

## **Marginocentric Beijing: Multicultural Cartography and Alternative Modernity in *The Last Days of Old Beijing***

Qingben LI

Institute for Arts Education

Hangzhou Normal University

2318 Yuhangtang Road, Yuhang District, Hangzhou 311121.China

liqingben1@sina.com

**Abstract:** The term “Marginocentric cities” has been used to describe those multiethnic nodal cities “that at favorable historical conjunctions have rewritten the national cultural paradigm from the margin, ascribing to it a dialogic dimension, both internally (in dialogue with other ethnic traditions) and externally (in dialogue with larger geocultural paradigms)” (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer, 2002:26). Whereas this map of marginocentric cities is restricted to East-Central Europe, this paper, focusing on the novel *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, insists that the concept of “marginocentric city” is also operative for Beijing city as a nodal space of cultural exchanges in which boundaries might be more elusive and national geographies dislocated. At the same time, I propose the constitutive dialectics of being simultaneously central and marginal should be regarded in relation to the complex relationships taking place in Beijing, different from the Western modernity, as it appears in this cross-cultural novel which also combines tradition and modernity.

**Keywords:** Beijing, Marginocentric Cities, Muticultural Space, Cross-cultural Studies, Alternative Modernity

### **BEIJING’S MULTICULTURAL SPACE AND URBAN CARTOGRAPHY**

*The Last Days of Old Beijing* was published in June 2008, a month before the Summer Olympic Games were held in Beijing on August 8<sup>th</sup> that year. It is written by Michael Meyer, an American volunteer who come to the city to teach English and has lived as no other Westerner in a shared courtyard home in a *hutong* (lane) in Beijing’s oldest neighborhood, *Dazhulan* (as mispronounced by the author; the correct Chinese is *Dashilan* 大栅栏). This book, neither a fictional novel nor an academic work, describes with affection his neighbour’s life stories, including a widow, his co-teacher Miss Zhu, a student called Little Liu, the migrant recycler Wang, a soldier Liu, and many others. Their stories are intersected with Beijing’s transformations over time. As the city changes, the traditional way of life fades away, replaced by shopping malls, the

capital's first Wal-Mart, high-rise buildings and widened streets to the purpose of hosting the Summer Olympics. Life in the vanishing backstreet of the city is also transformed, as the title of this book suggests.

More striking is the mapping of a new urban cartography of Beijing as multicultural place, combining tradition and modernity and connecting east and west. The book offers the opportunity to rethink these relations from a spatial dimension, for "It is space, more than time that now hides consequences for us" (Soja, 1992).

After close reading, we find that Michael Meyer's attitude is ambiguous and even indecisive, representing a challenge to traditional models of linear and totalizing historiography and literary writing. After residing in Sichuan province, southwest China for two years, Meyer's first impression of Beijing when he arrived there in 1997 was good: "Beijing felt cosmopolitan. It also looked unlike any other Chinese city. Here, the center was not a hollow cavern of wide boulevards and monolithic apartment blocks, but a chain of central lakes surrounded by a compact mixture of architecture built on a human scale" (Meyer, 2008:13). Beijing's flat layout, open sky, and a climate even reminded him of his Minnesota home. However, when he found a home in *Hutong* in 2005, the picture changed:

"The run-down mansion where I live shows traces of its former owner's wealth. The heavy double-wooden doors retain coats of lacquer, though the painted couplet has been rubbed away. Unknown hands chipped off the guardian lions carved atop the twin rectangular stones anchoring the doorframe. Lotuses and clouds painted in bright primary colors fade on the lintel. Rusting hooks that once held halyards to raise red lanterns poke out from weeds growing in the furrows of the tiled roof." (Meyer, 2008:6).

Although the house has a glorious and wealthy past, Meyer focuses on its decline. The most serious problem he encounters is the absence of public toilet, "four slits in the floor face one another, without dividers. A squatting man hacks up a wad of phlegm. Another, wearing pyjamas, lights a cigarette" (Meyer, 2008:8). Privacy becomes his greatest concern: "once over the threshold and into the *hutong*, life becomes all public" (Meyer, 2008:6).

Although the younger residents would like to move out if compensated with an alternative modern apartment, some prefer not to leave their old

house, which keeps many memories. This is the case of Mr. Yang, who “grew up in the house and knew the area’s history. He was the part of it, he said. Connected. One day, he wanted his child to know these things, too” (Meyer, 2008:14).

