1966 to 1976.

Photos and graphics in the book, more than 300 in total, are as important as the text. Many of the graphics resulted from outstanding achievements made by China's academic community. Here, I would like to extend my heartfelt respect to those seniors and colleagues of mine who helped me in my research for this book. I owe this book in particular to the following people:

- **Ms. Lin Zhu**, for allowing me to access photos of Liang Sicheng's life and work, as well as some of the sketches drawn by Liang Sicheng in his notebooks;
- **Mr. Luo Zhewen**, for letting me use his photos of Beijing's city gate towers and other important ancient structures before they were torn down;
- **Mr. Liang Congjie**, for allowing me to use an unpublished water color sketch by his father, Liang Sicheng;
- **Mr. Zhang Wenpu**, for providing me with a photo portrait of Zhang Xiruo;

- **Mr. Chen Yanqing**, for providing me with photos of Chen Zhanxiang;
- **Mr. Zhang Kaiji**, for allowing me to use photos of his architectural works;
- **Mr. Zhang Xiande**, for allowing me to use his sketches of city gate towers, along with some photos of old Beijing;
- **Mr. Kuang Han** and **Mr. Charles Chauderlot** for providing me with their drawings of *hutongs* (narrow lanes and alleys) in Beijing;
- **Mr. Song Lianfeng**, for providing me with some aerial photos of Beijing; and

Staff members of the Library of Qinghua University School of Architecture, for the assistance they gave me.

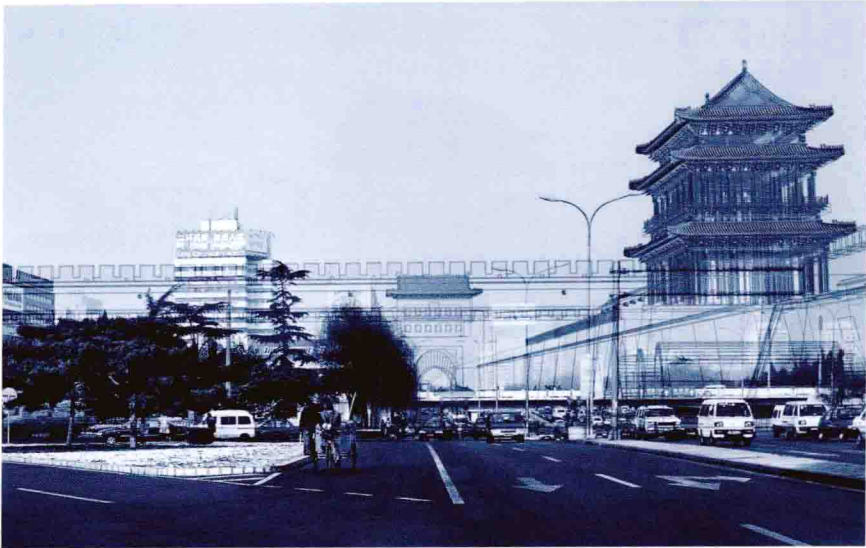
No student of Chinese architecture and city planning can forget the name, Liang Sicheng.

It is Liang Sicheng who, in old China, trekked over land and water to find things that could epitomize the quintessence of the Chinese civilization, in total disregard of the physical difficulties and hidden dangers in those almost inaccessible, bandit-infested areas. On that basis, he produced China's first-ever monograph on the history of Chinese architecture.

Liang Sicheng was the first to call for "dwelling to the dweller." He was also the first to define "contented life and work of residents" as the "ultimate aim of city planning" — in fact the first to work for a rational development of Chinese cities.

It is Liang Sicheng who, in disregard of political risks, did his utmost to plea against destruction of ancient structures for construction space. His appeal was turned down again and again but never did he give up. The architect, as portrayed by the Chinese mass media and publications in the most recent years, was a person of tragedy. So many people have been moved by the words he wrote in 1957: "Demolishing a city gate tower, you are cutting a piece of flesh off my body; taking off a brick from the city walls, you are peeling off an inch of my skin." Earlier still, in 1950, he and Chen Zhanxiang proposed that the administration center of the new government be built outside Beijing so that the ancient capital would be preserved in its entirety. Both were to suffer because of what was dubbed as the "Liang-Chen Proposal," and their tragedy has moved so many to tears.

