

Introducing Běijīng

Capital of the country set to dominate the 21st century, Běijīng is the indestructible heart of China. Just as all roads used to lead to Rome, now the world is beating a path to Běijīng to discover the city that holds the key to the planet's most populous nation.

Běijīng is a city rushing towards the future so fast that it's easy to forget that this ancient capital has been home to Mongol, Ming and Qing emperors. Few cities can boast a history as dramatic or turbulent as Běijīng's. Ruled by emperors and warlords, invaded by everyone from Genghis Khan to the former colonial powers, Běijīng has been razed to the ground many times yet has always risen from the ashes, shaken off the dust and reasserted its authority as the capital of a far-flung country that's now home to 1.3 billion people.

Despite all that history, Běijīng is now in the spotlight as never before. With China's economy roaring like an unstoppable machine and the Olympics on their way, the world's attention is focused on this enigmatic city as never before. For so long shrouded from view from the West, whether because of the capricious whims of emperors, or the bamboo curtain that descended after the 1949 Communist Revolution, Běijīng has thrown open its doors to the outside world. The response has been overwhelmingly enthusiastic and Běijīngers are growing accustomed to the ever-increasing number of foreigners who are coming to see what all the fuss is about.

What they find is a city that seems too large to comprehend. Located on a vast plain that reaches as far south as the Yellow River, the city's chessboard flatness reinforces a sense that it goes on forever. This flat topography, coupled with broad, sweeping avenues, huge open spaces and one-storey *hútòng* (alleyway) architecture, traditionally gave the city a stumpy skyline. Now, high-rise apartment blocks and gleaming office towers of steel and glass are sprouting up everywhere, re-defining the city's perspective.

First-time visitors will be dazzled by the contrasts available in Běijīng. New buildings appear almost overnight, the roads are jammed with the latest cars and the streets are full of fashionably dressed men and women with mobile phones clamped to their ears. Business people wheel and deal in the multi-millions, vast shopping malls are home to exclusive foreign brands and the city's clubs jump to the latest Western sounds.



But turn off the main roads into the *hútòng* that crisscross the heart of Běijīng and it's as if you've stepped back in time. Hawkers still ride through the alleys on bicycle carts shouting their wares, old men and women step out in their Mao suits and people squat by the roadside to eat bowls of steaming noodles, to get their hair cut, to socialise or just to watch the endless parade of humanity going by.

The mix of past and present is visible everywhere in Běijīng. Although many of the city's historic buildings have been demolished in the rush to modernise the capital, including the old city walls, thousands of temples and *hútòng*, Běijīng is still home to some of China's most stunning and essential sights. It's here that you'll find the Forbidden City, the Summer Palace, Temple of Heaven Park, the Lama Temple and the Great Wall, to name just a few. Beyond Běijīng, excursions to the erstwhile imperial encampment at Chéngdé and the Great Wall's finale at the sea at Shānhǎiguān add additional historical allure.

As the city's fabric is being transformed, so Běijīng is shaking off its reputation as a conservative metropolis. The numerous bars, clubs and restaurants are packed and, after an inevitable period when they were content to ape their Western equivalents, they are now discovering their own identity. New places open every week, a reflection of both the amount of cash floating around and of the desire of Běijīngers to enjoy their newfound prosperity.

Nevertheless, Běijīng is still very much a work in progress and not all the city's residents have embraced the changes. The elderly and those excluded from Běijīng's boom, such as migrant workers and the middle-aged unemployed, can only look on as the younger generation enjoys the fruits of Běijīng's ongoing transformation from dowdy communist capital to truly international world city. The roads of the inner city might be clogged with new cars, but on the outskirts of Běijīng some people still travel to work on donkey-drawn carts. Many Běijīngers are caught in the abyss that separates the free market and the old state-controlled economy and, with no real safety net provided by the government, their prospects are bleak.

Běijīngers though, are a pragmatic, unpretentious, forthright bunch and nothing fazes them. The revolutionary zeal inspired by Mao Zedong and his rhetoric is history for everyone; Běijīngers have been there, done that and moved on. If they can seem a little dour at times, then they make up for that by being overwhelmingly friendly and welcoming people who mock pomposity and cherish candour. They're still curious about life in the West too and equally eager to hear what foreigners think of their hometown.

The short autumn is probably the best time to visit Běijīng. Spring is sandstorm season, while the hot and humid summers can be brutal. The consolation for the heat is that the city's population takes to the streets until the small hours, which makes for a fascinating spectacle. In contrast, the winters are bitterly cold. Nevertheless, there's an icy grandeur to the old sections of Běijīng in January and February as the lakes freeze over and snow clings to the *hútòng* roofs. But whenever you come, you'll be able to experience Běijīng's unique energy and see a city that is changing by the day. It's never boring here. Enjoy your visit.

LOWDOWN

Population 15.4 million

Time zone GMT + 8 hours

Coffee ¥20-30

Subway ticket ¥3-5

Three-star hotel room ¥400-600

Number of cars 2.8 million

Number of taxis 63,000

Number of construction sites 9000+

Expat population 70,000

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BĚIJĪNG TODAY

New arrivals to Hong Kong or Shànghǎi come primed by both cliché and high expectations, thanks to the shared colonial pasts of these cities. In contrast, many first-timers to Běijīng arrive with a hazy picture of their destination in their minds. Such confusion is perhaps understandable as airlines still slap a label on Běijīng-bound luggage that says 'PEK', a reference to Běijīng's previous incarnation as Peking.

But while Běijīng has changed its name many times, it has been the focal point of Chinese identity since the Yuan dynasty. From the 13th century, while Shànghǎi was still a fishing village and Hong Kong a backwater port, Běijīng was the capital of one of the largest empires the world has ever seen. Very little remains of that era in present-day Běijīng, but that's to be expected in a city that has reinvented itself so many times. That urge for change is one of the first things any visitor notices. A skyline lined with cranes as far as the eye can see, and buildings under construction that seem to grow a storey a day, compete for attention with a ground-level view of millions of people pushing and striving for a better life. Communism and capitalism have met head on in Běijīng and the collision has produced a unique vitality. There has never been such an exciting time to visit Běijīng.

