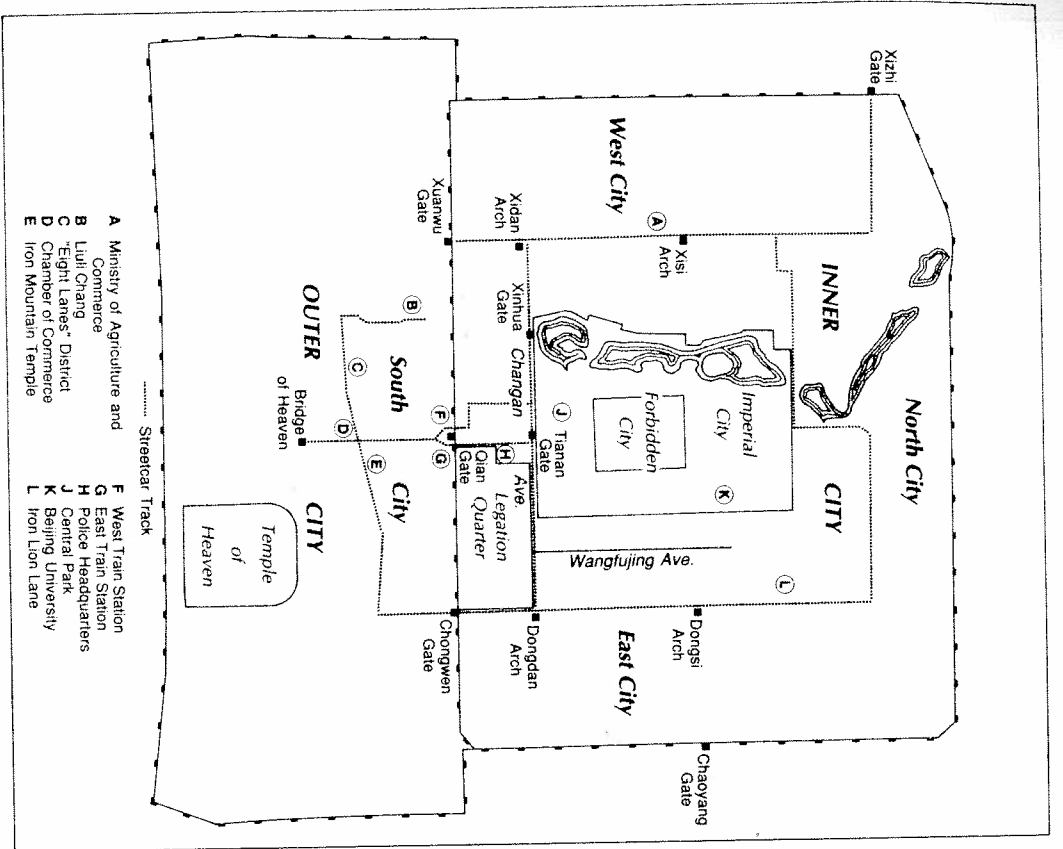


RICKSHAW BEIJING

City People and Politics in the 1920s

DAVID STRAND



Map I. Beijing.

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A Twentieth-Century Walled City

Wobbling Pivot and Armature of State Power

Broad avenues, parks, and public squares open up the contemporary urban world to the mass assemblies essential to modern commerce, culture, and politics. By contrast, early-twentieth-century Beijing, as a physical entity, remained a city stubbornly defined by walls, walled enclosures, and gates.¹ The fifteenth-century Ming plan of the capital decreed boxes within boxes and cities within cities. The habits of vernacular architecture extended this principle into neighborhoods and residences.² Towering walls of tamped earth with brick facing formed the square Inner City (*neicheng*) and, adjacent to the south, the rectangular Outer City (*waicheng*; fig. 1). (The Inner City was conventionally divided into East, West, and North “Cities” or districts. See map.) The Inner City enclosed the walls of the Imperial City, which, in turn, framed the yellow-roofed, red-walled Forbidden City and the emperor’s throne room. In his memoir of Republican Beijing, newspaper man Li Chengyi, quoting a line spoken by an emperor in a Beijing opera, remembered a cityscape composed of circles within circles: “In the midst of a great circle lies a small circle. Within the small circle stands a yellow one.”³ Within the compass of these great walls and a grid-work of imperial thoroughfares lay a mosaic of walled enclosures containing the mansions of the powerful, the smaller courtyard residences of the monied, propertied, and degree-holding classes, and the courtyard slums of the laboring poor.

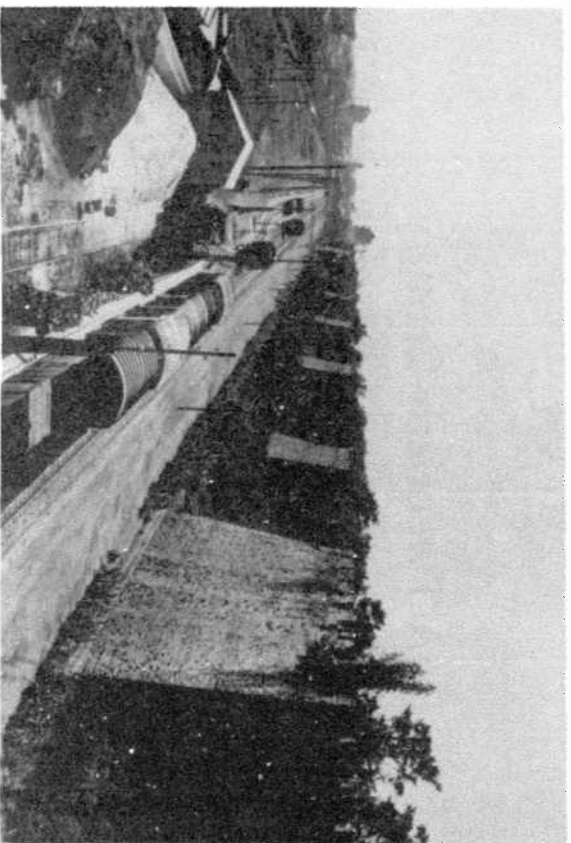


Fig. 1. The wall separating the Inner and Outer Cities. Qian Gate and the western branch of the central railway station are visible in the distance. In the aftermath of the Boxer uprising in 1900, the portion of the wall pictured here was placed under foreign jurisdiction as a means of guaranteeing the security of the Legation Quarter immediately to the north. From Heinz v. Perckhammer, *Peking* (Berlin: Albertus-Verlag, 1928).

The hard symmetry of Beijing's monumental plan was softened by the random, maze-like wanderings of alleyways (*hutong*) typical of most neighborhoods and, seasonally, by nature. In the late fall and winter, the "special blueness of the sky, intensity of the sun and brilliance of the moon" placed the city's unique architectural ensemble of palaces and walls in brilliant relief.⁴ In the spring north China's famous dust storms obscured the composite order of these elements, as did tree foliage in the summer when Beijing became a "forest city."⁵

In the late-Qing and Republican era, change directed toward the physical and social transformation of Beijing stirred and developed. Beginning at the turn of the century, reformers and

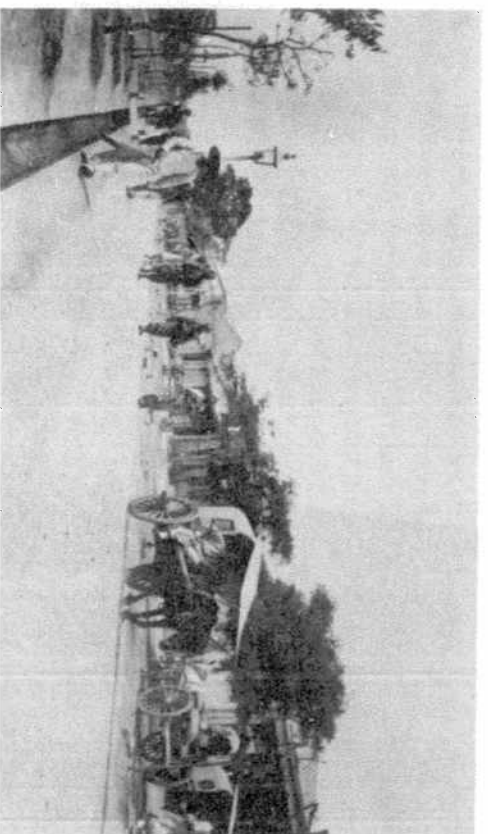


Fig. 2. On this modern Beijing avenue, a mule-cart driver has ignored the prohibition against narrow-tired vehicles using the paved, center section. Note the presence of gutters, street lamp, and flanking lines of young trees marking the borders of the unpaved side roads. Pedestrians naturally preferred the macadam to dusty or muddy mule-cart tracks. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

entrepreneurs introduced inventions and institutions intended to make the city a fit capital, first for a modern empire, and then for a republic. As a physical space, Beijing seemed alternately to invite and to resist change. Strips of macadam could be laid without much trouble down the centers of wide, Ming-vintage avenues. But in order that narrow-wheeled country carts, which ruined pavement, could continue to travel in the city, the sides of the roads had to be left unpaved.⁶ Alongside the new pavement, work crews installed water pipes, street lamps, postboxes, public latrines, and telegraph and telephone poles and lines. A new, uniformed police force built kiosks and deployed its members beside the thoroughfares. The tasks of the police included keeping mule drivers off the pavement and protecting postboxes and utility equipment from vandalism and pilferage (figs. 2 and 3).⁷ In 1910 Qing officials reportedly contemplated tearing down the city walls

