DESTINATION PEKING

by

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DESTINATION PEKING

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Introduction

'I pride myself that I know the city of Peking rather better than most Europeans, although no one can be wholly familiar with its infinite complexities, or can ever know all the secrets which lie between the blank grey walls of its narrow hutongs.'

– JP Marquand (1937)[1]

Destination Peking is a companion book to my previously published *Destination Shanghai.* It is similar in format – eighteen tales of foreigners who lived their lives, or sojourned briefly, in Peking in the first half of the twentieth century. For some the city would be home for most of their lives, for others perhaps only a temporary visit though one that profoundly affected their lives in some way.

The subjects of this volume, like their contemporaries in *Destination Shanghai*, came from a variety of backgrounds, from the ultra-wealthy such as the Woolworth's heiress Barbara Hutton and her husband the Prince Mdivani of the famous Russian émigré "Marrying Mdivanis", to the very poor such as Mona Monteith, who worked in the city as a prostitute in the first year of the twentieth century. Many had come seeking adventure in the ancient city – writers such as JP Marquand hoped to find amazing tales to tell. Some came as criminals, and others as policemen to catch them. Others identified with China's inter-war causes and ideologies – Americans Ellen Newbold La Motte and Emily Crane Chadbourne found during their sojourn in Peking a cause that would define the rest of their lives as they launched campaigns against the opium trade and opium use; Edgar and Helen Foster Snow discovered Chinese communism; Bill Reusswig and Martha Sawyers left Peking to dedicate their artistic talents to supporting China's war effort against Japan. Shanghai may have been perceived as the great city of opportunity, but Peking could provide too - Olga Fischer carved out a career as an opera singer; the artists Bertha Lum

1 JP Marquand, *Thank You, Mr Moto* (London: Fontana, 1937), p.93.

and Isamu Noguchi found inspiration and some commercial success in the shadow of the Forbidden City. Peking, of course, though no longer an imperial city after 1911 or a capital city after 1927, was always a centre of Chinese political machinations – Lev Karakhan journeyed from Moscow to Peking as the first Bolshevik emissary to China; the senior Nazis Eugen and Helma Ott sought to bring their ideology to Asia and Peking.

But, perhaps most of all, it was a city that attracted those enchanted by its beauty, its singular and unique aesthetic enshrined in the lanes and alleyways of the city's numerous hutongs, hidden courtyards, walls, gates and towers. JP Marquand, a long-underrated chronicler of the city in the 1930s, wrote: 'The Hutongs, or alleys, open into irregular squares and taper off again into narrow meanderings. There are no street signs, and nearby the only light comes from occasional corner shrines, dedicated to the Goddess of Mercy, or to the Water God, or to the God of Earth. The walls of the hidden courtyards close about us, making our footsteps echo.'[2]

Foreign visitors and sojourners admired and studied Peking's opera, banquet cuisine, the historic charm and grandeur of its temples, shrines, the *pailou* that arched across the street, ancient stele, and imperial past. Harold Acton and Desmond Parsons, both independently wealthy English aesthetes, lived in beautiful hutong courtyard houses; the young artist Denton Welch (born in Shanghai) spent cold days in the early 1930s antiquing around the Panjiayuan market, while Wallis Spencer, the woman who later become the Duchess of Windsor, hunted fine jade on, of course, Jade Street.[3] The young American travel writer Harry Hervey sought inspiration and story ideas walking atop the Tartar Wall along the edge of the Legation Quarter – observing camel trains approaching the city from beyond the wall while foreign soldiers guarded the embassies within. Arriving on the Trans-Siberian Railway, Robert Byron hunkered down in a peony-strewn hutong courtyard to write of his travels from Palestine to Afghanistan along *The Road to Oxiana*, while the notorious "Hermit of Peking" Sir Edmund Backhouse in his last years penned his fantastical memoirs of the sexual underbelly of the Forbidden City.

Those who made Peking their destination composed the various elements of what was known then as the city's "foreign colony". The first

2 Marquand, *Thank You, Mr Moto*, p.96.

3 Now Baoyu Shijie, which runs parallel to Qianmenwai Avenue.

half of the twentieth century was a tumultuous one for Peking. Mona Monteith arrived at the American Legation negotiating the rubble remaining from the Boxer Uprising and the Siege of the Legations a year before. The preserved bodies of dead soldiers still awaited repatriation. Over the next decades the foreign colony faced the fall of the Qing Dynasty, political upheaval, numerous warlords, the Japanese occupation of the city, and the declaration of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

The Beijing of the first half of the twentieth century was visually and physically very different to today's giant megalopolis of twenty-two million people. Before 1949 the city's population was approximately three million people. Redevelopment and destruction meant a major eradication of the city's physical past. The ancient walls, gates and towers of the city were mostly pulled down – only a handful remain. Roads were widened; the vast soullessness of Tiananmen Square created. Suburbs have sprawled in all directions; ring roads have multiplied. Perhaps the greatest loss of all: the hutongs.