The 2008 Olympics have provided the latest motivation for Běijīng to regenerate itself once again. Just a few years ago, Běijīng was a city dominated by sterile, Soviet-inspired architecture, where monolithic government buildings and drab apartment blocks proliferated. There are still plenty of such structures around, but joining them now are inspiring buildings designed by some of the world's cutting-edge architects. Along with the US\$34 billion Běijīng is spending on upgrading its infrastructure, this speak volumes about Běijīng's desire to transform itself into a capital fit to take its place alongside the world's major cities.

It's not just new architecture and subway lines that are driving the changes in Běijīng. The contemporary art scene is the world's most vibrant, and the government is putting US\$63 million into renovating artistic and cultural venues, while some of the fortunes being made are being ploughed back into bars, cafés, clubs and restaurants. Fifteen years ago, Běijīngers went to bed early because there was nothing else to do. Now, the capital is increasingly a 24-hour city whose residents play as hard as they work.

A swelling middle and white-collar class has totally redefined the socioeconomic make-up of town. Fashion – once a symbol of the decadent West and a household taboo – is now an indispensable lifestyle fad and not just for the young. Owning a car has become the goal of nearly all Běijīngers and there are 2.8 million of them on Běijīng's jammed roads, a number increasing by 1000 a day. The economic boom has also seen the return of age-old vices that were thought to have been stamped out forever. Prostitution, drugs and crime are back in a big way, despite the best efforts of the police.

Amid all the shiny new developments and the young hipsters walking the streets, it's easy to forget that Běijīng is still a very uneven mix of old and new and rich and poor. For every person benefiting from the soaring economy, there are many more struggling to get by. There's also a big generational gap. Běijīng is home to an increasingly elderly population, almost 11% of Běijīngers are over 60, and while the youth of the city can take advantage of Běijīng's boom, many middle-aged people are resentful about how privatisation has meant

HOT CONVERSATION TOPICS

- Money, money, money
- The newest, best restaurant to spend some of the above in
- The latest pirated Hollywood DVD to hit the streets
- The terrible traffic
- Rumour-mongering about TV and movie stars and just how they got so famous so quick
- Why Běijīng is better than Shànghǎi

HOME Lin Gu

Wang Ruihai will never eat instant noodles again. He survived on the cheap noodles in the winter of 2003, when he couldn't find himself a job in Běijīng. Rather than being unemployed, the 25-year-old enrolled in a two-month computer-hardware maintenance course, believing that ignorance about computers was even worse than illiteracy. All he had left after tuition and rent of a room with a broken window and no heating (shared with three other trainees), was Y200 (about US\$25).

Wang first came to Běijīng in the winter of 1999. 'Do you want to find something to do in Běijīng?' his father had asked him one day when they were toiling in the fields. Like most of his former schoolmates who were dashing off to the Chinese capital for work or college, the answer was obvious. Together with his uncle, Wang left his family and headed for the big city, more than six hours from his village in Héběi province. They landed in a briquette factory, where Wang's job was to transport the honeycomb-shaped fire starters on a flat-board tricycle into factory storage. He earned Y700 (about US\$90) a month, and life there was harsh. He almost lost a thumb on an assembly line. Less than three months passed before the Spring Festival and the traditional time for family reunion, so Wang happily went home to the countryside.

Yet Běijīng kept calling to him. In 2001 Wang returned and worked for a cleaning company in a new apartment compound of 14 buildings in the northwest of the city, where the bulk of the residents were college teachers, foreign students and IT professionals. Every morning he got up at 3am, collected garbage from three apartment buildings by 5am and transported it to the processing station by 8am. His work clothes were often stained with sewage. Once, when Wang was about to share an elevator with a resident, the tenant frowned and covered her nose; at other times, they simply waited for the next elevator.

Wang doesn't blame them. 'The key to solving the problem of discrimination is in our own hands, as long as we try to make the best of ourselves.' All of Wang's workmates were rural migrants like himself, no city resident had the least interest in their line of work. As everyone knows, all the dirty jobs in Běijīng are done by rural migrants.

Běijīng became a ghost city in the spring of 2003 when SARS evacuated the capital. Few dared to linger in public spaces, but there were some exceptions: a team of volunteers came to Wang's workplace, distributing thermometers and gauze masks as preventive measures against SARS. Later, they organised a party for lonely workers, and told Wang about a newly established cultural centre that was tailored to rural migrants just like him.

The city's four million rural migrants have five nongovernment organisations that manage such gathering places. Out of 1.3 billion Chinese, an estimated 150 million at any one time are on the move, mostly from the countryside to the cities, in search of work.

What motivates this giant mobile camp is the widening gap between rural and urban, poor and wealthy. There has long been an outcry for equal treatment for rural migrants in terms of rights to work, medical care and education, with reports of injustices often occupying mainland newspaper headlines. For millions of hard-working women and men like Wang, their lot seems unlikely to change anytime soon. But small, incremental improvements are always possible.

Wang's most recent migration to Běijīng was in March 2005, when he became a photography assistant at a Taiwanese-owned wedding photo studio in downtown Běijīng, based on his one year as a trainee photographer in a small city in Héběi province. The normal pay is about Y1000 (about US\$125) per month, but it can rise up to Y1700 (about US\$215) at peak season. It's the first step on the ladder.

Wang's boss, a young photographer called Zhang, was impressed by Wang. 'Glamorous as it may appear, this is a place where people with a lower-class background can possibly grab a chance,' Zhang says. 'You may speak Mandarin with an accent, but so what? As long as you have guts!'

Wang now finds his feelings for Běijīng are changing. Today, it's more than just a paying gig. He witnesses constant injustice against migrant workers, and yearns to do something about it. He joins other volunteers in visiting hospitalised migrants, and performs skits in schools for migrant children and at construction sites. He's also organised a photography team, where fellow migrants exchange their ideas about photography while improving their photographic skills.

'Taking photos isn't just for fun. It's a way of documenting our lives,' he says. On a day off work, Wang likes to ride across the city on his bicycle, with his camera at his side. The remnants of an ancient courtyard being demolished by bulldozers, a gang of construction workers on lunch break taking in the shade – these are the typical targets of his lens.