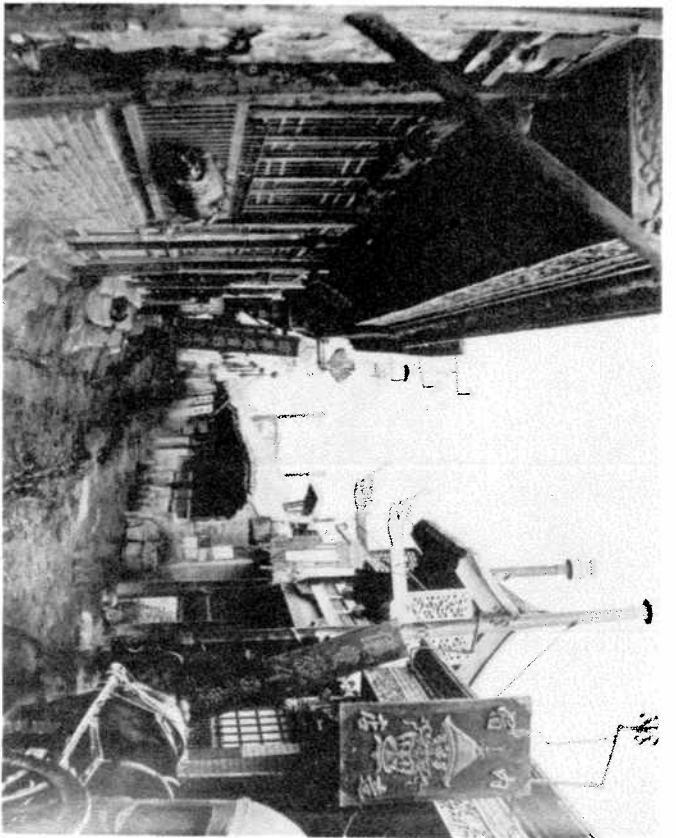


Fig. 3. A Beijing alleyway (*hutong*). Narrow, twisting side streets were left unpaved. This commercial *hutong* boasts a long line of businesses, including a hat shop and a jewelry store. Note the old-style signboards and intricately carved facades. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

and laying streetcar track in their place.⁸ Considering that at that time Beijing's walls still symbolized, concealed, and protected imperial authority and the person of the emperor, the notion was a radical one. Although the city walls, as the expression of cosmological canon, still had a potent ally in the sheer inertia of these ordered ranges of earth and brick, modern-minded Chinese began to imagine their removal.

By the birth of the Republic in 1912, a rusty, potholed grid of wire, pipe, and macadam mimicked, if not threatened, the ancient geometry of the city's walls and gates. New government bureaus, universities, factories, and foreign legations functioned as modern enclaves in the midst of preindustrial and culturally traditional Beijing. The streets themselves, with their complement of new devices and social roles, including telephone communications, rick-

shaw and (eventually) automobile travel, and formal policing of public behavior, systematically projected modern ideas and invention throughout the city. As Marshall Berman has observed, the modern avenue, of which Hausmann's Parisian boulevards and Petersburg's Nevsky Prospect are outstanding examples, is a "distinctively modern environment" which "served as a focus for newly accumulated material and human forces: macadam and asphalt, gaslight and electric light, the railroad, electric trolleys and automobiles, movies and mass transportation."⁹ When the European city was exported whole or in part to the Third World, modern avenues of the kind constructed in early-twentieth-century Beijing formed both the skeletal structure and the nervous system of a new urban organism.¹⁰

In some cities, like Shanghai, modern enclaves and infrastructure transformed urban life. The city itself became an enclave in the midst of a preindustrial hinterland. In most other cities, especially those like Beijing, located inland from China's maritime fringe, the changes were less decisive. But the attendant emergence even in smaller numbers of new buildings housing factories, universities, and modern government, and of new people, like proletarians, capitalists, and a cadre of politicians and assorted professionals, represented a significant alteration in the pattern of urban life. Anarchists throwing bombs, students making speeches, and entrepreneurs floating joint-stock companies could not fail to make an impression even if a uniformly politicized citizenry or a forest of smokestacks did not yet exist to underscore their long-term significance.

Imperial Beijing, with its cosmologically dictated ceremonial and administrative architecture, congested commercial districts, and flat expanses of courtyard residences, easily absorbed the initial transformative threat posed by a few modern buildings and machines and a thin layer of pavement. But the fragility, even the absurdity, of ventures advertising themselves in the form of malfunctioning, sometimes dangerous machinery, hectoring policemen, and shouting rickshaw men could not disguise the insistent way in which new technologies and practices pressed up against the lives of Beijing residents and subtly altered the speed, scale, and direction of city life. Once the empire's un wobbling pivot encased in massive walls, Beijing began a long and halting re-



Fig. 4. Fashionably dressed men and women enjoying a sled ride. For centuries simple sleds like this one had been available for hire on the “palace lakes” north of the Imperial City. The laborer pulling the sled wore special shoes equipped with iron hooks that gripped the ice. Once the sled picked up speed, the puller hopped on to coast along with his passengers. (H. Y. Lowe, *The Adventures of Wu: The Life Cycle of a Peking Man*, vol. 2 [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983], pp. 132–133.) UPI/Bettmann Newsphotos.

emergence as the armature of modern state power wrapped in telephone and telegraph wire and powered by mass nationalism instead of a mandate from heaven.

By the 1920s this redirecting of city life was well advanced. A streetcar system operated, along with scores of modern factories, dozens of newspapers, a racetrack, cinemas, an airfield, and several railway stations. Political parties, a chamber of commerce, labor unions, patriotic societies, literary clubs, and professional societies of lawyers, bankers, and newspaper reporters claimed tens of thousands of members. But despite the inspired imaginings of late-Qing planners, streetcar track, while it ran through and within the square and rectangular template formed by the Inner and the Outer City, did not replace the city walls. Nor did labor unions and professional associations push aside craft and merchant guilds. They competed and cooperated with each other in an increasingly complex blending of organizational and leadership styles and strategies.

Some cities are like palimpsests. The imperfectly erased past is visible even though only the imprint of the present can be clearly deciphered. By contrast, Beijing in the 1920s, as a human and physical entity, clearly preserved the past, accommodated the present, and nurtured the basic elements of several possible futures. Few cities in China in the 1920s looked so traditional and Chinese and at the same time harbored the essentials of modern and Western urban life. In fact, the city's physical ambiguities provide a metaphor for the uneven and incomplete social transformations of the Republican period. With everything added by way of new technologies and social practices and little taken away through the uniform application of factory system, modern administration, or thoroughgoing social revolution, Beijing cultivated incongruities and forced accommodation between old and new forms of production and social action (fig. 4).

Beijing and Beiping:

Taking the Measure of a Capital in Decline

West of the Forbidden City and within the walls of the Imperial City lie three artificial lakes or seas (*hai*): Bei (north), Zhong (middle), and Nan (south). The two southern lakes, or “Zhong-

nanhai," are surrounded by palaces and pavilions, which form the southwestern corner of the Imperial City.¹¹ The main entrance to the Zhongnanhai complex is Xinhua Gate, which faces south on Changan Avenue, running east and west. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, emperors and the court used Zhongnanhai as a retreat from the more austere setting of the Forbidden City. Following the 1911 Revolution and beginning with President Yuan Shikai, most Republican heads of state used Zhongnanhai as residence and office complex.¹² Since 1949 top officials of the People's Republic have lived and worked in the same, palatial setting.

While the 1911 Revolution left imperial Beijing physically intact, dethronement of the emperor jarred political authority loose from the symbolic design of the city's walls and palaces. After 1911 real and putative power resided transiently in Zhongnanhai, in the cabinet offices at Iron Lion Lane in the East City (the eastern districts of the Inner City), in the parliament building in the West City just north of the wall separating the Inner and the Outer City, or in the imperialist bastion of the Legation Quarter. The Forbidden City was given over to parks and museums and, until he was expelled in 1924, the residence of the deposed Manchu monarch. This spatial decentering of political Beijing presaged the wobbling, errant course of the Republic and the degrading of Republican institutions located variously in reconverted palaces and mansions, like Zhongnanhai, and Western-style buildings, like parliament.