Over the years I have been hard at work to search for Liang Sicheng's footprints all over Beijing, to catch his words that seem still echoing, while trying to acquaint myself with the city's new moods and sentiments. The more I learned, the more I felt that there were still things to dig up. This "vicious cycle" of cognition once made me hesitant. Time and again



An artist's rendition of Beijing's Fuchengmen area now and the demolished Fuchengmen Gate (by courtesy of Beijing Crystal Digital Technology Co. Ltd.)

I stopped writing, and time and again I picked up my pen and pressed ahead. Based on what I wrote for the symposium in commemoration of Liang Sicheng, I produced two relatively complete articles, one submitted to Qinghua University and the other, to the *City Planning* magazine. Both articles aroused interest among China's academic community. With encouragement from many seniors and friends, I continued writing and eventually produced this book.

Indeed I experienced so much sorrow and had so many regrets during those ten years when I was trying to explore the changes that had taken place in Beijing. Chen Zhanxiang died, and so did Shan Shiyuan, Mo Zongjiang, Zhang Bo, Zhou Yongyuan, Zheng Zuwu and many others. All of them had an ardent love of Beijing, though they had different roles to play in Beijing's history and held different opinions on the changes that had taken place in the city. Bedridden, Zheng Zuwu exerted himself to the utmost to receive me, inhaling oxygen while trying to talk. Twice Chen Zhanxiang shed tears when talking with me. To sum up, I would like to thank all those I interviewed, not only for the help they rendered me, but also for their honesty toward history.

I am grateful to Ms. Lin Zhu for allowing me to access Professor Liang Sicheng's notebooks and diaries, which came in scores of bound copies,



An artist's rendition of Beijing's Chaoyangmen area and the demolished Chaoyangmen Gate (by courtesy of Beijing Crystal Digital Technology Co. Ltd.)

as well as the "confessions" he was forced to write for alleged "anti-Party, anti-socialism crimes" during the "Cultural Revolution." I spent the whole winter of 1999 at Qinghua University working on these invaluable historical records, an experience forever inscribed in my memory.

I must thank Mr. Chai Zhen, my teacher, and Mr. Luo Ruiren, a senior schoolmate of mine, for the encouragement they gave me. I must also thank all those who helped me by offering suggestions on the draft of this book — Ms. Lin Zhu, Mr. Liang Congjie, Mr. Liu Xiaoshi, Mr. Chen Yanqing, Mr. Zhang Xiande, Mr. Yang Dongping and Ms. Zhang Zhijun. For years in a row, Mr. Li Jing kept supplying me with newspaper clippings, and I also had the help of Ms. Wang Lei in sorting out those photos.

Finally, I must thank my wife Liu Jie who shared the sorrows and joys I experienced over a long decade of hard work. She was able to contribute her knowledge and wisdom to this book as both of us have been studying the same subject — the changes of Beijing where both of us live.

Wang Jun

October 29, 2002, Beijing

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Acknowledgement

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I should acknowledge numerous people who have helped me so much with the publication of the English edition of *Beijing Record*, seven years after the initial Chinese edition came out in 2003. Forgive me, however, for mentioning only a few of them here.

Mr. Hu Lujun, my classmate at the Remin University of China, generously sponsored the translation of the book into English. He and Mr. Luo Ruiren — our senior alumni — admired this first book I authored upon graduation, and wished to bring it to more readers. This English edition of *Beijing Record* is a kind of reward of their desires.

My thanks also go to three of my senior colleagues at the Xinhua News Agency: Mr. Li Zhurun, Mr. Jin Shaoqing and Ms. Xiong Lei for their generous help despite their busy schedules. Li and Jin translated the book into graceful English: Mr. Li on the foreword and chapters 1–5, and Mr. Jin on chapters 6–10. Based on their work, Ms. Xiong Lei did the copyediting. Their work has tremendously enriched this English version.

I'm equally grateful to Thomas H. Hahn, Jeffrey L. Soule, Liu Yuan, Harvey Solomon and Sidney Wong, who enlightened me considerably on urban planning and offered much encouragement and advice about this English edition's publication. Their help has been invaluable, and most appreciated.

Finally, I'd like to express thanks to two editors of World Scientific Mr. Lim Tai Wei and Ms. Dong Lixi, and to all the others who have made contributions to the publication of this book.

Wang Jun

April 15, 2010