

LOCAL CHINA THROUGH WESTERN EYES

European exchanges with China date back to the 14th century. The contemporary EU began its experience on a more systematic basis in the year 1975 with the opening of an EC diplomatic office in Beijing. Since that time, a series of outreach projects have been set in motion. These aim at trade agreements, political dialogue, and the establishment of a sustainable partnership that might result in the furtherance of a more humanitarian legal agenda.

The Beijing Olympics provides a complex scenario for a revisiting of the West-East interchange. Human rights activists continue to underscore a need to set and maintain goals that appear to be dwarfed by the economic pursuits of an ideological centralized state. Those focused on the scale of expenditures note the sheer cost of the Olympic complex, which by some estimates has meant a dollar outlay of at least 40 billion for the athletes' Village, additional buildings, and connecting roads and subways.

The current opening to China is also introducing a far-flung audience to another aspect of development which has been ongoing for over a half-century, namely the transformation of a four thousand year old agrarian civilization into an urban and industrial power. Many modern views are more narrowly focused than broad contributions about globalizing realities, choosing instead a concentration on shifts in art or architecture, the negative effects of real estate sprawl, or on the transformation of local social landscapes and lifeways. (1)

One welcome contribution can be found in Michael Meyer's " *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed*. (2) An experienced travel writer and a Peace Corps volunteer in the 1990's, the author enjoyed a two year residence in an ancient Beijing neighborhood while he taught English language courses. His resultant work on the waning days of old Beijing may have been derived from an interest in the contrast between the sparse private space accorded him in his and others' cramped living quarters and the vibrant life of the public courtyard that led through winding lanes and attached gates to regularly frequented open air markets and to similar gated localities. Another inspiration may have been a confrontation with archival sources that emphasized the 1949 Maoist desire to transform Beijing, the imperial center, into a veritable smokestack city all the while an appointed mayor unsuccessfully sought a different urban model, one based on Washington, DC, a low administrative center with ample views and spacious encircling roadways.

The author emphasizes that the transformation of old neighborhoods has been evolving since the early 1950's. It is not only economic change that has been spurred, but also a growth in domestic expansionary trends that have seen millions moved from localized quarters to urban and suburban outskirts. Similar to the process in the neighborhood microcosm portrayed, urban population outflows have been accompanied by masses of eviction notices as well as by the legal entanglements of historic patterns that have led to conflicts over the ownership of local dwellings, some of which were held by factories and others by housing authorities. The seeming patchwork nature of real estate development, evictions, and exurban population movements was, in fact, not all or everywhere due to

imposed sanctions from higher political levels. A municipal planning board was dissolved in the 1970's, and there is no denying the effects of time and the weather on increasingly blighted buildings made of wood and bricks. Nevertheless, the author's neighborhood was one of over 7,000 in 1949. Today, that number has plummeted to the 1,300 similar localities whose winding lanes and locust trees are increasingly being replaced by shopping malls, parking lots, convenience stores, hotels, highways, and office towers.

Western experiences mirror such replacements. Yet it is a critical sense of the speed, dynamism, and massive demographic change in and around Beijing that the author manages to convey and that may well startle those accustomed to slower replacement levels and a parallel quest to conserve ancient space along with traditional architectural and living patterns. Where have all his former neighbors gone? Many to suburban high-rise buildings where apartments overlook square cement courtyards without grass, benches, or a place to play. An examination of public and private lifeways may await an additional partnership.

In the meantime, the former Peace Corps volunteer has returned to his Beijing home. Initially, all was not bleak since the creaky neighborhood gate still remained and still functioned. But a primary guide and friend, a local widow, was now gone, a familiar courtyard police officer had moved beyond the neighborhood, and the son of another neighbor had long since left to join others in a search for employment in one of China's northeastern regions. Instead of the crowds he remembered was an old man who greeted him with the clipped but encouraging sound of "we are both here." "We were here" echoed the author.

The Beijing Olympic Games are scheduled to begin on August 8, 2008.

See, for example, Nicolai Ouroussoff, "Lost in the New Beijing: The Old Neighborhood." *New York Times* online, July 27, 2008.

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