Zhongnanhai, which served as headquarters for the Republic's first head of state, also housed its last resident in Beijing: Marshal Zhang Zuolin. As military dictator based in Beijing from December 1926 to June 1928, Zhang presided over the demise of the Beijing Republic (prior to its rebirth in Nanjing under the Nationalists).¹³ Continuing a slide toward insolvency begun early in the decade and accelerated by Zhang's military adventures, impoverished officials contrived to sell brick from the city walls and ancient trees from imperial temple grounds to pay government salaries.¹⁴ Even by comparison with previous masters of the Beijing regime, Zhang Zuolin's commitment to republican virtue was feeble. He marked his tenure in office with sacrifices to Confucius and other gestures hinting at imperial ambitions.¹⁵ Admittedly, he never went the full route followed by Yuan Shikai, who in 1915

and 1916 tried to make himself emperor. Perhaps Zhang understood that declaring himself monarch would have only substituted "a parody of the empire" for "the parody of a republic."¹⁶

By spring 1928 Zhang Zuolin's forces were in retreat from the allied armies of the Northern Expedition led by Chiang Kai-shek. The militarist prepared to leave Zhongnanhai and Beijing and return to his base in the northeast. Just after midnight on June 3, 1928, a twenty-car motorcade carrying Zhang sped out of Xinhua Gate, heading for Beijing's East Station and a special armored train bound for Mukden (Shenyang).¹⁷ Shortly before dawn the next day, on the outskirts of Mukden, a bomb planted by the Japanese army blew up the car Zhang Zuolin was riding in and mortally wounded the warlord.¹⁸

For the next week, in a pattern followed in the 1920s on previous occasions of flight and conquest, a consortium of prominent ex-officials, merchants, and bankers governed the city through a Peace Preservation Association (*zhan weichi hui*). The body maintained order with the help of Zhang Zuolin's garrison commander, Bao Yulin, who remained behind Zhang's retreating forces with a contingent of soldiers. The consortium also orchestrated an orderly transfer of power from Zhang's troops to the Nationalists. On the morning of June 8, raggedly dressed advance elements of General Yan Xishan's peasant army entered Beijing through the southern gates of the Outer City.¹⁹ Meanwhile, by prearrangement, General Bao and his troops, looking impressive after months of urban garrison duty, took leave of the city from Chaoyang Gate on the eastern side of the Inner City. Xiong Xiling, a former premier, a Beijing entrepreneur and philanthropist, representing the Peace Preservation Association, gave a speech praising Bao's performance as garrison commander. The Beijing chamber of commerce presented Bao with honorific gifts and provisions for his men. A group photograph was taken to commemorate the event.

As in the past when the capital changed hands, Beijing became the site in June and July for meetings among the victors. Chiang Kai-shek and the militarists who supported the Nationalist drive to the north arrived in Beijing aboard armored trains to consult each other and pay respects to Nationalist-movement founder Sun Yat-sen, whose remains had been temporarily interred in the

Temple of Azure Clouds in the hills west of the city at the time of his death in 1925. But this time the meetings did not have, as they had in the past, the goal of reconstituting a national government in Beijing. The Nationalists had chosen Nanjing as their capital and renamed Beijing ("northern capital") Beijing ("northern peace").²⁰

In moving the capital to Nanjing, the Nationalists were following the wishes of Sun Yat-sen, whose death from cancer had come during a fruitless attempt to negotiate unification of north and south. The choice of Nanjing also made strategic sense in that a southern capital removed the regime's center from proximity to the Japanese threat in the northeast. Nanjing was located in the midst of China's economic heartland and closer to the southern cradle of the Nationalist revolution in Guangdong.

However, the Nationalists were also motivated by their strong dislike of Beijing. Nationalists partly blamed the city and its inhabitants for the failure of the Republic and expressed concern lest their own movement become contaminated by contact with the old capital.²¹ Even in speeches appealing to city residents to support the Nationalist cause, Nationalist leaders could not refrain from condemning the mix of Manchu, militarist, and Communist influences thought to be concealed in Beijing. On June 30, 1928, at a rally held in Central Park (soon to be renamed Sun Yat-sen Park) just west of Tianan Gate, city residents listened patiently in the rain as a military official from Hunan, named Li Pinxian, praised Beijing's fame as a cultural center as he attacked its more recent history. Beijing, he declared, "has been occupied by warlords as well as by the poisonous vestiges of monarchy to the point that customs and habits have become deeply corrupted."²² Worse still, Communists had taken advantage of the fact that Beijing was "rife with corruption" to promote a cause that appeared attractive by comparison. Li concluded his speech by testifying that on his way out to visit Sun Yat-sen's tomb in the Western Hills he saw a man wearing a Manchu-style queue and that many people could be seen wearing Qing-era summer hats. These, he said, were "obstacles to carrying out the revolution" and "ought to be eradicated."

Beijing residents, through the press and local organizations like the chamber of commerce and the hotel guild, mounted a vigorous defense of the city's reputation and her fitness to be the capital.

Beijing, they pointed out, was "grand and imposing."²³ What other city in the country could boast such a magnificent array of palaces and museums? Nanjing might be at the center of the eighteen-province heartland of the country, but China also included Xinjiang and Mongolia. Reestablishing the capital at Beijing would send a signal to Russian and Japanese imperialists that greater China and its northern borders would be defended. As if to prove the depth of Beijing residents' nationalist feelings, the Beijing chamber of commerce sent an open telegraphic message to the nation, announcing a drive to raise funds to erect a bronze statue of Sun Yat-sen in Beijing and plans to host a national festival in his memory.²⁴

The Nationalists charged guilt by association. Beijing people posed as innocent bystanders. One petition sent to Chiang Kai-shek and his colleagues slyly pointed out that although talk of "Beijing corruption" was certainly "fashionable," since the Nationalists had arrived in Beijing they too had established numerous bureaus and official organs. Official statements sounded much like past declarations. Following the Nationalists' own logic, would not these actions likewise be a form of corruption?²⁵

Needless to say, the Nationalists were irritated by the Beijing residents' attempts to be accommodating in a fashion tailored to their own interests and regarded them as a confirmation of their prejudices against the city. When Chiang Kai-shek arrived in Beijing on the morning of July 3 he greeted the crowd of local notables and organizations, which had been waiting all night at the train station for his arrival, with a wave of a hat, a brief word of thanks (*xiexie, haobao*), and a refusal to have his photograph taken.²⁶ He and his entourage left almost immediately for the Western Hills to pay their respects to Sun's body. Afterwards, as he left the Temple of Azure Clouds, a reporter asked him about "the question of the national capital" and Chiang replied, "In Nanjing, of course." One year later, when Chiang returned to the city in an unsuccessful attempt to forestall a revolt by two of his erstwhile northern militarist allies, several hundred merchants marched on the hotel he was staying at and demanded the return of the capital.²⁷ Chiang termed the request "ridiculous" on the grounds that the whole matter was purely an "affair of state."²⁸ To residents of the "old capital," long accustomed to viewing

national affairs as a local industry, loss of paramount administrative status and the rebukes delivered by Chiang and his fellow Nationalists constituted grievous blows to both livelihood and city pride.

As the decade progressed fewer and fewer political authorities outside the capital had paid any attention to the government within the walls, except as a target for attack. While some ministries and bureaus continued to function, the regime faced mounting difficulties in paying its employees even a bit of what they were owed.²⁹ Staffed by unpaid and demoralized officials, government offices became derelict places.³⁰ Even so, a palpable administrative and political aura clung to the city. As long as there was a chance that an effective national government might be reestablished in the city, tens of thousands of political aspirants and hangers-on hovered about in a cloud of connections, factional intrigue, and patronage.³¹

As the national government faded and finally disappeared in the 1920s, leaving only archives and museums as markers of the high tide of early Republican administration, Beijing retained a "heavy official atmosphere."³² The city exuded what others more provocatively termed a "bureaucratic odor."³³ Beijing's hotels, inns, provincial hostels, restaurants, theaters, teahouses, parks, and bathhouses continued to provide a congenial setting for the practice of politics. The city's newspapers mirrored political goings-on with varying degrees of accuracy and distortion. Much of the economy had direct or indirect ties to government and politics, ranging from the service sector, which housed, fed, transported, and amused officials and politicians to less likely beneficiaries, like the bicycle trade, which equipped the messengers stationed outside government offices and private mansions.³⁴

Beijing society naturally oriented itself toward power—the city's principal product and resource for over five hundred years. The early Republic encouraged the continuation of this orientation in a form that made Beijing people appear servile and spoiled to outsiders. "Generally speaking, Beijing society is utterly feeble and decrepit. . . . When Guangdong people are at the end of their rope, they face the danger directly. Shandong people leave hearth and home to struggle on elsewhere. But Beijing people make a point of acting like the bereaved heirs of the Qing empire."³⁵ In a

mocking way, the author of this passage, who knew Beijing well in the 1920s as a practising social researcher, suggests that the removal of the capital in 1928 and the city's loss of status had been anticipated by the personal and collective loss experienced by Qing bannermen, who were in a literal sense "bereaved heirs" of the old regime.

