



At the center of Beijing, a quiet street, Donghuamen Neighborhood District.



A breach in the wall, Forbidden City.

Solid Stone — Soft Snow Treading the Short Path in A Changing China

Text and photographs by Lowell Bennett



Link:

*A Western Perspective
Observation and Comment by Lowell Bennett*

Writer's Thoughts

Hiking a few hours on a winter afternoon in Beijing, a westerner new to the country won't learn much about China. But one can sure get a sense of things.
Imposing stone structures of government and ideology, a delicate garden, an ancient palace, a booming commercial center, gregarious university graduates, honest cab drivers, friendly bar owners and a dreamlike nightclub district — the collective metaphor for this nation comes perhaps too easily.
In China's long history, she has been driven by powerful affairs of state, geopolitics and economics. These are the evolutionary bricks and mortar of a modern nation's foundation.
But perhaps the truly enduring greatness is made of other stuff: The fundamental elements of a higher civilization as conceived and practiced by artists, artisans and all her working people. They may be directors of government, generals of armies, masters of industry, creators of art, cutters of stone, crafters of wood — or she may be that small middle-aged woman who with assiduous care quietly sweeps her domain of public walk. All are part recorder and part player in a society that relishes its ancient past, struggles with its present, looks to its future and endures as a culture.
Now, as China enters a new and very different era in her long history — as her government expands horizons of nation and citizen, as her people grasp greater prosperity, as her armies of industry seize territories of global commerce, as her leaders strive to maintain peace in region and world — it would seem that down at Houhai Lake there is also some fun to be had...

Midwinter I arrived in China sporting perhaps overly generous official designation as a “foreign expert” and a contract to serve as consultant editor to this venerable half-century-old publication.

Generally I was pretty cold.

Red hot commercial development, fiery regional foods, warmhearted citizens — That’s the sort of adjective-heavy phrasing one might cutely trump up to contrast notable first impressions. And that would all be accurate. But first thing it’s the dry-ice cold knifing across my pink California ears that is the something to write home about.

Nevertheless, on this particular date just short of three weeks in country, it was a holiday, the office was closed, a picturesque snow had fallen, I had spent a lot of time avoiding the weather and shot exactly zero photos. So after begrudgingly giving up on what excuses I could offer myself, I threw on my ski jacket, slung my backpack and

headed out into the remarkable city of Beijing.

Tiananmen Square

At about 3:00 pm the taxi dropped me and a few steps later I was standing at the approximate geographic center of Beijing and at the precise center of political power in China.

Tiananmen Square can be a hard place; stark, resolute. The sense of being there is made more palpable by the conditions. The snow had settled in the night before and light flurries continued. The day was cold and grey as granite.

On the flat slab plane of this manmade open space, with visibility trailing to nothing just beyond, I was enveloped by the muting mist, the chill of winter and the rock of state. In the distance, fronting the Square, are the imposing edifices: the Great Hall of the People, the China National Museum and the Mao Zedong Memorial Hall.

I was looked down upon by these great

buildings of government, culture, history and Him. At this place choices were made, destinies cast and power on Earth was changed. And still from here a nation is driven to advance in the world.

As if embodying the determination and resilience of both nation and citizen, the Tiananmen guards are for hours in the open air. The young sentries patrol and watch over this people’s place and its monuments to struggle, revolution and sacrifice. At particular spots, honor guards are rigid, solidly locked-up at attention, unflinching in the adversity of cold, wind and snow.

Standing here beneath another nation’s banners and its imposing constructions of state, an American of ease can perceive a harder force sourcing from the stones of Tiananmen.

Area Note: Originally constructed in 1651, Tiananmen Square would be enlarged to four times its original size. Now the world’s largest public square, the curb-to-curb coverage spans an area of more than

440,000 square meters (526,000 square yards / 109 acres). Centerpiece on the Square is the Monument to the People’s Heroes. The flagstones of the expanse are numbered to allow for quick assembly of parades.

Zhongshan Park

Retreating from the Square, and after a short stroll through the passage beneath the wide boulevard of Chang’an Avenue, an entirely separate reality is reached.