A little timid and, at 1.7m, none too tall, Wang Ruihai is above all a good listener. He smiles as others exchange gossip at the cultural centre. The best moment for him, he says, is when they all sit down to eat together: 'It's like coming home.'

they have lost their secure, relatively well-paid jobs in state-run enterprises, and they are disillusioned by their paltry pensions.

Běijīng has also paid a high price for its rapid development in recent years, with the city's heritage taking a thrashing. As late as 1950, Běijīng was still, essentially, a medieval walled city. The magnificent walls were unceremoniously levelled to make way for the Second Ring Rd in the 1950s, along with numerous *páilou* (decorative archways; see the boxed text, p37). Today, the residents of many *hútòng* (alleyways) which crisscross central Běijīng are being moved on as property developers bulldoze their homes to make way for uniform high-rise apartment blocks for the new moneyed class. As the *hútòng* go, so do huge pockets of history.

There is a growing awareness of the need to protect what is left of old Běijīng. Some *hútòng* are now under government protection and other ancient sites are being rebuilt. But in Běijīng, as in all of China, heritage will always take second place to the demands of business.

Nor, despite the dazzling GDP figures, has the nature of the government changed much. Běijīng is still the capital of a communist state, albeit one which preaches 'Socialism with Chinese Characteristics', a euphemism for combining rigid control of the population with a liberal capitalist economy. In its bid to survive, the government has made great concessions, but it knows that reform can only go so far before the seeds of its own extinction are sown. There are limits to reform.

The tremendous strides that Běijīng has made since the early 1980s are awesome, but they conceal the limping progress of other development indicators, such as democratic reform, effective anti-corruption measures, freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

CITY CALENDAR

China follows both the Gregorian (*yángli*) and the lunar calendar (*yīnli*). Traditional Chinese festivals and holidays (p223) are calculated according to the lunar calendar and fall on different days each year according to the Gregorian calendar.

JANUARY & FEBRUARY

SPRING FESTIVAL

Chūn Jié

7 Feb 2008; 26 Jan 2009

Also known as Chinese New Year, this festival is the high point of the year, kicking off on the first day of the first lunar month. The festival usually falls sometime between late January and mid-February and ushers in a new year marked by one of the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. The weeks in the build-up to the festival are an explosion of colour, with *chūnlían* (spring couplets) pasted on door posts, door gods brightening up *hútòng* and shops glistening with red and gold decorations. Work colleagues and relatives present each other with red envelopes (*hóngbāo*) of money, the streets ring with cries of '*gōngxí fācái*' ('congratulations – make money') and at night they echo to the sound of fireworks going off non-stop. The White Cloud Temple (p97), the Lama Temple (p91) and other temples in Běijīng stage entertaining temple fairs (*miàohuì*). Celebrations are also held in parks such as Ditan Park (p86). In 2000, the holiday was officially lengthened from three days to seven, and legions of Chinese use it to head

to the provinces to visit relatives. Despite that, and the fact that it can be bitterly cold, the Spring Festival can be a fascinating time to be in Běijīng. However, air and rail transport is booked solid, hotel accommodation is harder to come by and many businesses shut up shop for a week or so.

LANTERN FESTIVAL

Yuánxiāo Jié

21 Feb 2008; 9 Feb 2009

Celebrated two weeks after the first day of the Spring Festival, this festival (also known as Dēng Jié or Shàngyuán Jié) is not a public holiday, but can be a very colourful time to visit Běijīng. The Chinese visit *dēnghuì* (lantern shows) in the evening and devour gorgeous *yuánxiāo* (glutinous rice dumplings with soft, sweet fillings).

MARCH & APRIL

GUANYIN'S BIRTHDAY

Guānshīyīn Shēngri

5 Apr 2008; 25 Mar 2009

The birthday of Guanyin (Sanskrit Avalokiteshvara), the Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, is a fine time to visit Buddhist temples,

many of which have halls dedicated to the divinity. Puning Temple (p205) in Chéngdé province is entirely dedicated to Guanyin and sees important celebrations on the occasion of her birthday, held on the 19th day of the second moon.

TOMB SWEEPING DAY

Qīng Míng Jié

5 Apr (4 Apr in leap years)

A day for worshipping ancestors, the festival falls near the date of Easter; people visit and clean the graves (*sǎomù*) of their departed relatives. The Chinese often place flowers on tombs and burn ghost money for the departed. There may be increased vigilance in Tiananmen Square during the festival, as public displays of mourning for the dead of 4 June 1989 remain prohibited.

CULTURE

CONNECTIONS

China is a country where *guānxì* (connections) is all important. With too many people competing for too few desirable jobs, as well as services, those who have *guānxì* usually get what they want because the connections network is, of course, reciprocal.

Obtaining goods or services through connections is informally referred to as 'going through the back door' (*zǒu hòu mén*). *Guānxì* is lavishly cultivated by way of banquets, fuelled by drinking *báijiǔ* (white spirits), and by the giving of gifts. As foreign investment in China has grown, gift giving for *guānxì* has become more and more wasteful. Cadres and officials are very well placed for this activity and there is a thin line between exploiting *guānxì* and corruption.

IDENTITY

Běijīng has repeatedly been the source of tempestuous historical events, from the May Fourth Movement to the Cultural Revolution and the student democracy movement of 1989. Despite that, Běijīng is – unlike buzzing Hong Kong or Shànghǎi – a city of slowly brewing latent energy that gradually accumulates before spilling over.

Běijīngers know that they live in the cultural, political and psychological centre of China. They are not only *Zhōngguó rén* (Chinese), they are *shòudū rén* (citizens of the capital) and in the top spot. Throughout the land the Chinese chat in *Pūtōnghuà* (based on the Běijīng dialect), set their watch according to Beijing Time (*Běijīng Shíjiān*) and act on enigmatic directives from the capital.

Because they live so close to the centre of power, Běijīngers regard themselves as more politically astute than other Chinese and the city's taxi drivers will always have an opinion on the latest issues. Confident of their pre-eminence, they feel superior (*gāorén yīdèng*) to those unfortunate enough to live outside town. They think *Běijīnghuà* – the local dialect – is infinitely superior to *Pūtōnghuà* and they revel in the complexities of the Běijīng dialect and how it instantly distinguishes outsiders. To be a Běijīnger is to be the genuine article, while everyone else, Chinese included, is a *wàidiren* (someone from outside town) or even worse, a *tūbāozǐ* (country bumpkin).