The banners, identified by the color and pattern of their battle flags, were the original fighting units of the Manchus. After their seventeenth-century conquest of China, bannermen and their dependents were settled in and around the capital and throughout the empire in strategically placed communities.³⁶ In the 1920s, bannermen and their families, who included Chinese and Mongolians but who were predominantly Manchu, still constituted one-third of the city's population of approximately one million.³⁷ They were popularly regarded as having lost their martial spirit and retained an unwarranted sense of entitlement. In outward appearance, customs, and habits bannermen differed little from the average Chinese resident of the city. Given their more than 250 years of residence, Manchu bannermen had become quintessential Beijing people (*Beijing ren*). Bannermen were entitled to receive stipends and rations in accord with their status. But these monies and benefits had diminished considerably by the eve of the 1911 Revolution.³⁸ As stipend payments became irregular and anti-Manchu sentiment mounted, bannermen were satirized and ridiculed as lazy wards of the state and as absurdly devoted to defending their declining status.³⁹

After the 1911 Revolution, the Republican government continued to pay banner stipends and rations, although by the early 1920s these payments were in arrears, like most government obligations.⁴⁰ As their financial situation became ever more precarious, Manchus began to take whatever work they could find. Thousands became policemen and soldiers. Tens of thousands pulled rickshaws. Others found jobs as peddlers, servants, prostitutes, actors, and storytellers.⁴¹ In this regard it is difficult to tell what observers found more disconcerting: the Manchus' alleged indolence or their unseemly willingness to fill low-status occupations, many of which required considerable enterprise and hard work.

The decline of Beijing Manchus became synonymous with the

decadence of the imperial regime. As the Republican state experienced a comparable, accelerated decline, stereotypical representations of Manchus as a "feudal" residue seemed germane to an accounting of Beijing's essential character. As a friendly southern observer remarked in his assessment of post-1928 Beijing, the old capital was "placid, passive, easygoing, conservative, venerable, leisurely, and feudal."⁴² The city's style of life resonated with the softening or corrupting of government in the 1920s, not because the old capital was corrupt in the ordinary sense of the word (*fubua*), but because, like most capitals, it made its living and derived its meaning by following the lead of officialdom.

In addition to sharing and supporting a politics of decline, which placed a premium on hanging on at all costs to whatever scrap of power remained within reach, Manchus and the decadent Republic had a common preoccupation with the care and feeding of politically derived status. If by the mid-1920s Beijing no longer fulfilled its traditional role as a setting for the large-scale production and use of political power, the city continued to cater to displays of status and rank. Beijing people were willing players in this game because many of their livelihoods depended on the spending habits of political operators of all stripes and, it appears, because they found the manipulation and use of status and power aesthetically pleasing. As inveterate theatergoers and avid fans of Beijing opera, city residents of all classes could appreciate clever twists of plot, subtle gestures, and calculated bravado exhibited by ministers and warlords, as well as by ordinary folk caught up in the many situations where official Beijing intruded into the broader arena of urban life.

A seriocomic example of how complex this game could be occurred on an April morning in 1924 on an avenue outside Xuanwu Gate in the Outer City. A heavily laden, mule-drawn night-soil cart driven recklessly down the center pavement of the street was stopped by a policeman on watch. The policeman chided the driver for abusing the mule and for illegally driving the cart on the paved center section of the road. The newspaper account of the incident reported that the carter replied angrily, "with eyes flashing," "What business is it of yours?"⁴³ The two men drew a crowd and argued for nearly an hour. When the policeman finally told the driver he must accompany him to the station, the man

"laughed coldly" and said, "Let me tell you something. This night-soil cart [and the excrement within] is from the presidential palace [at Zhongnanhai]. You wouldn't dare take me to the station." The policeman would not be bullied, and he was not entirely persuaded that the driver was who he said he was. Members of the crowd offered to mediate, but to no avail. The newspaper account concluded by noting that "by then there was no choice but to go to the station. Whether or not he was really from the Presidential Mansion we were unable to determine." The claim to be in possession of sewage from the mansion of President Cao Kun, who had shamelessly bribed legislators to obtain his office the year before, undoubtedly had less potency than one made when Zhongnanhai was occupied by someone as powerful as the Republic's first president, Yuan Shikai. But even in decline, official Beijing still affected the calculations of those who fell within its diminishing circle of influence.

Beijing was famous in the 1920s not only for its venal politicians, rapacious warlords, job-hunting officials, and idealistic students, but also for its courteous but insistent policemen, rancorous mule drivers and night-soil carriers, polite but status-conscious shopkeepers, officious streetcar conductors, and artful pickpockets. An admiring observer suggested that Beijing people placed "in a difficult situation are able to fight." But they are also more likely to retain their composure because their sense of "human relations" (*renqing*) is so acute.⁴⁴ A combination of confidence and wariness natural to those who lived at or near the center of the Chinese political world made Beijing people circumspect in the way they sized up situations. As the case of the policeman and the night-soil carter suggests, city residents displayed both persistence and prudence in charting a course through the uncertainties associated with status, power, and things redolent of a bureaucratic odor.

Local Politics in a Centerless Polity

If Beijing is measured against the course of its decline and fall as China's capital, one can surely make a case for its essential decadence. The city's monumental structures, which once projected immense power and authority, by the 1920s graphically recorded

the progress of decay. A journalist who visited Zhang Zuolin in Zhongnanhai in 1928 observed that the palace complex was in poor repair. "The paint and lacquer is peeling off in large chunks and broken panes of glass, instead of having been replaced, are found mended with glue and paper."⁴⁵ A European traveler who toured the Forbidden City found that "ideas of physical decay and death . . . haunted one at every turn. . . . The Palace itself was dying; grass grew thick on its eaves; and even its official custodians had begun to sell its treasures. Other monuments were going the same way."⁴⁶ Late-Qing and early-Republican reforms failed to reverse this trend even though they left as legacies the partial modernization of city life.

As old Beijing crumbled new Beijing rusted, suggesting not so much a bright structure of modern technique competing with peeling paint and lacquer as two forms of decay. Decay at the center in the form of run-down palaces, electric power outages, and militarized civilian institutions offered a visual and social impression of city life likely to provoke critical, even despairing, comments by cosmopolitan Westerners, who associated decadence with the "Orient," and by censorious Nationalists, who saw Republican corruption superimposed on Manchu complacency. If these judgments were true, then the only chance remaining for Beijing, and by extension for the rest of Republican China, was to submit to moral and social renovation at the hands of self-proclaimed revolutionaries like the Nationalists or their Communist rivals.

However, beyond the compass of Zhongnanhai, the Forbidden City, and the foreign legations lay a Beijing more complex and vital than the romantic meditations of foreigners or the polemical attacks of political radicals might suggest. The city had one of the finest police forces in Asia, staffed in the main by supposedly indolent Manchu bannermen. While Beijing newspapers and news services were often creatures of warlords and politicians, the size and output of journalistic enterprise in the city had few rivals in the country. The city's university system although buffeted by financial problems and political repression, employed some of China's best minds and produced some of the decade's most famous political activists. And against the stillness of Beijing as home to museum, archive, and decomposing bureaucracy, rose the bustle of the marketplace, which sounded "a cacophany, a pande-

monium, that has no counterpart in Europe, even in the noisiest southern marketplace."⁴⁷ From this commercial, craft, and service-industry base local bodies, such as guilds, a chamber of commerce, and labor unions, spun out strategies and policies designed to promote their particular interests and ideologies. Alongside the "bureaucratic banquets" and fin de siècle entertainments of Beijing's official circles (*guanlie*) flourished a lively, politically sophisticated, associational life belonging to and shared by merchant (*shang*), laboring (*gong*), and student (*xue*) circles (*jie*). Political instability and uncertainty stimulated a myriad of adjustments, responses, and initiatives on the part of an increasingly politically conscious urban citizenry. Local politics could not fill the political and cultural vacuum created by the collapse of the Republic. But the free surfaces and empty spaces left by devalued and departed government institutions were quickly covered by the graffiti of social movements and occupied by the local authors of new political rituals and factional intrigues.

The "grand and imposing" setting offered by Beijing heightened the dramatic effect of the Republic's political demise. But the problem of a putative political "center" turning out to be empty, absent, or immobilized and unable to enforce its will or values was not unique to Beijing. The empty, unformed, or deformed center is a defining characteristic of the Republican era. Warlordism signified a haphazard decentralization of authority down to regional and provincial power holders, many of whom aspired to recognition as national leaders on the basis of their supposed representation of the "people." Under these conditions the notion of central authority had little practical meaning. As they made their way from a world centered on the emperor as "Caesar-Pope" to a polity based on an ill-defined popular will, politically conscious Chinese suffered a profound "cultural crisis."⁴⁸

Powerful local organizations, such as the police, the chamber of commerce, and when circumstances allowed their unfettered emergence, student and labor federations, were positioned attentively, and somewhat nervously, just shy of where a political center might have been and sometimes threatened to be. Center stage in Beijing, as in other Chinese cities, was occupied in turn by massed demonstrators, convocations of national or local elites, the entourage of an itinerant militarist, imaginary self-government schemes,

and scaffolding for the planned construction of new institutions. While governmental institutions trembled and fell, local elites and the organizations they captained strove to cushion the impact of invading armies and collapsing regimes. By mid-decade, local elites, as the 1928 episode involving Zhang Zuolin's withdrawal from Beijing suggests, had refined the management of dangerous and impecunious visitors to an art. If Chinese statecraft had long concerned itself with the management of disruptive social forces, city elites had crafted a set of strategies capable of buffering the arrival and departure of disruptive political contenders. Deputations of merchants and retired officials, alerted by suburban shopkeepers or police posts, met invading troops in the suburbs, ushered their generals into the city, negotiated extortionate demands for tribute, and saw them to the train station when the balance of power on the north China plain shifted again.