The conflictive picture reveals the author’s double attitudes to Beijing’s cartography and its multicultural space. In fact, different people offer different understandings of the city. Li Xiguang, professor of journalism and author of the English slogan “New Beijing, Great Olympic” for the 2008 Summer Games once pointed out, “By ‘New Beijing’, I meant we want to have a new humanism in Beijing, a new humanistic city. But the local officials and planners took this slogan literally. They think ‘New Beijing’ means destroy old Beijing and build a new Beijing” (Meyer, 2008: title page). This paragraph is quoted in the title page of *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, showing that the boundary between old and new is very fragile and easy to step over.

We admit even the new Beijing still has many traditional buildings with old gestures and styles and many pre-historical and historical relics. Alongside the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, the Heaven Temple, and the Great Wall, there are still some *Hutong*, although numbers have reduced at great speed.. Historical sites and cultural relics such as the first Paleolithic site unearthed in the basement of Oriental Plaza, Beijing’s ritziest shopping mall at the Avenue of Eternal Peace – the city’s main thoroughfare that runs past *Tian’anmen* Square – and the *Wangfujing* pedestrian-only commercial street, which Meyer mentions in *The Last Days of Old Beijing* (Meyer, 2008:38). Maybe we usually imagine the old Beijing to be a sort of isolated place from the foreign world, but this is an illusion. With more than three thousand years of history and eight hundred years as capital of China, the city has rich history of international and intercultural exchanges.

Prior to the unification of China by the First Emperor in 221 BCE, Beijing had been for centuries the capital of the ancient states of Ji and Yan, which was the ancient China’s north-eastern boundary facing foreign minorities. During the first millennia of imperial rule, Beijing was a provincial city in northern China. Its stature grew in the 10th to the 13th centuries when the nomadic Khitan and forest-dwelling Jurchen peoples from beyond the Great Wall expanded southward and made the city a capital of their dynasties Liao and Jin. During the Mogol-led Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), Beijing began to serve as China’s capital, known by the Mogol name Khanbaliq or Cambuluc in Marco Polo’s account.

Marco Polo was probably the first European ever employed at Chinese emperor's court in Beijing. As a foreigner from the western country, he could be Meyer's spiritual ancestors whose travel description has the same foreign perspective on Beijing with *The Last Days of Old Beijing*. Marco Polo described Beijing in this way: "From one side to the other of the town [the streets] are drawn out straight as a thread, and in this way all the city inside is laid out by squares, as a chessboard is" (qtd. in Hull, 1995:51). This paragraph is also appears in Meyer's *The Last Days of Old Beijing*. The author also points out that the term *Hutong* may derive from the Mongolian word for "water well" and "a path between tents", or perhaps from a Chinese word that described the narrow passageways that served as firebreaks in Kublai Khan's thirteenth-century capital (Meyer, 2008:4). The hybridity of the original meaning of *Hutong* reminds us of Beijing's multiethnic and multicultural place.

Marco Polo left his traces in today's Beijing, beside his description of Beijing. According to Meicun Lin's research, Marco Polo lived mostly at Huitong Guan (会同馆), north of the Beijing city, which is today located in the western part of Riverfront Park, the North Exit of Old Drum Tower Street (Lin, 2008). The route of Marco Polo from Venice to Beijing passed through Acre, Tabriz, Hormuz, Balkh, Kashgar, Shang-tu. From Beijing back to Venice the route passed through Yangzhou, Zaitun, South China Sea, Sumatra, Ceylon, Hormuz, Trebizond, and Constantinople (Istanbul). Thus, Beijing figured as the start point of the earliest Silk Route connecting East and West. Marco Polo's descriptions of his travels inspired other explorers and merchants to follow in his footsteps, eventually opening up an international age. Several maps such as the Selden Map, formerly own by maritime scholar John Selden and possibly drafted in 1608 (Brooks, 2013:163) or the late 1610s (Batchelor, 2014:139-40), the map of Shunfeng Xiangsong (顺风相送, 1639), the maps of Zheng He's voyages (郑和航海图, 1628) and the map of Dongxi Yangkao (东西洋考, 1617), show systems of navigational routes connecting Chinese provinces near Beijing with Western ports, indicating large exchanges of people across continents.