Běijīngers have a reputation among their fellow Chinese for being blunt and straightforward (*zhíjié liǎodàng*), honest, well-read and cultivated, if just a bit conservative. Běijīngers

SEPTEMBER & OCTOBER

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Zhōngqiū Jié

25 Sep 2007; 14 Sep 2008

Also known as the Moon Festival, this festival is marked by eating tasty *yuèbǐng* (moon cakes), gazing at the full moon and gathering together with relatives for family reunions. It is also a traditional holiday for lovers and takes place on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month.

BIRTHDAY OF CONFUCIUS

Kǒngzǐ Shēngri

27 Oct 2007; 27 Oct 2008

The great sage has his birthday on the 27th day of the eighth lunar month, an occasion marked by celebrations at Confucian temples.

scorn the calculating (*suànjì*) shrewdness of Hong Kong Chinese and the notorious stinginess of the Shànghàinese. They take pride in being generous (*dàfang*) and amicable (*yòushàn*), and this is nowhere more evident than when dining out. Běijīngers will fight to pay for the bill with loud choruses of ‘*wǒ lái, wǒ lái, wǒ fù qián*’ (‘I’ll pay’) and will never split the bill (as may happen in Shànghǎi). Běijīngers are also prone to excess, cooking more than they need and binning the rest. It’s all part of their big-hearted mindset. Although Běijīngers tend to frown on ostentatious displays of wealth, that’s beginning to change. Nevertheless, they are far less flash than the Shànghàinese and generally more modest than the Hong Kong Chinese.

LIFESTYLE

Changes in the way of life of Běijīng residents have matched the city’s economic transformation over the past 20 years. Modern Běijīng offers young people a new and exciting world of fashion, music, sport, new slang and lifestyle experimentation. Many over the age of 40, however, often feel trapped between the familiar expectations of their generation and the widening horizons of the city’s youth. The unpleasantness of the Cultural Revolution encourages parents in this age group to protect their children from strife and unexpected misfortune.

With the One-child policy enforced strictly in Běijīng, most families only have the one child, unless they are rich and are willing to pay the fine for having a second child, or have serious *guānxi*. The ‘Little Emperor’ syndrome, where the only child is spoiled rotten by his parents and his grandparents, is very common. Many children continue living with their parents long after leaving school. The high price of real estate in Běijīng means it’s still standard for married couples to be living with one or other set of their parents. Many Běijīngers rely on their parents to provide child care for their children.

In part, that’s because the Chinese work long hours. Saving money, whether to provide for their child’s university education, to finance a move to a bigger apartment or to buy that car, is an obsession with Běijīngers. But if the adults are out working, then life can be equally stressful for the kids. Chinese parents have high expectations for their children and place great faith in university education as a route to a better life. Consequently, if the kids aren’t at school, then they’re at home studying.

The older generation meanwhile, are out and about and most often can be found in their local park. From dawn till dusk, Běijīng’s parks are full of elderly Běijīngers practising taichi, holding dance classes, playing Chinese chess, cards and mah jong, or just hanging out with each other.

CHINESE ETIQUETTE

The Chinese are very polite and will naturally appreciate it if you are polite in return. Reserved in their behaviour and expression, the Chinese eschew public displays of emotion and grand gestures. Saving face (avoidance of shame) is important to the Chinese psyche and forcing a Chinese person to back down prompts loss of face.

Meals are important occasions where friendships and business deals are often forged. The host – or the person sitting next to you – is likely to serve you food and ensure your glass is refilled. Relentless toasting is common, often performed standing up and accompanied by a chorus of ‘*gānbēi*’ (cheers), which is the signal for you to drain your glass. But if you can only handle half a glass, say ‘*gān bānbēi*’ which literally means ‘drink half a glass’. Don’t forget to do a toast in return, a few minutes after you have been toasted. Even if you have been invited out make a gesture to pay the bill. It will be appreciated but refused. Don’t, however, insist on paying the bill as your host will need to pay. For reasons of face, it is terribly important for Chinese to settle the bill as a sign of generosity and hospitality. Smoking at meal time is generally OK, as it can establish a rapport among smokers, but make sure you offer your smokes around.

A landmine to be wary of is political discussion. The Chinese may secretly agree with you that the Communist Party is a band of good-for-nothings, but these are sentiments they probably won’t want to voice. This works both ways, so say you don’t want to talk politics (if you are being grilled on US foreign policy, for example) unless there is quid pro quo.

Even if you are not on business, name cards are very important, so make sure you have a stack printed up with Chinese on one side and English on the reverse. The Chinese present and receive business cards with the fingers of both hands.

In the evenings everyone gathers for a meal together. Then they disperse: grown-up children to meet friends, younger ones to MSN their classmates on the computer, the grand-parents to chat with the neighbours, the parents to watch TV and relax. With whole families living in cramped apartments, the streets are always crowded in the evenings, especially in summer, as people go in search of a bit more space. They set up stools or chairs by the roadside, bring out their tea or bottles of beer and chat for hours. The *hútòng* in particular are always lively and are fascinating places to stroll through after dusk.

For those people too exhausted after work to go out, it’s the TV that’s the main source of entertainment. Korean soap operas are hugely popular, as are soaps from Taiwan. Reality TV shows such as *Supergirls*, the Chinese version of *Pop Idol*, draw massive audiences too and have caught the imagination of the younger generation who feverishly cast votes for their favourites. But if there’s a big NBA game or soccer game on, then there’ll be a tussle over who watches what.

FASHION

The fashion industry in Běijīng has exploded over the past 10 years. The annual Beijing Fashion Week, featuring increasingly individual and China-centric creations from home-grown designers, has become a fixture on the international fashion circuit, albeit one with a considerably lower profile than Milan or Paris.

While it’s unlikely that Běijīng will ever match Hong Kong or Shànghǎi for style or establish itself as a leading fashion city, it does have over 20 schools and colleges with fashion departments and some Běijīngers do take what they wear seriously.