Governmentless or government-poor cities are not necessarily anarchic if, as was true in the Chinese case, civic traditions include substantial quasi-governmental functions in the hands of local elites.⁴⁹ Encampment around empty or underpowered governmental institutions engendered a kind of pluralism. Secular trends that placed considerable power in the hands of merchant and gentry managers had been formalized in the last decade of the Qing by the officially sponsored creation of a system of self-regulating professional associations (*fatuan*), such as chambers of commerce, lawyers' guilds, and bankers' associations. In the 1920s these institutional encampments, or "city trenches," to borrow Ira Katznelson's term to describe the "fortified" nature of an urban social order, worked to contain instability.⁵⁰ Organizations originally designed to be manned by co-opted elites as barriers against unruly markets and movements ironically functioned to check the advance of dangerous regimes and protect the interests of elites and their constituents.

For local elites, politics then became a two-front war against official and outside economic interests, intruding from above, and rank-and-file constituents, exerting pressure from below. An organization like the chamber of commerce could function both as the first line of defense against official exactions and interference and as the last line of defense against turmoil in the market or workplace. For city people without elite status, politics meant either

accepting the logic of elite representation and protection or finding a means of breaking through these defenses. A principal current in Beijing politics in the 1920s involved attempts by unrepresented or underrepresented strata, such as students, workers, women, and peasants, to join or challenge the charmed circle of *fatuan* and win a modicum of power for themselves.

City residents experienced politics as a path that began within their immediate world of shop, school, or neighborhood and spiraled up through guilds, unions, associations, federations, and chambers. Beyond organizations operating at the citywide level lay the uncertainties, dangers, and opportunities of regional, national, and international politics. Political contenders in these larger arenas, such as warlords, the Nationalists, and the Communists, who hoped to mobilize or neutralize the political energies of city residents of necessity followed the same paths or surveyed and laid out new ones of comparable dimensions. Mastering the art of city politics in this context required both a talent for bold strokes and dramatic gestures capable of suggesting the promise of a new, unified political order when none in fact existed and the ability to patch together a base of support from the diversity of interests and loyalties natural to a city of the size and complexity of Beijing. Mapping out the full extent and significance of these strategies requires leaving the royal road of national political struggles for the parallel and adjoining avenues and alleyways of local politics.

The Rickshaw: Machine for a Mixed-up Age

Perspectives on city life and politics which emerge from an examination of monumental and official Beijing suggest a well-organized deathwatch around a ruined republic and a falling away from past greatness.¹ Political decadence at the center provoked a compensatory community activism representing new forces rising amidst decay and decline. While the novelty and idealism generally associated with these ventures contrasted with the seemingly moribund and corrupt nature of the Republic in decline, contemporary observers were divided over whether these newer forces represented a means of revitalizing Chinese society or merely another form of decay.

Rickshaw pulling was a prime example of the unexpected courses cut through local communities by technologically induced change. A modern device equipped with inflatable tires and ball bearings, the rickshaw achieved great popularity as a means of transportation and employment and, simultaneously, notoriety as a sign of social dislocation.

The importance attached to rickshaws and rickshaw men by writers and pundits was based both on the singular nature of the vehicle and on the large numbers of rickshaws present in Chinese cities. Rickshaw pulling was a public spectacle in Beijing in the 1920s. Sixty thousand men took as many as a half million fares a day in a city of slightly more than one million people.² Sociologist Li Jinghan estimated that one out of six males in the city between

the ages of sixteen and fifty was a puller. Rickshaw men and their dependents made up almost 20 percent of Beijing's population.³

By the early twenties the rickshaw was the "most numerous, or at least the most conspicuous thing" in the city.⁴ In busy intersections "a thousand telephones seemed to be ringing" from signal bells in the floor of rickshaws, used with abandon by passengers to warn off other vehicles.⁵ The crush of pullers waiting for fares outside the entrances to train stations, public parks, and theaters led to hard words and fights among laborers and passengers and the policemen who tried to keep order. A visitor to the city concluded that the "hoarse voices and gargling oaths of quarrelsome rickshaw men" were essential to any rendition of a Beijing street scene.⁶

Rickshaws and rickshaw men were included in realistic portraits of the Republican-era city or more imaginative attempts to interpret signs of change and turmoil posted along the route taken by urban development. So many writers and poets featured rickshaw men as central characters that a minor genre of "rickshaw works" emerged.⁷ Romantics, like the poet Xu Zhimo, and realists, like the revolutionary Zhou Enlai, found the rickshaw man to be a useful literary device in the discussion of themes ranging from life's mysteries to the nature of capitalism.⁸ Social scientists like Li Jinghan practiced their craft on rickshaw men as intriguing and convenient objects of study. Rickshaw men were, as another researcher put it, the "most numerous and accessible" workers in the city.⁹ Rickshaw men also appeared as stock characters in newspaper vignettes about the trials and tribulations of urban life. Newspapers carried frequent accounts of tragic and comic incidents involving rickshaw pullers who stole from their passengers or were swindled themselves; who had once been princes, generals, or high officials; who fought well or badly in street brawls; or who killed themselves in despair. The rickshaw seemed to carry with it a natural air of melodrama that poets, professors, and editorialists found irresistible.

No one understood the central place of the rickshaw in Republican cityscapes and in the popular imagination better than Beijing novelist Lao She. Lao She, a Manchu whose father was killed in 1900 during the Boxer disorders, wrote moral fables of Republican decay and disorder from an accumulated store of detailed,

camera-like observations.¹⁰ He once confided that the “moment I think of Beijing, several hundred feet of pictures of the ‘Old Capital’ immediately unroll in my mind like a film.”¹¹ Rickshaw pullers appear within the descriptive and narrative frame of Lao She’s short stories and novellas as residents of courtyard tenements, as family servants, and as insurgent proletarians.¹² He also made a rickshaw puller the protagonist and title character of *Camel Xiangzi* (Luotou Xiangzi), his great novel of Republican Beijing.

The idea for *Camel Xiangzi* came to Lao She, who was sojourning in the Shandong port city of Qingdao at the time, as he spoke with a visiting friend from Beijing. The friend related two true anecdotes about Beijing rickshaw men typical of the human-interest stories journalists and their readers were so fond of. In one, a puller had three times purchased and three times been forced to sell his rickshaw. The other concerned a rickshaw man who had been kidnapped by soldiers and then had escaped with several purloined camels. Lao She interjected that “quite possibly one could write a whole novel based on that.”¹³ He later used the two tales as the germ of the story and character of “Camel” Xiangzi. “The cast of characters and the plot line were not hard to think up with Xiangzi and rickshaw pulling at the center of things. All I had to do was to have everyone develop a connection to rickshaws so as to tie them to Xiangzi, like goats tethered to a willow tree in the midst of a grassy field.”¹⁴ In the course of the novel Xiangzi pursues his elusive goal of independent rickshaw ownership through a dozen adventures, including being kidnapped by soldiers, a shakedown by a secret police agent, being tricked into a loveless marriage, helplessness in the face of disease, and final degeneration into a paid police informant and claquer in political demonstrations.

In deciding to “place rickshaw pulling at the center of things,” Lao She necessarily rejected other possibilities in the tableau of figures representative of Republican urban society: rebellious students, iconoclastic intellectuals, ambitious politicians, ruthless militarists, petty bureaucrats, and profit-minded entrepreneurs. These latter individuals and images appear in the novel tied to Xiangzi in such a way as to force the reader to evaluate the dynamism and decay of the times in terms of their effect on the travail

of an ordinary person. Lao She set the action of the work outside the palaces, ministries, mansions, and universities of the old capital and in the midst of the city’s markets, teahouses, alleyways, and courtyard tenements where Beijing’s ordinary folk lived and worked. Lao She imagined the forces impinging on rickshaw men—both societal forces, like the urban transportation market, and natural ones, like dust storms and the winter cold—and then mapped out the rest of the city from a rickshaw man’s perspective. “Thinking about it in this way, a simple story was transformed into a vast society.”¹⁵

The collective biography of Beijing rickshaw men, like the fictional story of Xiangzi, presents a street-level perspective on Republican history measured from the periphery to the center. Rickshaw men lived in poor circumstances in Beijing’s capillary-like systems of narrow, twisting alleyways. Every day, in search of fares, they were drawn out along city avenues toward the ministries, schools, parks, guildhalls, and opera houses that served as focal points of Beijing politics, commerce, and culture. Rickshaw pullers were joined through their work to the basic rhythms of city life expressed in collective activities ranging from marketing and theatergoing to political protests and panics. Like traditional servants, they had access to the household and social life of the moneyed, propertied, and official classes. Like modern taxi drivers, they picked up and dispensed news and rumor. Like the poor everywhere, rickshaw men were sensitive to even small changes in the cost of living. Of course, a rickshaw puller would not have a merchant’s knowledge of market conditions, an official’s grasp of political hierarchy, a militarist’s sense of tactics and ability to track movable wealth, a journalist’s knowledge of current events, or a student’s sense of national mission and proprietary right to the political spotlight. But rickshaw men were well placed to be perpetual witnesses and occasional actors as history was made in their presence and in their midst.