The way of a softer China is manifest within the tranquil gardens of Zhongshan Park. Further hushed by the soft blanket of snow, the garden and its ornate structures are subdued beneath the contiguous walls and watchtowers of Forbidden City. But in this tranquil setting, the natural things and more gentle buildings hold their own.

This is a domain without need for ostentation or force. Paths through the snow lead to far corners of sheltered tranquility. A gazebo masters its own frozen realm; independent, inoffensive, intelligent of design, with no need of great walls or battlements.

Here, as a small child, a future emperor may have climbed a cypress tree. Years later, as a man fully empowered by blood, army and country, smiling, he may have watched his own child climb that same tree.

The ancient cypress remain, on warmer days perhaps accommodating somewhat different children. But on this cold inhospitable afternoon, the regal trees simply disregard the foreigner in their midst. Below them their native subjects, the plants of the garden, doze within a quiet quilt of snow, patiently waiting out the winter.

Area Note: In the Liao Dynasty (916 - 1125) what is today Zhongshan Park was the site of Xingguosi (Temple of National Revival), a place where royalty worshipped their gods of land and grain. Spanning 240,000 square meters (287,000 square yards / 60 acres), the park was reconstructed in 1914 based on designs dating back to 1420. In 1928, the site was renamed Zhongshan Park, in memory of Dr. Sun Yat-sen (also known more commonly in China as Sun Zhongshan), the founder of the Republic of

China.

Forbidden City — The Imperial Palace

A few steps east of the frozen fantasy of Zhongshan Park loom the massive walls and watchtowers of the City. Pass through these battlements and you cross threshold to a formidable fortress, but you will also walk upon vast palace grounds of extraordinary beauty and remarkable history.

The Imperial Palace of the Ming and Qing Dynasties is primarily known to westerners as the Forbidden City. In 1401 the residence and fortifications were ordered built by Zhu Di, second emperor of the Ming Dynasty. Completed in 1421, at more than 9,000 rooms, the palace would serve as perhaps the most extraordinary live-work space of all time.

There would be 24 emperors that would reside and conduct the business of government here.

Once this was the private domain of royalty, attendants, privileged concubines,

Frozen elegance, Zhongshan Park.



Donghuanmen Night Snack Market.



garrison troops and honor guard. Soldiers still keep watch, but the intruders today are placid foreigners and intrigued citizens armed with mobile phones and digital cameras. Of some threat perhaps are the well-groomed boys in designer clothes who may dash about and toss the occasional snowball.

Nearly 600 years ago, under the watchful eye of the palace guard, perhaps the elegantly-garbed children of the royals ran down these walkways, into these courtyards, laughing, throwing their own snowballs.

And what were my ancestors doing about

February 12, 1912. In years prior, the Qing Dynasty had weakened and China's national affairs were subject to the mercenary dictates of Western powers. Thus the ground was made fertile for revolution and the reign of emperors in China was ended.

Donghuamen District

Exiting The Palace at the Wumen Gate, hiking easterly about a half-mile along the frozen moat, I happened into an area of small shops and quiet residential streets. Surprising, to be at the center of a major international

is like much of this booming city—massive office buildings, busy department stores, countless restaurants, hyperkinetic boulevards and about the calmest, death-defying, vehicle-dodging pedestrians on Earth.

Like a lot (maybe all) westerners, my first impression upon hitting the streets of this town was of the baffling synchronicity of vehicle, bicycle and human. Stopping (or even slowing much) for those on foot is a phenomenon rarely displayed by Beijing drivers. Lacking advantage of mass and momentum, cyclists occasionally do give

If I needed a new jacket and if I were hungry, I could settle both tasks in the space of about five steps and five minutes. Out of the clothing store, then barbequed mutten on a stick washed down by jujube juice. But not today.

Moving up a block I was at the Sun Dong An Plaza at the northern end of the Wangfujing Commercial Street. This is an area frequented by foreigners, featuring high-end retail often targeting the western buyer of stuff and I got out of there.