The hutong – the ancient arteries and veins of the city, a unique Peking form of architecture, narrow alleys that once proliferated throughout the city and really defined it for so many residents and visitors. In 1949 there were over three thousand largely pristine hutong. In 1990 the number fell to 2,250 as large-scale demolition commenced. By 2004 just 1,300 remained, with many of those condemned, the ubiquitous character for demolition (*chai*, or 拆) chalked on whole hutong alleys due to be eradicated before the city's showcase Olympics. In 2012 just nine hundred remained; and today? Best estimate is now less than three hundred, with virtually all those remaining being changed significantly by the addition of new and out-of-character buildings, or truncated by demolition.[4]

In the first half of the twentieth century Peking was a city that got dark early, and that generally went to bed early too. For decades there were electric streetlights only within the Legation Quarter. But this in itself made the city special, magical. JP Marquand once again:

4 Hard metrics of hutong destruction and preservation are hard to find. These statistics are a mix of the last survey of the Nationalist government in 1949, then People's Republic of China official statistics, and later those of the Shijia Hutong Museum and other heritage NGOs, such as they exist in China.

> There is no place in the world as strange as Peking at night, when the darkness covers the city like a veil, and when incongruous and startling sights and sounds come to one out of the black. The gilded, carved façades of shops; the swinging candle lanterns; the figures by the tables in the smoky yellow light of tea houses; the sound of song; the twanging of stringed instruments; the warm strange smell of soy bean oil; all come out of nowhere to touch one elusively, and are gone.[5]

The foreign colony, except for the stateless Russian émigrés and the city's foreign criminal milieu, lived privileged lives. Though foreigners lived across the city they tended to cluster in and around the Legation Quarter, which was a sanctuary from the incredibly cacophonous and chaotic Chinese city outside. This remained so throughout the first half of the twentieth century, even if in their claustrophobic confines they sometimes felt, as Peter Fleming, the intrepid travel journalist (and older brother of James Bond creator Ian), visiting in the 1930s, wrote: 'like fish in an aquarium, going round and round... serene and glassy-eyed.'[6]

Finally, we shouldn't ignore the rivalry between Shanghai and Peking that has existed for nearly two centuries at least. The opposing Chinese cultural outlooks are termed *haipai* vs *jingpai,* the Shanghai style vs the Peking style. Both cities have their respective supporters and detractors both among Chinese people and those foreigners who have pitched up on China's shores over the decades. I genuinely hold great affection for each metropolis, but for different reasons, and find it mildly annoying when someone – Chinese or foreign – elevates one over the other. Many comparisons between the two have been observed over time. *New Yorker* writer Emily Hahn appreciated the Peking evoked in this book, even while she preferred Shanghai: 'Let the aesthetes sigh for their Peking and their dream world. I don't reject Peking… it is a reward for the afterlife. Shanghai is for now, for the living me.'[7] Yet how many sojourners in China, as Harold Acton noted, 'came to spend a fortnight in Peking yet lingered on, for the rest of their lives?'[8]

Paul French – October 2020

5 Marquand, *Thank You, Mr Moto*, pp.94-95.
6 Peter Fleming, *News From Tartary* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1936).
7 Emily Hahn, *China to Me* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1944), p.3.
8 Harold Acton, *Peonies and Ponies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1941), p.7.

A note on names and spellings

Names in this book reflect the spellings commonly used in the first half of the twentieth century. Hence Peking and not Beijing; Nanking and not Nanjing. Where Chinese people were commonly known by Western names to foreign audiences, these are used, rather than the Pinyin romanisations. Additionally, I have used the best-known variations of some Chinese names rather than their more modern variants, such as Sun Yat-sen rather than Sun Zhongshan, and Chiang Kai-shek as opposed to Jiang Jieshi.

Within the text I have used the road names of Peking that were applicable at the time. These are invariably either Wade-Giles (e.g. Chang An Chieh for today's Changan, or Chang'an Jie), or alternative names commonly used by the foreign colony. For instance, the main commercial thoroughfare now known as Wangfujing was usually rendered as Wangfuting between the wars while being generally known by the foreign community as Morrison Street (after the missionary and pioneering Sinologist Robert Morrison, though often confused with the London *Times* correspondent George Morrison who, by chance, lived on the street). Similarly, many roads in the Legation Quarter were also known by European names.