Unsurprisingly, the younger generation lead the way in individual style. With more and more people tuning into the NBA, thanks to the presence of China’s basketball star Yao Ming, hip-hop culture is a real influence on male teenagers. Younger women too, increasingly look to the prevalent street fashion trends in the West, while spending a lot on skin-whitening creams, the most popular cosmetics in China. There’s also a growing market for plastic surgery. Devotees of rock and punk music, club culture and skateboarding dress accordingly.

For the rich it is label worship all the way. But for everyone else fashion means less. Many elderly people still take to the streets in their old Mao jackets, while men dress in conservative black, grey or brown suits and are unselfconscious about carrying man-bags or having mobile-phone holsters on their belts. Traditional Chinese-style clothes, especially jackets and *qípào* (traditional, full-length Chinese dress), are still in vogue with women, sometimes after being given a modern twist by local designers.

MEDIA

China is the world’s largest producer of daily newspapers; there are over 2200 of them on sale each day. The problem is that few of them contain anything worth reading. Papers in China stick to a diet of good news: the booming economy and sporting success, while avoiding writing about anything that might offend the government. The media, as well as the internet, is closely monitored by the authorities and every year China features near the bottom of Reporters Without Borders annual World Press Freedom Index.

As a consequence of this many newspapers have adopted a tabloid tone, with graphic pictures of car crashes competing with celebrity gossip. The capital’s papers are no exception. The most reputable is the *Beijing News*. But unless you read Chinese your newspaper reading will be limited to the government’s English-language flagship, the anodyne *China Daily* (see p227 for more on newspapers and magazines). It’s a similar story with the state-run CCTV, China Central Television. Their English-language outlet is the equally bland CCTV 9. Other stations, like BTU (Beijing TV), offer an uninspiring mix of soap operas, reality TV, game shows and sport. Just like in the West really, only with censored news.

If the print and TV media are a lost cause, then hope can be found in the blogosphere. With the world’s second-largest internet population, the Chinese are fanatical bloggers. There were some 35 million blogs out there at the last count and they’re written by everyone from movie stars to schoolkids. It’s through reading the blogs that you can get a sense of

what people in this vast country are preoccupied with, angry about and what their hopes for the future are. There are websites which provide English translations of the most popular ones; www.danwei.org has a list of these.

Unsurprisingly, the authorities are moving to try and control the blogosphere. At the time of writing, proposals to make all bloggers register their blogs under their real names were being mooted. But despite the much-vaunted 'Great Firewall of China', the government's grip on cyberspace is not nearly as tight as is sometimes assumed. Proxy servers enable people to access those sites, like Wikipedia and the BBC, that are routinely blocked, while a number of file-sharing websites offer free downloads of foreign TV shows that would never pass the censors.

ECONOMY & COSTS

He who is not in charge of it does not interfere in its business.

Confucius

Běijīng is the capital of the world's fastest growing economy. Already the fourth largest in the world, the economy continues to grow at a rate of over 10% a year and, if it sustains its current momentum, sometime in the next 25 years or so China will have the world's largest economy.

With the Olympics in the bag, the local government has seized the nettle to activate a vast investment blueprint that will shake up Běijīng. US\$6.7 billion is to be spent on Běijīng's public transport system and road construction, US\$4.4 billion is earmarked for environmental protection and US\$18.2 billion is planned for the expansion of manufacturing and high-tech industries. Further down the line, there are plans to build a ring of satellite towns around Běijīng to house the city's ever-expanding population.

Tourism is becoming an increasingly important source of revenue, with the Chinese tourism industry set to become the second-largest in the world after the USA by 2015. Already, China has the largest domestic tourist market in the world. The tourism sector was expected to be worth US\$354 billion in 2006 and with China tipped to be the world's top travel destination by 2020, the potential for further growth is huge.

Facts and figures aside, Běijīng remains China's political heart rather than its economic frontline and its pulse is more measured than, say, Shànghǎi's. Vigilant about its affairs and scrupulous at reigning in more strident trends nationwide, the economic environment of Běijīng is far from laissez faire, despite the seemingly random nature of some of the housing developments going up. Regularly published paeans to China's robust economy may paint a different picture, but much of Běijīng's economic development is propelled by state investment and large scale public works programmes rather than by market forces. Many of the labour intensive and high investment programmes that will shape the Beijing Olympic Economy fall into this category.

A similar formula powers much of China's spectacular GDP growth. The conspicuous manifestations of such development – high-rise towers, chic designer-clothing stores and Bentley showrooms – are eye catching, but much of the economy remains under the control of the socialist state and its army of bureaucrats.

Several major obstacles to growth exist, some of which represent local problems, while others are part of larger national dilemmas. All of them impinge on the city's economic

performance, discourage investment and hamper Běijīng's efforts to become a major international financial centre.

Běijīng has a largely unfavourable geographical location – neither on the coast nor on a major waterway – and never developed a great trading economy like that of Shànghǎi or Hong Kong.

Water and land are two natural resources that are being rapidly depleted, which restricts Běijīng's development potential. At the same time, the combination of millions of migrant workers moving to the capital in search of work and a huge upsurge in the number of graduates seeking jobs in Běijīng means that unemployment is a problem for both the educated and uneducated. In 2006, the official unemployment rate in Běijīng was 2.5%, a figure predicted to rise in the next few years. With no real social security system in the PRC, an anomaly for such an avowedly socialist country, prospects for the unemployed are bleak.

Běijīng is investing considerable sums in transport infrastructure, building new roads and widening existing ones, while expanding the subway system and over-ground rail services. But economic development itself has revealed the limitations of Běijīng's road and transport systems. The number of vehicles on the city's roads was 2.8 million in late 2006 and, with the government reluctant to rein in the demand for car ownership, and prices for both cars and fuel artificially cheap, gridlock is perhaps just down the road. There is little doubt that congestion charging will have to be introduced in the near future.