It was about a mile past that open center of commerce, while traversing a long street of more localized high-end boutiques, trendy

to go their own way, I was advised to “Take a taxi.”

So I did.

Area Note: Donghuamen Night Snack Market, near the Palace Hotel, is an ideal place for westerners to sample traditional Chinese snacks like wan-ton, tea soup (*chatang*), mutton skewer (*yang rou chuan*) and fried glutinous rice cakes (*zhagao*). Most of Beijing's night markets are open year-round.

Houhai Lake

Night had settled on the snow-laced

icy lake.

Some spots are quieter, but others pipe out their preferred house tunes. Within a few blocks, I got an exterior sampling of jazz, American pop, techno, 80's dance tunes, hard-driving Euro rock and classical (as in Mozart).

I had walked some snowy miles and some cold hours and was ready to wrap-up this especially damp exterior expedition. Near the lake I crossed a small bridge and a particular jazz number caught my ear: Dave Brubeck's “Take Five.”

The establishment was warm, newer,

“The Alley of Welcome Trouble” (according to the writer) Houhai Lake District.



In wait of spring, Zhongshan Park.



then? Hard to know. When China's royal family first moved into their new home, Europe was just beginning to awake from the Dark Ages. It would be more than 70 years before Columbus would cross the Atlantic and stumble onto what was then a virgin New World.

Area Note: The Imperial Palace (Forbidden City) is comprised of 150,000 square meters of interior space. The total compound occupies more than 720,000 square meters (250 acres) of total area in Downtown Beijing. The final emperor (The Last Emperor) to occupy the place was Henry Pu Yi, who at age six formerly abdicated on

metropolis looking down a leafless tree-lined and silent street - the mist closing the distant view, nothing coming, nothing going, near silence.

A lone middle-aged man peddled by, braving the elements, likely navigating his bike to a warm home beyond that enveloping mist. The tranquility of the scene seemed oddly and pleasantly rural, as if it were early morning in a far-off provincial village. But just a few blocks away was more tangible proof of location.

Continuing down the intersecting shop-lined street for a few minutes, I was back in Beijing. The Donghuamen commercial area

way.

Oddly, it all seems to work. Drivers drive well, pedestrians dodge well and traffic flows well on a beautiful world of new asphalt that is pothole and litter-free. But for the less agile westerner in Beijing, and perhaps those accustomed to the more sedate boulevards of say, Sarasota, Florida (or New York, New York), they would be well-advised to go with the local flow when crossing on foot.

Wangfujing Commercial Area

A little further and I came upon the open-air Donghuamen Night Snack Market, a streetside multi-venture already in full swing.

hair stylists, music shops and bistros, when behind me came a feminine “Hello.”

The two young ladies were recent university graduates, anxious to try out their English. After pleasantries I was invited to tea. I explained that it would soon be cocktail hour and I would hold off. I was already aware that evening cocktails is a ritual not widely practiced in China, and here again the reaction was nonplussed. “I think too early... What about tea?”

It was about then I whipped out my map and asked of them the best route to Houhai Lake. And it was at this point offense may have been taken. Before they abruptly turned

shimmering streets and the alley glowed, almost surrealistic, as if joined from another time. Barely lit by red lanterns and light seeping from interiors, hidden by shadows, hinting at perhaps welcome trouble - the passage-way more fit my preconceived American notion of an old Shanghai. This dreamy urban portal opened to an even more fanciful setting.

At the other side the scene resembles that of a resort village in the Swiss Alps. The myriad shops, cafés and clubs glow with warm interiors. Outside, rainbow lighting and vibrant music reflect off the light snow that dresses up the narrow lane, promenade and

well-appointed, nicely lit, the proprietors friendly, the company good and the martini first-rate — not too much vermouth.

Still, I might have blown it when I passed on the tea...

Area Note: The Houhai (also known as Back Lake) district accommodates more than 70 small bars and restaurants, plus several large nightclubs and lakeside dinner houses. Conditions permitting, locals and visitors often skate the surface of the lake. 