From the beginning of 17th century onwards, many European missionaries and other Westerners came to Beijing, taking Western culture and technology to the city and deepening the exchanges between China and the West. The European Jesuit Matteo Ricci reached Beijing becoming advisor to Emperor Wanli of the Ming Dynasty in 1601. He

was given free access to the Forbidden City. His 1602 map of the world in Chinese characters introduced the findings of European exploration to East Asia. He established the Nantang Cathedral in 1605, the oldest Catholic Church in the city. Ricci dressed in traditional Chinese robes, spoke Chinese language, and explained the Bible using Confucius' terms. For example, he borrowed an unusual Chinese term, Lord of Heaven (Chinese: 天主; pinyin: Tiānzhǔ), to use as the Catholic name for God. Thus, he was successful in explaining the Catholic faith to Chinese people. Beside this, Ricci was also the first European to translate some of the Confucian classics into Latin, with assistance from the Chinese scholar Xu Guangqi. He really made a great contribution to the cultural exchange between the East and West. Ricci died in 1610 and was buried in Zhulan cemetery, which is now part of the campus of Beijing Administrative College (located at 6 Chegongzhuang Road, Xicheng District).

At this point, we could explain the Beijing's multicultural space with the Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem theory. "Polysystem theory itself recognizes that this is a regular process in attitude change in culture: we do not understand or accept anything new except in the context of the old" (Even-Zohar, 1990). Indeed, any cities couldn't cut off its tradition from the root. We should also understand the new Beijing in the context of the old. Although the new Beijing has lost many historical and cultural relics, which deserves to be blamed, the remains of these historical sites above can still make clear to all the richness and openness of Beijing city's history.

## THE ALTERNATIVE MODERNITY OF BEIJING CROSS-CULTURAL WRITING

Beijing also witnessed the falls and changes of imperial dynasties and the city's monuments were often destroyed as Meyer describes. For example, in 1153, the Jurchen conquered Beijing as secondary capital of Liao dynasty, destroyed the city and rebuilt it as the Central Capital of the Jin (Golden) dynasty: "the city's walls were enlarged to a perimeter of thirty miles, punctured with twelve gates" (Meyer, 2008:143). The city was destroyed once more by the Mongolians led by Genghis Khan in 1215: "They conquered the city with glorious slaughter, the city falling to a barrage of flaming arrows. Every citizen was marked for death. When

the siege was over, the capital's streets were slippery with melted flesh, and the landscape showed only vultures and ash." (Meyer, 2008: 144)

Beijing also witnessed the humiliation of foreign invasion. In 1860, for instance, Anglo-French forces assaulted Beijing and burned the Old Summer Palace, whose ruins are still visible. Citing a historical record, Meyer describes with a humorous tone a westerner's impression on Beijing at that time, "the British attaché recorded that in 1865, Lord Stanley sneered, 'Peking's a giant failure, isn't it? Not a two stories house in the whole place, eh?'" (Meyer, 2008:7) This statement represents the Western derogatory attitude toward China at the time, and testifies the decline of China's national force and the shift from the center to the margin of the world. However, it is precisely this "marginality, as well as their multi-ethnic composition that has allowed cities to look simultaneously to both East and West, establishing a fertile nexus between cultural traditions" (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer, 2002:26).

Aware of the backwardness and marginality of China, the Chinese people began to learn from the West. Since the late 19th century, Beijing has been the first Chinese city to witness Westernization. The popular saying "Learning from the Western science and technology is to boycott the Western invasion", reveals the complicated relationship. The movement of economic and military reform began back in 1898, and it was followed by the political revolution of 1911 and the May 4th cultural movement in 1919. All of these took place in Beijing, or at least had a close relation with the city.

We can say that Beijing witnessed the process of China's modernity. Meyer mentions "The openings were for drainage canals, and rails that brought trains into the city, to a station constructed in 1911 beside the Front Gate" (Meyer, 2008:215). Foreign engineers had pierced Beijing's city wall after the Boxers were defeated. The image reminds us of the process of Chinese modernity and testifies that reshaping of the old Beijing.

Although the connection between China and the West was interrupted in the 1960's, the subsequent implementation of China's opening up policy has brought the country even closer to the West. The most powerful and visible proof of this integration was the successful hosting of 2008 Beijing Olympics, which enhanced the overall national self-confidence and tolerance towards the West, reflected in the slogan of "one world, one dream". Driven by the major international cultural activities of the Olympic Games, Beijing launched a series of cultural

products and cultural services to create the Beijing brand and attract global investment and consumption, promoting the rapid development of Beijing's cultural and creative industries. The Olympic Games also enhanced the awareness of the Chinese people's intellectual property. The State Council and the Beijing Municipal Government promulgated the "Olympic Intellectual Property Protection Ordinance" prior to the games. The Olympic Games also promoted the effective implementation of the principle of fair competition so that the Industry and Commerce Department of Beijing Municipal Administration cancelled the management fees collected from individual industrial and commercial households, a measure which is of great help to normalize socialist market economy and to promote better and faster development of cultural industries. Finally, in accordance with the requirements of the construction of a modern international metropolis, Beijing not only developed to the full the existing cultural facilities, but also carefully designed and built a number of new and more complete infrastructures.