Corruption not only erodes China's GDP but is one of the major causes of public dissatisfaction with the government. One of the principal complaints of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrators, the problem of corruption has not been solved, despite the arrest, imprisonment and, in a few cases, the execution of high-ranking cadres. In June 2006, Běijīng's vice-mayor Liu Zhuhua, who was in charge of overseeing the construction of all Olympic venues, was removed from his post for corruption and dissolute behaviour. Liu had been taking bribes from property developers, while maintaining multiple mistresses.

As a city hell-bent on modernising, Běijīng can be shockingly expensive. You can pay criminal prices: up to Y45 (US\$5.50) for a coffee or Y50 (US\$6) for a bowl of noodles at Capital Airport; Y1.2 million (US\$150,000) for a bottom-rung Porsche or US\$8500 a month for a plush three-bedroom apartment.

Foreigners (and the Chinese nouveau riche) are targeted for their hard-earned cash, so don't just dish it out. Look around, learn to get savvy and get a feel for where locals shop, and quickly try to get a sense of proportion. Working with a new currency, take your time to accurately convert prices.

Hotels are going to be the biggest expense, but food and transport can add up quickly too. Excluding the cost of getting to Běijīng, ascetics can survive on as little as US\$15 per day – that means staying in dormitories, travelling by bus or bicycle rather than taxi, eating from street stalls or small restaurants and refraining from buying anything. At the time of writing, the cheapest dorm bed was Y15 and a basic meal in a run-of-the-mill streetside restaurant cost around Y20.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, five-star hotel rooms can reach US\$300 per day and upmarket restaurant meals around US\$50. And there is an increasing number of expensive department stores. If you want to spend money you won't have a problem.

Beer at corner shops (*xiǎomàibù*) – often buried down *hútòng* – should cost around Y2 for a bottle of Beijing or Yanjing Beer. Drinking at bars is much more expensive, where a small bottle of Tsingtao will cost around Y15 to Y25. Unlike cigarettes in countries such as the UK, where prices for cigarettes are by and large the same, there is great variation in Chinese cigarette prices (Y3 to Y70 per pack).

Pirate DVDs usually retail for around Y7 to Y10, but be warned that quality is often a problem (see also the Lost in Translation boxed text, p168).

BĚIJĪNG'S ECONOMIC STATS

- Běijīng's GDP US\$84 billion (2005)
- Total retail expenditure US\$35.7 billion (2005)
- Expenditure on real estate US\$22.7 billion (2005)

HOW MUCH?

Bāozi (steamed meat buns) from street stall Y3

Bus ticket Y1

Cinema ticket (for a foreign film) Y60

Large bottle of Yanjing Beer from a shop Y2

1L of petrol Y5

Local SIM card Y100

Newspaper (in Chinese) Y0.5

0.5L bottle of mineral water Y1.5

Taxi rate (for first 3km) Y10

T-shirt from Yashow market Y60

GOVERNMENT & POLITICS

A revolution is not a dinner party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture, or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another.

Mao Zedong

Běijīng is the seat of political power in China and all the important decisions that affect the rest of the land are made here.

Little is known about the inner workings of the Chinese government, but what is clear is that the entire monolithic structure, from grass roots work units to the upper echelons of political power, is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and its power base is Běijīng.

The highest authority rests with the Standing Committee of the Politburo of the CCP. Including the president, Hu Jintao, and premier, Wen Jiabao, its nine members are in effect China's cabinet. Beneath them are another 25 members and below them is the 210-member Central Committee, made up of younger party members and provincial party leaders. At the grass roots level the party forms a parallel system to the administrations in the army, universities, government and industries. Real authority is exercised by the party representatives at each level in these organisations. They, in turn, are responsible to the party officials in the hierarchy above them, thus ensuring strict central control.

The day-to-day running of the country lies with the State Council, which is directly under the control of the CCP. The State Council is headed by the premier and beneath the premier are four vice-premiers, 10 state councillors, a secretary-general, 45 ministers and various other agencies. The State Council implements the decisions made by the Politburo.

Approving the decisions of the CCP leadership is the National People's Congress (NPC), the principal legislative body that convenes in the Great Hall of the People (p77). It comprises a 'democratic alliance' of party members and non-party members including intellectuals, technicians and industrial managers. In theory they are empowered to amend the constitution and to choose the premier and State Council members. The catch is that all these office holders must first be recommended by the Central Committee, thus the NPC is only an approving body.

The Chinese government is also equipped with a massive bureaucracy. The term 'cadre' is usually applied to bureaucrats, and their monopoly on power means that wide-ranging perks are a privilege of rank for all and sundry – from the lowliest clerks to the shadowy puppet masters of Zhōngnánhǎi. China's bureaucratic tradition is a long one.

The wild card in the system is the armed forces, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Comprising land forces, the navy and the air force, it has a total of around 2.3 million members.

TOP BOOKS ON THE ECONOMY & POLITICS

- **China Shakes the World: The Rise of a Hungry Nation** (James Kynge; Weidenfeld; 2006) How China's emergence as an economic superpower affects the rest of the world.
- **Chinese Lessons: Five Classmates and the Story of the New China** (John Pomfret; Henry Holt; 2006) A former Běijīng bureau chief for the Washington Post, Pomfret gives a moving narrative of what happened to five of his 1981 classmates from Nanjing University over the last 25 years, offering an invaluable insight into the reality of life in present-day China.
- **Mao: The Unknown Story** (Jung Chang & Jon Halliday; Jonathan Cape; 2005) Hugely controversial biography of Mao that paints a picture of a man consumed by egoism and indifferent to the fate of the Chinese people. Banned in China.
- **Mr China: A Memoir** (Tim Clissold; Constable & Robinson; 2004) Amusing and readable account of a British businessman's misadventures in China in the 1990s.
- **The Tiananmen Papers** (compiled by Zhang Liang, edited by Andrew Nathan & Perry Link; Public Affairs; 2001) A two-inch thick compilation of Politburo memos, minutes and documents, this publication blows away the smoke screen hanging over 4 June 1989.

Another 1.1 million serve in the People's Armed Police. China is divided into seven military regions, each with its own military leadership – in some cases with strong regional affiliations.

China's president, Hu Jintao, is also chairman of the Central Military Commission and so head of the PLA. Along with his status as the General-Secretary of the CCP, it means that Hu holds the three most powerful positions in China. Born in 1942 in Anhui province and trained as an engineer (like many of China's most senior politicians) at Běijīng's prestigious Tsinghua University, Hu is the first of China's presidents to have joined the CCP after the 1949 revolution.