The Rickshaw as a Modern Invention

Invented in Japan in the late 1860s, possibly as an aid to the crippled and the convalescent, the early rickshaw resembled a sedan chair awkwardly mounted on an axle and oversized wheels.¹⁶

Refinements, such as the use of springs, ball bearings, and rubber tires, soon produced a lighter, more efficient machine, which spread rapidly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and India. This simple technology joined small amounts of capital, large pools of unskilled labor, and robust consumer demand for personal transportation so successfully that the rickshaw became a characteristic feature of Asian cityscapes. The addition of a bicycle mechanism in the 1940s convinced a final, more enduring mutation: the pedicab, or trishaw.

The first rickshaws, marketed from Japan and privately owned, appeared on Beijing streets in 1886 and immediately stirred controversy.¹⁷ Mule carters, angered at the competition, “threw the horrid foreign things, which degraded men to the level of animals” into a canal.¹⁸ At that time, mule litters and carts, horses, sedan chairs, and wheelbarrows provided the only other means of personal transport in the city. Beijing streets were dirty and unpaved. Country carts, equipped with narrow wheels to traverse the road-poor hinterland, carved deep ruts wherever they went. The ruts filled with water and at times made Beijing’s broad avenues and tangle of *hutong* impassable. Inner Asian dust and sand storms periodically spilled their contents onto the city. “No wind and three feet of dust; a rain storm and streets of mud” complained a local proverb.

In 1900, a few months before Boxer armies seized the city, rickshaws reappeared in significant numbers.¹⁹ Rickshaw garages opened and rented out vehicles to laborers, who in turn solicited on the street. With one man in front pulling, and another in back pushing, the rickshaw overcame poor road conditions to win a small clientele of merchants, officials, and foreigners. A Japanese visitor noted that the number of rickshaws and pullers increased rapidly in the spring and summer of 1900 in tandem with the risings of peasants outside the city.²⁰ He even wondered whether the Boxers had used rickshaw pulling as a cover to infiltrate the city’s laboring classes. It must have seemed logical to pair the two new and unusual happenings, sprouting up simultaneously in the countryside and the city. Perhaps, as later happened in the teens and twenties, rural disturbances swelled the ranks of city people looking for the kind of unskilled and temporary work the rickshaw offered. No doubt some of the new rickshaw men had Boxer sym-

paties. But when the insurgents invaded Beijing in the summer of 1900, in their campaign against foreigners and foreign things, they destroyed the newly imported vehicles.

The rickshaw trade resumed business once foreign troops cleared Beijing of fighters and, in cooperation with the Chinese government, restored order. In the next several years, two developments enhanced the ability of the rickshaw to compete for new passengers. First, designers and craftsmen built a better rickshaw. The 1900 model was rough-riding and noisy. The body and the wheel rims were made of iron, and the shafts held by the rickshaw man were short and mounted high in such a way as to make pulling difficult. Rickshaws made a terrible clanking noise, bounced passengers around in their seats, and easily got stuck in the mud. Even people who were not xenophobes or habitual mule-cart or sedan-chair users found rickshaw travel uncomfortable. Women especially found being pushed and pulled around in the new vehicle unseemly. By mid-decade a lighter frame and rubber tires, at first solid and later pneumatic, eased the lot of both passenger and puller and lessened the need for a second laborer to push from behind.²¹

The rickshaw business also benefited from the creation of European-style paved avenues. Replacing dirt or cobbles with pavement was a prerequisite for the successful introduction of the rickshaw in cities as diverse as the riverine port of Changsha, the lakeside tourist center of Hangzhou, the seaport of Fuzhou, and the hilly provincial capital of Chengdu.²² In Beijing, where post-Boxer reformers paved the center sections of major city avenues and left unpaved the cart tracks along the sides and most alleyways, rickshaws took advantage of the parallel road systems to speed along the macadam with other light or broad-tired vehicles (like bicycles or automobiles) while still being able to work their way along unimproved streets.

When rickshaw men became caught in traffic congestion around city gates or in shopping districts like the area outside Qian Gate, they still experienced the wrath of jealous competitors. A government official who first came to Beijing in 1909 recalled seeing mule-cart drivers strike rickshaw men from above and hurl insults, such as “Why don’t you drive carts? You prefer to drag them. You would be like animals or beasts of burden although you could

easily be men."²³ But by the teens the rickshaw had overtaken the mule cart in popularity. In 1915 there were approximately twenty thousand rickshaw men in Beijing. By the mid-twenties their numbers had tripled.²⁴

However incongruous the image might seem to contemporary eyes or in retrospect, the rickshaw succeeded in winning a place in China's urban economy as one of a cluster of newly imported technologies. Shortly after the turn of the century, Qing modernizer and reformer Zhang Zhidong ordered part of the Hankou city wall torn down and a modern road built in its place.²⁵ To stimulate economic activity, Zhang added one hundred rickshaws available for hire at officially posted rates. Rickshaws racing along the pavement, electric lights piercing the preindustrial darkness, a new marketplace, and the new premises of the Nanyang Brothers Tobacco Company, one of China's premier capitalist enterprises, were all components of Zhang Zhidong's modernization scheme for Hankou. Rickshaws arrived and multiplied in Beijing as a result of private entrepreneurship rather than formal or governmental planning. But the effect was the same. The rickshaw modernized urban transportation and speeded up the movement of people around the city in a manner comparable to the way in which telegraph wire hastened intercity communication, and factories accelerated production.

Passengers

Not everyone, however, had the pace of his life quickened from a walk to a run. Transportation was not a daily concern for the majority of Beijing residents, who typically lived where they worked, in a shop, factory, attached dormitory, or nearby courtyard tenement. Studies of household budgets indicated that almost half the families in Beijing spent little or nothing on personal transportation.²⁶

On the one hand, for many people, including factory workers, shop clerks, and craftsmen, Beijing was, and remained until the bicycle took over the city streets in the 1950s, a "walking city."²⁷ On the other hand, anyone who sought to use or experience Beijing as a complete ensemble of resources and opportunities could not easily remain a pedestrian. Republican Beijing did not have

one, compact center of political, economic, and cultural life. The area within the walls of the Inner and the Outer City covered more than twenty square miles, with government offices, schools, stores, restaurants, and parks scattered throughout. The Forbidden City center of prerevolutionary Beijing had been surrounded by satellite hubs of commercial, artistic, and residential life. By the 1920s the subordinate centers, which in most cases were miles apart from each other, had become preeminent: the university center northeast of the Forbidden City, the Legation Quarter, Inner City ministries and bureaus, and Outer City business and entertainment zones. In the past, officials, gentry members, and wealthy merchants had used mule- and horse-drawn carriages to make formal calls and circuits of the city.²⁸ The rickshaw provided a less elaborate means of transport for persons whose occupations or leisure pursuits required regular travel around Beijing: aspirants for administrative office, journalists, students, politicians, businessmen, tourists, and anyone who lived in hostels for visiting provincials in the Outer City and who worked or studied in Inner City governmental, financial, or educational institutions.

Given the nature of the rickshaw and the social background of the puller's clientele, economic utility inevitably became intertwined with status considerations and conspicuous consumption. The rickshaw puller saved the passenger the trouble of walking and hastened his or her movement from place to place. Just as important, rickshaw travel allowed a status-conscious individual to arrive or depart in a dignified manner, unsullied by street dirt or mud. Even after the center sections of avenues had been paved, negotiating the unpaved side-lanes and alleyways meant risking dust or mud. During Beijing's wet summers travel by foot was like "walking in a dish of photographer's paste."²⁹ As newspaper columnist Xi Ying observed, "Men who wear long gowns may not walk. It's like an unwritten law in Beijing."³⁰ Of course, some men in long gowns could not afford rickshaw travel, a galling circumstance in a context where the practice was encouraged as a matter of practicality and decorum. A poor student from Shanxi, who arrived in Beijing in 1923, later recalled that "at the time Beijing had no public buses or streetcars. The rich rode in rickshaws. We walked."³¹

Here the memoirist is engaging in hyperbole. Beijing's middle

classes, not the rich, were the main users of rickshaws. The rickshaw was the second rung on a status hierarchy of modes of transportation climbing in ascending order from buses and streetcars to public rickshaws, from public to private rickshaws, to the archaic splendor of a mule- or horse-drawn carriage, and finally from carriage to automobile. Successive acquisition of these emblems of status demonstrated, according to Xi Ying, that you had "made it" or "struck it rich." Wryly noting that he had somehow managed to avoid buying a rickshaw even after several years in Beijing, Xi Ying remarked that the private rickshaw "really is the passport of the petite bourgeoisie." People tended to think, "If you don't even have a private rickshaw, what on earth are you?"

The tremendous expansion of the Beijing rickshaw trade in the teens and twenties came about because of the suitability of the vehicle to the city's flat terrain and the transportation needs of Beijing's professional and mercantile classes. But rickshaw travel also represented a form of conspicuous consumption linked to social status. The city's official, moneyed, and propertied classes, augmented by new professions and vocations, could choose from a variety of rickshaws, ranging from ordinary to elaborate and from public to private as an expression of rank and privilege. Rickshaw technology was a Qing import. As a conventional means of transportation, it became a Republican institution.

