

Li, Lilliam M., Alison J. Dray, and Haili Kong. 2007. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 321 pages. ISBN 978 1 4039 6473 1

# Beijing: from imperial capital to Olympic city

2008 is a big year for China, as everyone now knows. On the auspicious date of the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 8<sup>th</sup> month, 2008 (8 is a lucky number in Chinese) the Olympics opens. China's ultimate coming out party will commence, and for three weeks, the world's eyes will be on the country, as it displays as never before the fruits of breakneck economic development over the last three decades, and its rapid escape from Maoist isolationism and economic autarky. But as Li, Dray and Kong make clear in the preface to their new history of the country's capital, while the Olympics will be China's moment, it will also be Beijing's. For much of the last 800 years, the history of Beijing, under its various former names (named *Dadu* - meaning Great City - by the Mongolians in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and ironically christened Beiping - meaning 'Northern Peace' - in the 1920s and 1930s, at a time when the city and the region were slipping into chaos) has been, in many ways, the history of the dominant dynasties and regimes of China.

Beijing's centrality to most western narratives of Chinese mainstream history over the last millennium is problematic. This is a problem shared in this book. In its early sections, it is an excellent and fascinating history of the day-to-day life in imperial Beijing, and the extraordinary rituals and political and social infrastructure around the various emperors. In its later chapters, however, (those dealing with the current century), it becomes, to all intents and purposes, a history simply of the main political currents of Republican China, and then the People's Republic. The chapter, 'Economic Reform and Cultural Fever' dealing with the years 1976 to 1989, for instance, has great detail in it about the events leading up to the 4th of June incident in 1989, and the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. It also runs through the various artistic reactions - by writers like Wang Shuo and film makers like Zhang Yimou - to the epic disruption of the Cultural Revolution, and then the move from Maoist Utopianism with all the turmoil this created, to the opening up and reform process under Deng Xiaoping, where economic freedoms were granted in spades, but the ideological constraints of a defeated and discredited belief system (Marxism Leninism) kept in place for forms sake. These really are issues for China as a whole, rather than simply Beijing. From time to time this account does relate to physical and cultural changes in the city. Take, for instance, the inhabitation, from the early 1990s onwards, of the 798 Factory area by avante garde artists, and high style shops and restaurants. This is a process that continues, almost in the spirit of self-parody, to this day. On the whole, however, it reads much like a standard, accessible history of the 1980s and 1990s.

## Unchanging hinterland

Beijing's dominance is a problem for those looking to unpack the regional contribution to China's development over the last half a century - or, for that matter, to try to convince sceptics that, while all is well in the capital, there is another China, a vast space where poverty, backwardness and lack of development reign. This is only a specific case of the more general problem that while development has really taken off in the coastal provinces, in the hinterland things remain disturbingly the same. Mao Zedong, on the victory of the communists in 1949, was, according to the authors, offered three choices for a capital: Nanjing, Xian and Beijing. Advisors such as Liang Sicheng, the son of the great reformer Liang Congjie, and a respected architect in his own right, counselled that the choice of Beijing was problematic because so much of its architecture belonged to the old China, the very China that Mao and the new leaders were trying to break away from. He proposed the construction of a wholly new city, next to Beijing - partly to symbolise clearly this clean break but also to preserve the magnificent buildings that still remained in the city, despite years of war, and the humiliating period under the Japanese in which it served as the junior partner to Nanjing, a hub for the occupied north east region. Nanjing, because of its association with the Japanese, was rejected. Xian, despite being the centre of great dynasties in the past, and very central, lacked strategic force. Beijing, while being one of the few world capitals not based beside a major river or the sea, occupied a perfect position, (close to the Russian border), to the major port of Tianjin. Tianjin was a gateway to the great routes to Japan and Korea. It also held sway over the crucial north east region where so much of the early industrial infrastructure of the new republic was to be built. Tellingly, Shanghai was never even considered for the role of capital, despite its many strengths. It was under political suspicion from the very beginning, as a place more wedded to commerce and money-making than really bringing home the revolution.



The Communists choice of Beijing for strategic regions connected to the very reason that Beijing had been expanded, and made into a capital in the first place. During the Yuan dynasty, Kubla Khan set up three capitals, running against the nomadic instincts of previous Mongolian rulers. One of the capitals was Shangdu, immortalised as Xanadu. While pleasant in the summer and impressive enough to be eulogised by the visiting Marco Polo, (the authors eloquently run through the very strong reasons for why Marco Polo's account of his visit might have been wholly fabricated), was simply too isolated. It was also, crucially, deep into traditional Mongolian territory, and the great Khan was motivated mainly by a desire to stake out his power within the conquered Han Chinese territory. Beijing, or, as it was called, *Dadu*, was just within the Great Wall. It occupied a key strategic point between the Mongolian lands to the north, and the Chinese ones to the south. This effectively sealed its fate, and a century of building and construction meant that by the start of the Ming Dynasty after a peasant rebellion in 1368, Beijing was the natural site for the new regime. Beijing remained the capital, despite regime change two centuries later when the Manchus conquered China in 1642-44.

## Spooks and scuffles

The accounts the authors give of Beijing as it developed over these centuries are impressive. Beyond the expansion of the immense Forbidden Palace complex, and the construction of various fortified walls, the city, according to accounts of visiting foreigners, and of the Jesuits who were based there from the 16th century onwards, was peaceful, with a high ratio of law enforcement officers to people. This has a haunting parallel with the Beijing of the 21st century, where, rumours have it, on any one day in Tiananmen Square the personnel of the security services make up as much as a quarter of the crowd milling around, seeking early signs of trouble and protest. Like Victorian London, it was to become a city that placed immense wealth next to grinding poverty - a magnet attracting people from elsewhere in the country coming to take the civil service exams. Towards the end of the Qing Dynasty, from 1860 onwards, it was also to be one of the primary focus points for foreign aggression, with the sacking of the Summer Palace, the Boxer Rebellion, and then the uprisings

that led to the fall of the Qing in 1911, and the creation of the Republic. Beijing's suffering and wounds over these decades were China's wounds, and the indignities forced on it were to be symbolic of those on the country as a whole as it slid towards disunity and decay.

Mao's choice of Beijing in 1949 was also accompanied by a wholesale rebuilding of parts of the city. The great medieval city walls were, famously, torn down, a process completed as late as 1965 when the final remnants made way for the underground being built then. Mao authorised the clearing of over 20 thousand buildings and dwellings in Tiananmen Square to make way for the world's vastest open space - a space into which his dead body was placed in permanent state in 1976 when he died. New stations, housing complexes, and roads were built. The city was to uniquely depopulate in the Cultural Revolution from 1966 as cadres and young students were sent down to the countryside. But from the late 1970s onwards it was to get into its stride once more, meaning that those who claim they are 'Beijingers' (people of Beijing) now have a hybrid and complex background.

Beijing in the 21st century presents many of the complexities of China as a whole. Undergoing breakneck redevelopment, it has almost lost its soul in the process, with some groups agitating to preserve at least some of its ancient heritage. Car traffic pollution has replaced the fumes spumed out by factories once based near the city. It hosts almost two million migrant workers, and sprawls over vast swathes in all directions, with precious little heed taken of planning or sustainability. In many ways it symbolises the voracious energy of the country it remains the capital of. But as Li, Dray, Novey and Kong repeat several times, Beijing's story, while intimately linked to the story of China as a whole, is only part of that story. And the ways in which it is in control of that story are decreasing, as it goes into the 21st century.

**Kerry Brown**

Chatham House, London  
Bkerrychina@aol.com