Although Hu, who is said to have a photographic memory and to be a keen ballroom dancer, often appears enigmatic in his public appearances, he has consistently shown his ability to out-manoeuvre his political opponents. Having inherited a government packed with previous President Jiang Zemin's supporters, known as the 'Shanghai Gang' (because so many of them rose to power in Shànghǎi), Hu has edged some of them out while promoting his own protégés who, like him, had begun their careers in the Communist Youth League.

He has also shown a fierce determination to reinforce the CCP's dominant position in China, as well as promoting his vision of a 'Harmonious Society', something which owes much to the teachings of Confucius. In 2006, he launched the 'Eight Honours and Eight Disgraces' (Bā Róng Bā Chǐ) campaign in an effort to restore the Chinese people's faith in the CCP. The campaign calls on party members to avoid greed and corruption, while thinking always of society's needs rather than those of the individual.

That the CCP's 70 million members need an image overhaul is obvious. Rising discontent over official corruption, along with anger over illegal land seizures and damage to the environment, routinely spills over into violence. There were 74,000 violent protests across China in 2004 according to the government. That number declined by 22% in 2005, but included one protest over the construction of a power station in Guangdong province that saw members of the People's Armed Police open fire on demonstrators for the first time since the student protests in Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

While such a harsh reaction is uncommon, the authorities continue to be ruthless in their treatment of those they regard as their enemies. Environmental activists, crusading lawyers, investigative journalists and members of banned groups such as the Falun Gong all risk imprisonment because of their activities. But thanks to mobile phones and the spread of the internet, it is now far harder for the government to prevent news of protests from leaking out. And with an ever-growing gap between the rich and the poor fuelling discontent, it will only get harder for the CCP to maintain its grip on China.

ENVIRONMENT

China's breakneck economic growth over the past few decades has both depleted resources and generated vast quantities of pollution. Long-distance train travellers through China will be familiar with a bleak landscape of fields and trees choked with shredded non-biodegradable plastic bags. Successful economic renewal provides the CCP with a tenuous mandate to rule, so green issues and sustainable development policies have long taken a back seat to short-term political planning. More and more Chinese are becoming aware of the need to protect what is left of the environment – there are now over 2000 environmental groups in China – but the laws for protecting the environment are often not rigorously enforced, or are flouted at the local level by corrupt cadres.

Běijīng is under tremendous pressure to clean itself up for the 2008 Olympics. Various measures have been introduced to clean the air, including encouraging the use of natural gas and electricity rather than the traditional circular coal briquettes (*fēngwōméi*) for winter heating, replacing diesel buses with ones powered by natural gas, and closing heavily polluting industries, or moving them out of the city. But Běijīng still consumed 55 million tonnes of coal in 2005 and along with the burgeoning number of cars on the roads, and the dust from thousands of construction sites, it demonstrates that air pollution is as bad, if not worse, than ever.

For the Olympics, drastic temporary measures will be taken to ensure that the athletes don't have to compete in a haze of smog. Construction sites will be closed down two months before the Games start, as will polluting industries, while private cars are likely to be banned

DUST DEVIL

You've heard of the Gobi and you may have heard of the Takla Makan, but did you know that Běijīng may one day be another of China's deserts? The Gobi Desert is just 150km from Běijīng and winds are blowing the sands towards the capital at a rate of 2km a year, with dunes up to 30m high wriggling ever closer.

In 2006, Běijīng was hit by eight major sandstorms that coated the city in choking yellow dust. One particularly vicious storm dumped 330,000 tonnes of dust on the capital. Experts blame overgrazing and deforestation; without grassland and tree cover, and with a dropping water table, the deserts are on a roll, overwhelming villages in northern China. The Gobi Desert is expanding towards the south at a rate of 2.4% per year, extinguishing the grasslands. Every month, 200 sq km of arable land in China becomes desert.

According to the United Nation's Office to Combat Desertification and Drought (UNSO), a third of China is subject to desertification – the process by which previously semi-arable or arable land gradually becomes depleted of plant and animal life.

The Chinese government has been jolted into pledging a massive US\$6.8 billion to stop the spread of the sand. A green wall, which will eventually stretch 5700km – longer than the Great Wall – is being planted in northeastern China to keep back the sand, though some experts argue that it is not tree but grass cover that best binds the soil.

from the roads for the duration of the Games. The capital's 160 parks, oases of green in a mostly concrete city, are being renovated and prettified ahead of the Olympics too.

Apart from air pollution, Běijīng's most pressing environmental problem is the lack of water. The occasional summer rainstorm aside, Běijīng is badly dehydrated. It is so arid that old anti-aircraft guns positioned around the city are routinely used to fire shells containing rain-inducing chemicals into the clouds. This 'cloud seeding' will be used during the Olympics to wash away the haze.

Běijīng and much of north China now faces an acute water shortage, with dropping water tables and shrinking reservoirs. Increased water use in and around Běijīng – and upstream along the Yellow River – has resulted in more and more water being extracted from the ground. Crisis point will come in 2010 when Běijīng's population is expected to top 17 million, three million more than available resources can supply. Although the gargantuan south–north water transfer project will start supplying the city with water directly pumped from the flood-prone Yangtze River in 2008, Běijīngers face the very real possibility of water rationing in the future.

Běijīng is the most polluted of the major cities, using measurements of the number of micrograms of particles of pollution dust per cubic metre. Beijing's level is 142 micrograms, compared to the averages of Paris (22), London (24) and New York (27). The World Health Organization (WHO) guideline is 20.

URBAN PLANNING

The demands of a rapidly increasing population and ballooning vehicle numbers have put Běijīng's transport and housing infrastructure under duress. But netting the 2008 Olympics has given the city a chance to grab the bull by the horns. Millions of square feet of real estate space are under construction, with the total amount of office space expected to double by 2008. The subway is undergoing a massive extension and roads are being widened, with the Chinese character *chāi* (for 'demolition') daubed in white on condemned buildings city-wide.