Pullers

Plotted against income and numbers, the class distribution of Beijing's population in the 1920s resembled a child's inverted top. According to a 1926 police census, wealthy households made up only 5 percent of the city's total.³² From this tapered summit, occupied by rich merchants, bankers, and high officials, the population sloped and bulged downward through a substantial "middle class" (22 percent) and a huge "lower class" (47 percent). Tucked in beneath the lower class lay a minority of "very poor" (9 percent) and a more sizable knob of "extremely poor" (17 percent) households.

Rickshaw passengers were drawn mainly from the city's middle class of shopkeepers, teachers, and minor officials. Most rickshaw pullers were situated in the lower reaches of the working class,

beneath skilled craftsmen, modern utility workers, and some shop clerks, and just above common laborers. Rickshaw men earned between ten and twelve dollars a month, an income comparable to that of policemen, unskilled craftsmen, servants, and most shop clerks.³³ Hard work and few or no dependents kept the average rickshaw man from sharing the fate of "beggars, those who eat at soup kitchens, and all the rest of the poor who do not have enough to eat and wear."³⁴ If most rickshaw passengers were well-off but not rich, most rickshaw men were poor but not impoverished.

A sizable minority (nearly one-quarter) of Beijing rickshaw men were former peasants.³⁵ Lao She's Xiangzi is a farmer drawn to the city and his new trade by the lure of urban opportunity. "The city gave him everything. Even starving he would prefer it to the village. . . . Even if you begged in the city you could get meat or fish soup. In the village all one could hope for was cornmeal."³⁶ Because of the great disparity in urban and rural incomes, even a "lower class" occupation like rickshaw pulling might satisfy a peasant's ambition for a better livelihood.

The relatively high standard of living achieved by the working poor astonished one landlord family, driven to the city as refugees from rural banditry in 1930. The landlord rented space for his family in a courtyard compound shared by households headed by a rickshaw man, a servant, and a water carrier. The rural refugees at first regarded their neighbors with disdain. "We looked down upon them: the rickshaw man toiling like an ox or horse, a servant who carried around chamber pots, and a water peddler."³⁷ But the landlord family finally came to marvel that their accustomed standard of living was lower than that of their working-class neighbors. The landlord's wife observed with some consternation that "the Liu family, our rich neighbors back in the village, own over 1,000 *mu* [10 hectares] but they only eat steamed bread [*mantou*] made from wheat flour once, at year's end. They [the rickshaw man, servant, and water carrier and their families] haven't an acre of land and yet they eat wheat-flour *mantou* the year through. My goodness!" After deducting the rent paid to the rickshaw-garage owner and the cost of meals taken while pulling, their neighbor, the rickshaw man, took home fifteen dollars a month to his wife and two children. In addition to wheaten bread, the family daily enjoyed vegetables fried in oil or prepared with vinegar or sesame

oil, and pickled vegetables as a condiment. The landlord complained that while in the countryside there was no shortage of vegetables, they all had to be pickled. Cooking oil was scarce, and preserved vegetables were made with too little salt and so had a sour taste. The rickshaw man's family ate meat two or three times a month, and the children were given a few coppers a day to buy fruit and snacks. At fifteen dollars a month, the puller's family was edging up from a condition sociologist Li Jinghan termed "making the best of a bad situation" into the "comfortable living" available to those who made between fifteen and twenty dollars.³⁸ At that income level the majority of Beijing's lower classes, comprising fully half the city's workers and laboring poor and including the upper strata of rickshaw men, enjoyed moderately decent food, clothing, and housing and perhaps even extra cash for opera tickets or other forms of entertainment.

The percentage of Beijing rickshaw men of peasant background increased in the winter when thousands entered the city in order to supplement their farming income. Each summer thousands of rickshaw pullers left the city to work as farm laborers during the peak agricultural season.³⁹ On balance, the proportion of rural migrants in the trade was less than in other cities with large numbers of pullers. Most of Shanghai's seventy thousand rickshaw men came from rural areas north of the Yangzi River.⁴⁰ Of thirty thousand rickshaw pullers in the Wuhan cities in the 1920s, most were rural migrants.⁴¹ They came without their families and lived in squatter huts on the edge of town. Both Shanghai and Wuhan had numerous factories and mills to absorb the urban poor and unemployed. Beijing had a much smaller modern utility and industrial sector and a large pool of men out of work or with jobs that paid less than rickshaw pulling. As a result, when peasant outsiders like Xiangzi walked into Beijing looking for work and chose the rickshaw trade, they joined not a uniform class of uprooted peasants but rather a mixed congerie of men from urban, suburban, and rural backgrounds. A low level of industrialization meant that city residents and rural migrants competed for positions in the rickshaw trade.⁴²

Bannermen formed the largest block of men of urban background in the rickshaw trade. As late as the 1920s, banner status still counted as employment, and fully one out of four pullers sur-

veyed in 1924 gave membership in the banners as their previous occupation. The Manchu presence in Beijing and banner stipends, together with other Court and government expenditures, had favored commercial, craft, and service-industry development.⁴³ This market had attracted merchants and laborers from throughout north China and the empire who established trades and founded guilds based on native-place ties. Many occupations in Beijing were made up exclusively of men from particular provinces or counties. It was taken for granted that most night-soil carriers came from Shandong, tailors from Ningbo, and sugar-cake makers from Nanjing.⁴⁴ Once the Manchus lost their politically enforced status and connections, they found the preindustrial economy, originally designed to serve them, resistant to their participation. As their banner stipends and rations dwindled, Manchus took whatever work they could find, including rickshaw pulling.

The decline in Manchu fortunes accounts in part for the urban character of Beijing rickshaw pullers. But there were other reasons why city residents became pullers. As Lao She recorded, many rickshaw men were "fired policemen and school servants, peddlers who had eaten up their capital, or unemployed craftsmen who had reached the point where they had nothing left to sell and nothing more to pawn."⁴⁵ In his survey of rickshaw men, Li Jinghan compiled a list of former vocations that included "cobbler, carpenter, policeman, cook, embroiderer, gardener, fisherman, musician, soap maker, typesetter, student, jade worker, silversmith, tailor, copyist, actor, newspaper boy, weaver, shop proprietor, rug weaver, distiller, miner, launderer, workman in a government mint, domestic servant, soldier, office boy."⁴⁶ Occasionally women disguised themselves as men and pulled rickshaws.⁴⁷

The urban economy, organized around guilds and more prosperous shops and enterprises, included peripheral constellations of less stable ventures. A large turnover in shop openings and closings existed as a normal feature of economic life.⁴⁸ Marginal sums of capital and small labor forces of clerks and craftsmen continually dissolved and recombined. According to a government study, each year over one thousand Beijing workers became rickshaw pullers because they had lost their old jobs.⁴⁹ In addition, apprenticeship, which was the key institution in recruitment to

guild work, did not always lead to permanent employment. In some trades, such as the carpet industry, owners and managers commonly recruited large numbers of apprentices from the countryside, employed them for three years at little more than room and board, and then discharged them at the point at which they would have been eligible for regular-worker status.⁵⁰ Many former apprentices went to work as rickshaw men.⁵¹

Notwithstanding a presumed preference for a stable career within guild-regulated commerce and industry, it was not unusual for workers to piece together livelihoods out of seasonal or casual labor. For example, Beijing residents who could afford it shaded themselves from the summer sun by having woven-mat awnings erected in front of shops and over open courtyards.⁵² Over two hundred firms in Beijing engaged in this business, and aside from firm managers and a few apprentices, all the labor was casual. Workers congregated at particular teahouses in various parts of the city and were hired as needed by go-betweens. In late summer and fall thousands worked at rolling coal dust and dirt into small balls used during the winter heating season. In the winter casual laborers cut, pulled, and stored ice from Beijing's artificial lakes for summer use in restaurants, fruit stores, the buffer cars on trains, and as a luxury good in private homes.⁵³ The men who pulled the blocks of ice from lake to underground cellars were recruited from "among the beggars, the aged, and the unemployed." Even trades organized into strong guilds, as in the construction industry, made use of casual labor in the peak seasons of spring and summer. Drawing on the fluid labor market that existed alongside the more rigid structure of native-place requirements and guild membership, rickshaw pulling formed what social researcher Tao Menghe termed a "big labor reservoir" for the "unskilled, the semiskilled, and even the skilled that sometimes finds itself out of work."⁵⁴

If rickshaw pulling provided a channel for upward and lateral mobility among immigrants and the urban poor, the job also functioned as an occupational life raft for downwardly mobile urban residents. As Beijing's status as administrative center declined, bankrupt bureaucracies stopped paying officials and clerks their full salaries. Some bureaus and government-supported schools collapsed completely, releasing their staffs onto the local economy

in search of a livelihood. Primary-school teachers, government clerks, and even Qing-era generals could be found pulling rickshaws to supplement their income or simply to survive once all other funds or prospects had been exhausted.⁵⁵ One Beijing essayist, writing about the "rickshaw question," reminded his readers that Beijing rickshaw pullers "are not all the men of humble origin some people imagine them to be—all illiterate and from the countryside. Some are politicians from the early Republic, Qing-era degree-holders, or young heirs to the banners who have lost their means of livelihood."⁵⁶ While these *déclassé* elements did not typify the average rickshaw man, who was most likely a former peasant, low-ranking bannerman, or craftsman, they underlined the social diversity and unsettledness of the pullers as a class.

