

四十五

Three hours from Tianjin
to the heart of Beijing
there were vendors on bikes
hawking fresh congyoubing
haircuts on the corners
men walking their birds
Sword Taiji at daybreak
not saying a word



Chapter 45 – Beijing, Peking, Peiping, Yanjing, Dadu – what’s in a name?

About 40 km southwest of Beijing is an area called 周口店 Zhōukǒudiàn, where 500,000 years ago (give or take a few hundred thousand years), *Homo erectus pekinensis* thrived. Over 100,000 of their stone age tools have been recovered as evidence. Beijing has been important to the part of the world we now call China since long before recorded history. During the Shang and the Zhou Dynasties, what we now know as Beijing was known as 蓟 Jì or 蓟城 Jìchéng. That was changed to 燕京 Yānjīng since it was the capital of the State of Yan during the Warring States period of the Zhou Dynasty before China was unified in the Qin Dynasty.

Until I started studying Chinese, I always knew Beijing as “Peking”, even though “Beijing” is how the Chinese characters, 北京 have always been pronounced in standard Mandarin. Peking was the pronunciation based on an old system of spelling Chinese.

Beijing was certainly not the only capital city in China’s history, but Beijing has been China’s primary capital for the past eight centuries. When Kublai Khan and the Mongols ruled China during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368 CE), they renamed the city, Dadu. When the Qing Dynasty began in 1644, it was renamed Beijing and remained Beijing until 1928, when the Nationalists moved the capital of China to Nanjing. The Nationalists then renamed Beijing, “Beiping.” Nanjing had actually been China’s capital over 1,000 years ago but for some reason, never changed its name after it ceased being the capital.

On that hot July day in 1982, there was a vibrancy in the air when we stepped off of the train at the Beijing Train Station. The grey, blue, and green colors of the day faded softly into the concrete and stone buildings, bridges and the air of China’s capital city. The roads were filled with bicycles as far as the eye could see. Most of the cars on the street were taxis, and if not, then they were most likely 红旗 Hóngqí limousines for high ranking government officials. Of course, there were public busses and “bread cars” (面包车 miànbāochē) which were kind of the poor man’s taxi shaped like a miniature loaf of bread.

Moving like a snail in a Didi Chuxing car (China’s Uber) in 2019, it’s hard to imagine many of these same streets packed chock-a-block with bicycles. There are still bikes in Beijing, but most of them are shared bikes. Bikes no longer own the road, cars and busses do. And even with the amazing Ring Roads taking some of the traffic and helping define the geography of the city, traffic congestion in Beijing remains a huge problem. The first ring road was actually a tram line that circled the perimeter of the Forbidden City. The 7th ring road was completed in 2018. Beijing’s rapid transit system has helped a lot. By the end of 2023, Beijing’s

Rapid Transit System had 27 lines - including 22 rapid transit lines, two airport rail links, one maglev line, 2 light rail lines, and 478 stations.



So many things taken for granted 20 years ago are a shadow of what they used to be. Barbers had spots on the street at many major intersections, and at sidewalk intersections in the parks. One can still find old men at 玉渊潭公园 Yùyuāntán Park who will trim your hair for a few yuan. In the early morning, people still walk their birds, but the Tai Chi(太極拳 Tàijí Quán) “boxers” have been joined by practitioners of 氣功 Qìgōng and forms of 武术 Wǔshù (general term for Chinese martial arts), gymnasts, badminton players, traditional fan dancers and ballroom dancers.

I can't leave Beijing without mentioning the food. By 2019, lawmakers had all but banned street food. 包子 bāozi · 饺子 jiǎozi · 锅贴 guōtiē and 煎饼 jiānbǐng (quintessential northern comfort foods) were still available, but not so easily on the street. Baozi is a steamed fist-sized wheat flour pastry filled with meat and/or vegetables. Jiaozi and guotie are similar. They both have a thin flour pastry (similar to a ravioli) and are stuffed with a combination of ground pork, cabbage, and spices. Both can be dipped into black or red vinegar. Jiaozi are boiled dumplings, and guotie aka potstickers, are kind of like fried jiaozi.

Jiānbǐng (煎饼) is made with flour (millet or wheat) and the thickness is somewhere between a crepe and a dosa. After the flour mixture is poured and spread onto the large, round cast iron pan, it becomes the “bing.” Add an egg (or two) by spooning or brushing it onto the bing. Then a generous sprinkling of green onions and a pinch of salt; some sweet bean paste; a shake or two of sugar; maybe a little baste of hot pepper sauce aka 辣椒酱 làjiāo jiàng . On top of all of that spread a few shards of 馃箐 guǒbì, that crispy fried dough that goes on top of everything else. Then roll it up like a big burrito, fold it in two, cut it in half, and put it into a paper or plastic bag. Voila! Beijing breakfast.

I heard the street food’s gone in Xidan and Sanlitun. Thank God for Wangfujing. Rumor has it, that night market is still going strong. I’m sure they still have the amazing Xinjiang kebabs (串儿 chuànr) and sugar coated haw fruit aka 糖葫芦 táng húlu.