But Běijīng's metamorphosis is not all roses – huge building projects have relocated over 100,000, often elderly, urban residents. Some have moved willingly while others have tried to resist, but with the state owning all property in Běijīng, protesters can do little to confront police. A third of Běijīng's *hútòng* within the Second Ring Rd have been demolished and, because the remainder sit on immensely valuable land, they continue to be demolished, albeit not at the rapid rate they once were. Before 1949, Běijīng had 3600 *hútòng*; now there are just 500.

Běijīng planners say that it's easy for foreign observers to condemn the destruction, remarking that Běijīng needs to modernise like any other city. Nonetheless, the identity of the city is undergoing an irreversible transformation. At the time of writing, there was an increasing awareness of the need to protect what is left of *lǎo* (old) Běijīng and a halt had been called to major demolition projects ahead of the Olympics. But once the Games have been and gone, no one is sure what will happen.

The Authors

Damian Harper



A growing penchant for taichi and a meandering career in bookselling (London, Dublin, Paris) persuaded Damian to opt for a four-year degree in Chinese at London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

A year of study in Běijīng and employment in Hong Kong further honed his irrepresible tendencies for wandering, inclinations that have led Damian to contribute to over a dozen guidebooks for Lonely Planet, including *Beijing*, *Shanghai*, *Hong Kong*, *China* and *Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei*. Married with two children, Damian and his family divide their time between Honor Oak Park in southeast London and China.

David Eimer



When David made his first trip to China in 1988, he had no idea that he would end up living and working there. After graduating with a law degree from University College London, he abandoned the idea

of becoming a barrister for a career as a freelance journalist. That took him from London to LA for five years, where he wrote for a variety of newspapers and magazines including the *London Sunday Times*, the *Mail on Sunday* and the *Guardian*.

Back in London, David became intrigued by the world's increasing focus on China. Returning there for the first time in 14 years, he found a country that had changed almost beyond all recognition. He moved to Běijīng in early 2005 and now contributes to the *Independent on Sunday* and the *South China Morning Post*. This is his first book for Lonely Planet.

DAVID'S TOP BĚIJĪNG DAY

I'll start with a strong cup of tea to wake me up and get me out of the apartment and then an early morning bike ride through the *hútòng* (p106) in Dongsishitiao Qiao, with a stop at a street stall (p122) for a *ròubǐng* (a bread bun full of finely chopped meat) for breakfast. Then I'll push my bike across one of the *tiānqiáo* (pedestrian bridge) over Chaoyangmen Dajie and ride to the Friendship Store (p162) on Jianguomenwai Dajie to pick up a newspaper. From there, I'll head to nearby Ritan Park (p95) to read the paper by the ornate fish pond where hopeful middle-aged anglers sit all day.

If there's shopping to be done, then it's a short hop to the malls at either Guomao or Wangfujing Dajie (p161). If I'm feeling feisty, a trip to the hectic atmosphere of the Silk Street (p164) or Alien's Street Market (p166) offers the chance to improve my bartering skills and to pick up a few bargains. By the time I'm all haggled out I'm hungry again, so it's time for a quick lunch of *jiǎozi* (dumplings) in a nearby restaurant.

After a morning in Běijīng's commercial emporiums, an afternoon spent contemplating spiritual matters at one of the capital's surviving temples seems in order. I could carry on heading south to the Temple of Heaven Park (p79), but more likely I'll turn around and head back north to the oasis of serenity that is Lama Temple (p91). There I'll join Běijīng's Buddhists as they meditate, pray or just sit gazing into space.

LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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In the evening, it's time to jump into a taxi and head to Sanlitun in Cháoyáng (p132) to catch up with friends over a meal. From there, we'll head to one of the many nearby bars (p143) for a few drinks.

CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

DR TRISH BATCHELOR

Dr Trish Batchelor is a general practitioner and travel medicine specialist who works at the CIWEC Clinic in Kathmandu, Nepal. She is also a medical advisor to the Travel Doctor New Zealand clinics. Trish teaches travel medicine through the University of Otago and is interested in underwater and high-altitude medicine. She has travelled extensively through Southeast and East Asia. Trish wrote the Health section in the Directory chapter.

JASPER BECKER

British writer Jasper Becker arrived in Běijīng in 1985 to report for the *Guardian* and left after the Tiananmen Square 'incident'. In 1995 he arrived to work for the *South China Morning Post* and has now lived in Běijīng for 16 years. He has written six books including *Hungry Ghosts*, *The Chinese*, and most recently *City of Heavenly Tranquillity – Peking and the History of China* which is being published in 2007. Jasper wrote the History chapter.

JULIE GRUNDTVIG

Julie first travelled to mainland China in the early 1990s where she hitchhiked her way from Yúnnán to Xīnjiāng. Several years after that she moved to Běijīng and eventually Xī'an where she studied Chinese art and literature. Later came an MA in classical Chinese and a stint in Běijīng teaching English and working in an art gallery.

She is associate editor for the journal *Yishu: Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art* and co-author/contributor of several Lonely Planet titles including *Taiwan*, *China* and *Beijing*. She currently lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Julie co-authored the Arts & Architecture and Food & Drink chapters.

LIN GU

Lin Gu recently left a position as Běijīng-based writer for *China Features* and joined the Graduate School of Journalism at University of California, Berkeley as a visiting scholar. In eight years covering China, he has reported on a number of issues, including social migration and environmental protection. Lin was a regular contributor to the radio talk programmes which replaced Alistair Cooke's 'Letter from America' after Alistair's death. He has also written and presented on current affairs in China for the BBC. Lin has a master's degree in social anthropology from Cambridge University and was the two-time recipient of the Developing Asia Journalism Award for his coverage of the AIDS crisis in China and the controversy over genetically modified rice in the country. He wrote the 'Home' boxed text in the City Life chapter.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Phil Weymouth

Australian born, Phil's family moved to Iran in the late 1960s. They called Tehran home until the revolution in 1979. Phil then studied photography in Melbourne, and returned to the Middle East to work as a photographer in Bahrain. Phil's Lonely Planet commissions include guides to *Beijing*, *Hong Kong*, *Shanghai*, *Dubai*, *Kyoto* and *Singapore*.

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