Reports of Manchu princes, former officials, "sons from good families," or college professors pulling rickshaws dwelt on the melancholy symbolism of such a fall from grace.⁵⁷ Journalist Xi Ying wrote of the consternation that greeted his decision to leave the provinces for the capital. A relative advised him not to go, but if he went, not to become a scholar. "I read in the newspaper that some teachers in Beijing are so poor they pull rickshaws at night. In a faraway place, if you don't have money, it's no joke. And besides, people like us aren't strong enough to pull a rickshaw."⁵⁸

Rickshaw men disturbed intellectuals partly because their vocation seemed backward and inhumane. But rickshaw men also served as rough reminders of how precarious claims to rank and status could be in the Republican era. A teacher who also wrote a popular column for a Beijing newspaper recalled chiding an acquaintance for not appreciating the kinship that existed between different social classes, based on common uncertainties.

My friend, a teacher, having been subjected to indignities by a rickshaw man cursed him as a "dumb animal." I told him, "You should not curse him like that. His skill as a rickshaw puller is a formidable one. You must know that if we could not teach, we would wish to be dumb animals, and yet we wouldn't have the strength to pull a rickshaw. When you are born into a mixed-up age of change and uncertainty, who knows where one might rise or fall to in the future? I have an old friend who was chief of staff for a certain lieutenant general. He is now telling fortunes for a living."⁵⁹

Even if they did not see their own descent into rickshaw pulling as likely, intellectuals might be drawn into the controversy surrounding the rickshaw, in part because, as members of the middle class, they could afford to ride in the vehicle. As they traveled to and from work, social gatherings, and political meetings, they found themselves staring at the back of a sweating worker. Writing in 1919, a few weeks after the May Fourth Incident, a contributor to the journal *New China* pointed out the moral contradictions involved when a person subscribing to modern values hired a rickshaw: "A rickshaw puller is a human being the same as we. . . . We talk about democracy and humanism, about everyone being treated equally and having an equal opportunity. How can we then sit in a rickshaw with the puller working like an ox or a horse in the rain and the mud? Urging him to risk his life running. . . . faster. . . . faster. . . . faster."⁶⁰

A writer for a reformist Beijing daily admitted in a column entitled "Change Your Topic" that he had become obsessed by automobiles and rickshaws as symbols of the problems troubling Beijing society. He was alarmed by the injuries and mayhem caused by autos and by the moral and social dilemmas posed by the rickshaw. He could not get them out of his head.

When we think about the state of Beijing society, automobiles and rickshaws immediately spring to mind. When criticizing Beijing society, it's easy to be dragged into discussing them. But when I write those columns, some people say to me, "Can't you change your topic?" Then I try to change, but the hooting of car horns and the panting of rickshaw men always seem to be right in front of me.⁶¹

Two days later, true to his admission, he wrote another editorial piece, entitled "The Right to Struggle," in which he made street alterations involving rickshaw men symbolic of China's political disorders. Chinese, the columnist suggested, resemble rickshaw pullers who constantly quarrel with each other while competing for fares and who react extravagantly and angrily to the slightest affront. The result is civil war and bitter internecine conflict. But when faced with police or soldiers, rickshaw men "dare not do a thing," just as Chinese remain passive in the face of imperialist aggression.⁶² Another commentator, making a more literal connection, described the anger he felt each time he saw a foreigner "sitting in a rickshaw with a Chinese as his slave" (fig. 5).⁶³

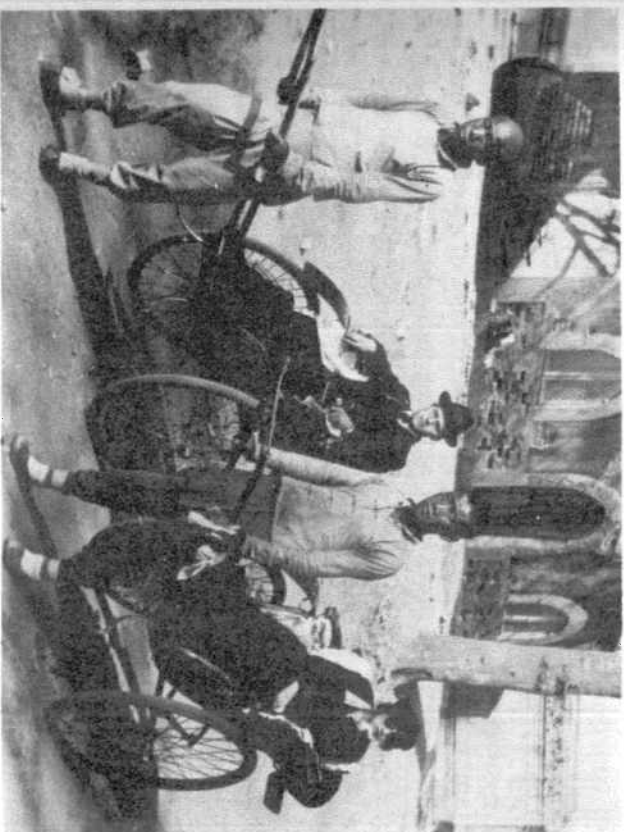


Fig. 5. Rickshaw men and passengers pose after a nonstop run of eleven miles from the city to the Summer Palace. The pullers are wearing typical laborer's garb: trousers, shirt, and cloth shoes. Their rickshaws are first-rate machines of the kind required for the foreign tourist trade. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

The success of the rickshaw as a mode of transportation and as a means of signaling status led directly to the vehicle's prominence in contemporary political and literary rhetoric. For a modern invention, the rickshaw had some peculiar effects. In a sense, the rickshaw represented technological progress, since pulling one was easier than bearing a sedan chair. Over short distances the rickshaw was faster than some kinds of traditional wheeled vehicles, such as the heavy, slow-moving mule cart common to north China. But at the same time, instead of simply substituting machine for animal or human power, the rickshaw also intensified the need for the most strenuous physical exertion. A walking puller saved steps for his passenger. A running puller saved time. The market duly rewarded the swiftest and strongest and created the spectacle of poor men straining to pull a largely middle-class clientele. Not only did the rickshaw become a popular method

of conveyance in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Hankou; the sight of one human being pulling another also became a symbol of backwardness and exploitation.

Critics of industrialization in the West, like J. L. and Barbara Hammond, depicted "human animals" being dragged by "machine animals" in the process of molding individuals to the discipline of factory production. Rickshaw pulling accomplished an unsettling reversal of this relationship by having the puller, a "human horse," drag his machine and exploiter behind him. In China, the sordidness of the image, recognized by mule carters and intellectuals alike, was heightened by formal Confucian stress on humane treatment and the stigma attached to beastlike behavior. Reformers writing in journals during the May Fourth period condemned rickshaw pulling as a "kind of unproductive labor and meaningless way to live," which, while associated with the appearance of other, less ambiguously modern devices like automobiles and trains, constituted an "abnormal development."⁶⁴ The rickshaw was deemed "irrefutable proof of the backwardness of China's material civilization."

Trapped by circumstances and their style of life into doing something they found morally distasteful, a few intellectuals felt compelled to try to bridge the gulf between passenger and puller. In a discussion of new sociological findings on living and working conditions among Beijing rickshaw men, Xi Ying characterized as failures his own efforts at communications across class and linguistic boundaries.

I do not understand statistics . . . so I've never thought of rickshaw men as material to be gathered for social research. However, I have often wished to chat with them and ask them their views on many matters. But my Mandarin is pretty awful. There is a wall between us. If I do happen to ask a question, I have to explain again and again what I mean in order to make myself understood even a little. This makes me discouraged and I fall silent. Sometimes they take my silence as a form of rebuke. (And in their lives rebukes are a common enough occurrence). I can sense their embarrassment. And that makes me even more discouraged and silent. As a result, although I've known hundreds of rickshaw men, I really haven't seen into their hearts. That they do have hearts I have no doubt.⁶⁵

The physical proximity of the intellectual in the city and the puller on the streets, and the symbolism suggested by the image of a long-

gowned or Western-clad rider perched behind and above a working-class puller, encouraged the use of the rickshaw as a marker for the class and cultural fault-lines running through Chinese society. By depicting rickshaw men as figures driven by larger social forces and trapped with passengers in a social conundrum devised by a not always rational or reasonable process of modernization, writers could use the lives of rickshaw men to illustrate and explain how these forces and processes worked. This illustrative and diagnostic function helps explain the point and potency of countless true and fictional stories that appeared in Republican-era books, magazines, journals, and newspapers.

Conventionally, the rickshaw man was portrayed as a guileless Everyman or a corrupted innocent. In the course of the 1920s, Beijing rickshaw men, like numerous other groups previously excluded from public and political life, acquired considerable guile and a modicum of political consciousness. As rickshaw men were brought to the center of public attention as figures emblematic of Republican-era social problems, they sought, sometimes with the help of intellectuals less reticent than Xi Ying, the will and political compass to make the journey themselves. By placing rickshaw men and the rickshaw question at the center of things, a point of entry opens up to the disorder and turbulence of Republican China.