Of course, all of these kinds of modernity would definitely sacrifice the city's historical sites at the same time. In 1949, a survey recorded more than seven thousand *hutong*. In the late 1990s, an average of six hundred lanes was destroyed each year. In 2005, the state-run media reported that only thirteen hundred *hutong* remained (Meyer, 2008:4). The demolition and transformation of the old Beijing City serves to reveal the history of the city as a multicultural space that combines tradition and modernity.

Nowadays, Beijing city ranks highest in the number of top cultural institutions and art groups in the country, and is also known for the high level of cultural infrastructures. The city is a modern cosmopolitan metropolis, with multicultural developments that welcome many international and domestic immigrants, including students and workers, and a unique cultural atmosphere. Beijing's culture has a growing influence in the international sphere, helping the relations between East and West, connections that are expected to increase even more with the prospect of the 2022 Winter Olympics that will be held in the city.

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that Beijing illustrates the category of a marginocentric city, functioning both as national center and as world's margin. Precisely because of this position, Beijing has gone beyond the boundaries of

tradition and modernity, opening itself to Westernization, reshaping and remapping its cartography. Recognizing its marginocentric character helps to avoid the neutralization of the city's cultural differences, where the production of space still has a direction regulated and defined by the power, accordance with the dominated thought and action (Lefebvre, 1991:59). In *The Last Days of Old Beijing*, the invisible "Hand" is a powerful but vicarious sign appearing on Meyer's neighbour's grey exterior wall brushed in ghostly white strokes and circled. It signals property developers, with interests that differ from those of the government's original plan to restore the late-Qing dynasty and early Republican-era architecture of the city: "The Hand worked on, peeling back the layers. It razed Soldier Liu's shaved-noodle restaurant, and masked the road-widening project at Fresh Fish Junction with blue tin sheeting" (Meyer, 2008:92). The ancient capital seems to disappear 再见古都 under economic interests. Thus, although the marginocentrism of Beijing is different to that of the postcolonial metropolis, described for example by Salman Rushdie, or to the East-Central European marginocentric cities explored by Cornis-Pope, it also brings together "things that seem not to belong together", setting "alongside each other in odd, often raw juxtapositions all sorts of different bodies of experience to show what frictions and sparks they make" (Rushdie, qtd. in Cornis-Pope, 2009: 22). We can call it an alternative modernity or a modernity with Chinese characteristics, different from the modernity experienced in other parts of the world. Recalling the appearance of the ancient capital, and displaying its grand historical culture while combing the traditional and modern, Meyer reveals the cross-cultural layers of the city, even if I find it difficult to come to terms with his Western gaze onto the shortcoming of my city.

Considering Beijing will host the 2022 Winter Olympics, it will be helpful to read *The Last Days of Old Beijing* once again. This time, I hope the reshaping of old Beijing will not happen once again.

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**Qingben LI** is a distinguished professor at Institute for Arts Education, Hangzhou Normal University. He was director of the Institute for Comparative Literature in Beijing Language and Culture University and an advanced visiting scholar at Department of Comparative Literature, Harvard University, from September 2010 to March 2011. Li has published over 100 academic papers and the following books: *Romantic Aesthetics of China in the 20th Century* (1999), *Studies and Researches of Wang Guowei* (1999), *Cross-cultural Perspectives: A Critique of Culture and Aesthetics at the Transitional Period* (2003), *Post-modern Sculpture Classics of the West* (2005), *The Uses of Cultural Studies* (translation, 2007), *A Report Book on Cultural Industries and Cultural Policies in the EU Countries* (with Wu Huiyong, 2008), *Comparison of Chinese and Western Literature* (with Cui Lianrui, 2008), *A Reader: Ecological Aesthetics Abroad* (2009), *Cross-cultural Aesthetics: Beyond the Model of Sino-Western Dualism* (2011), *Multi-Dimensional Models of Cross-Cultural Interpretation* (2014), and *Cultural and Creative Industries* (2015).