A list of the roads used in the text and their current names, as well as the names of Chinese towns, cities and provinces both before and after 1949 are added as an appendix at the end of the book. The former hutong names have been rendered into English – where they make sense and were known as such – and the current name. For instance: Kuei Chia Chang Hutong was known in English as Armour Factory Alley and is today called Kuijiachang Hutong.

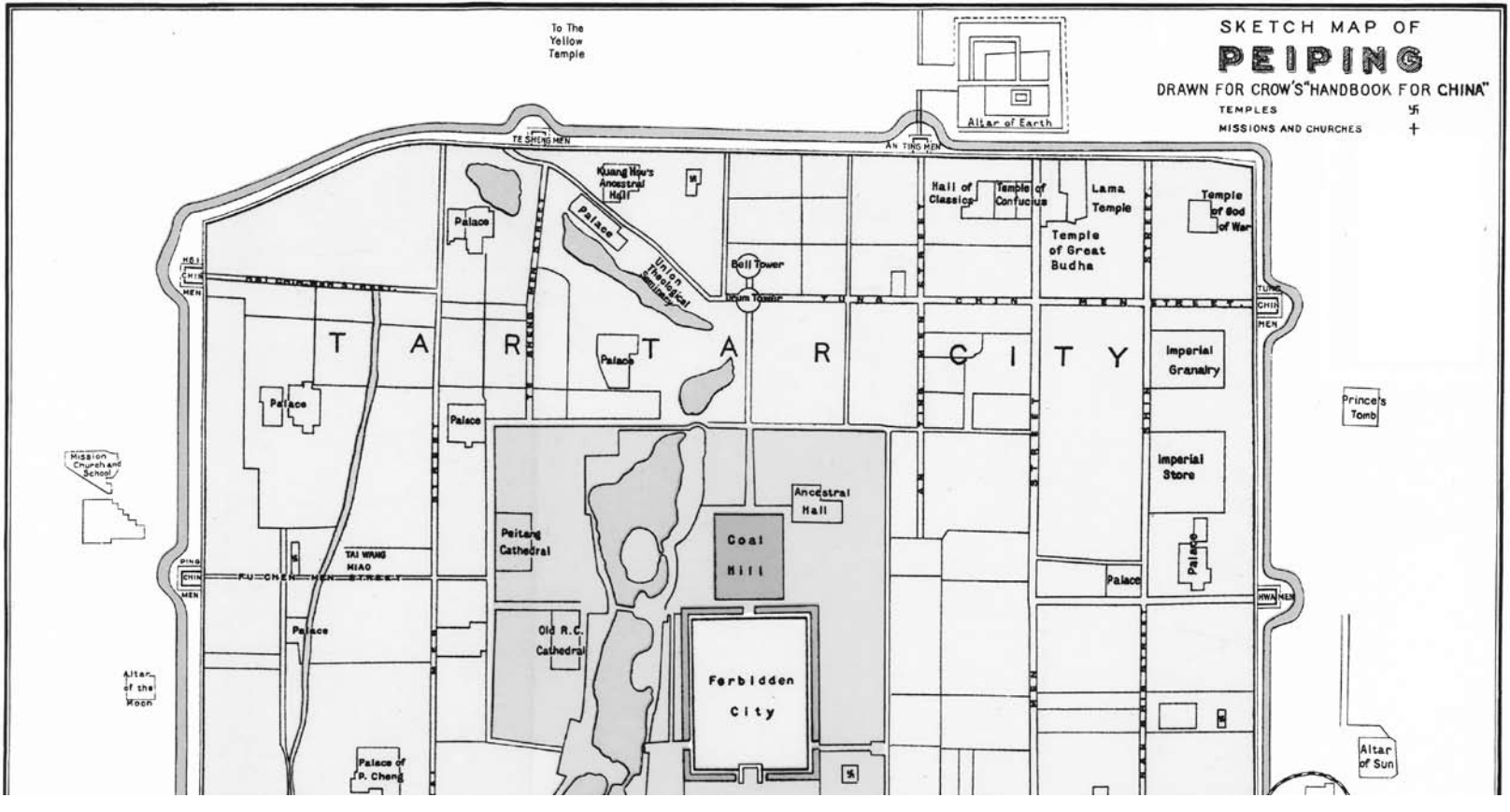
Peking, Peiping and Beijing…

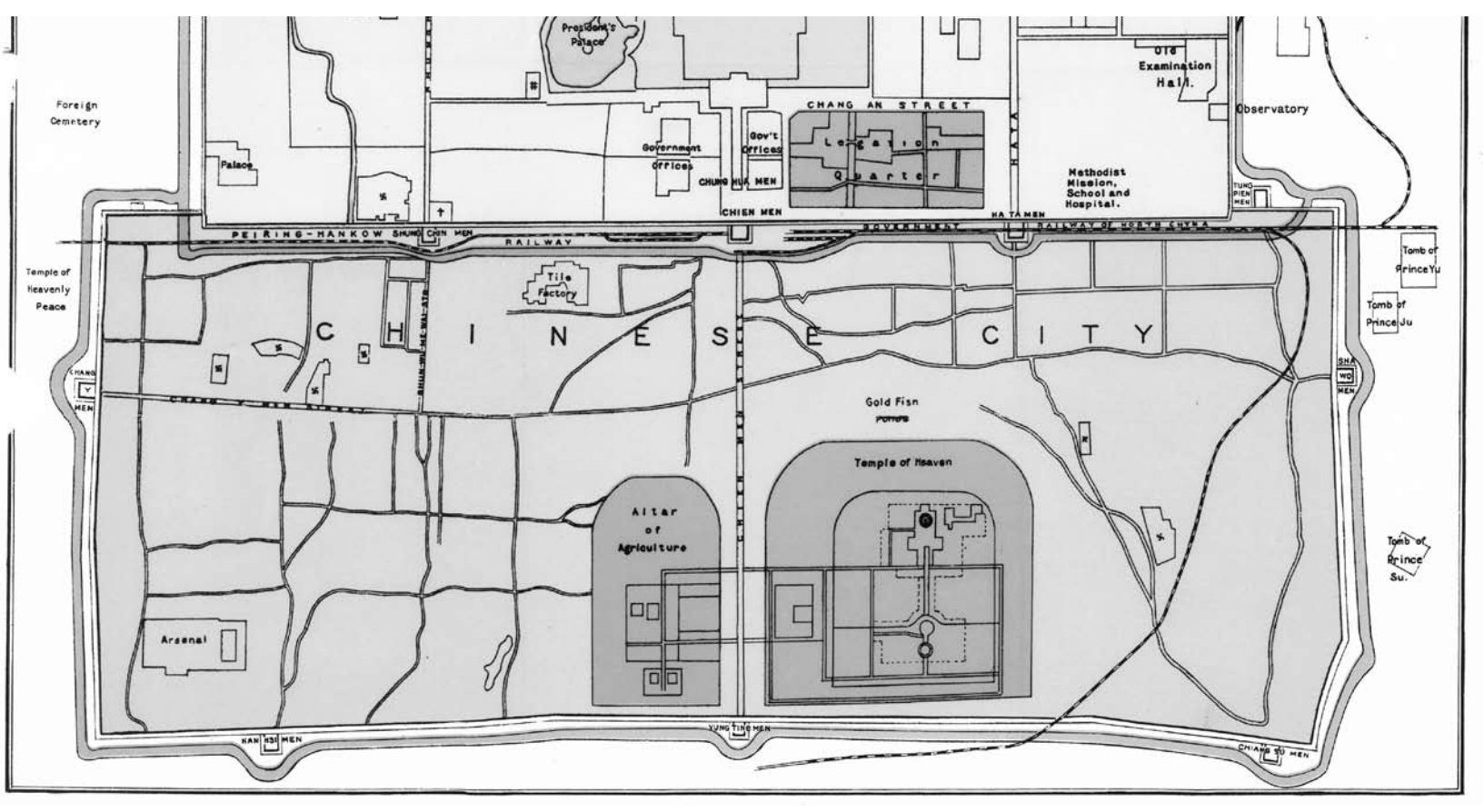
Peking's name has changed many times over the centuries, but this book only concerns the twentieth century. "Peking" is a spelling created by French missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From 1928 to 1949 the city was officially known as Peiping ("Northern Peace") after Chiang Kai-shek moved the capital to Nanking. Peiping sometimes appears as Beiping. The spelling Beijing was adopted for use within China upon the approval of Hanyu Pinyin on February 11, 1958, during the Fifth Session of the First National People's Congress. As none of the essays in this collection concern the period after February 1958, and as Peiping/Beiping remain somewhat obscure, I have used the name Peking for the city throughout.

The Carl Crow Map of Peiping

The map of Peking (Peiping) used overleaf is from Carl Crow's *Travelers' Handbook for China*. The guidebook was first published in 1913 and swiftly went through several updates and reprints. The first editions of the book were published by the Hwa-Mei Book Concern of Shanghai in China, and the San Francisco News Company in the USA. Later editions with new and revised material were published, up to the final revised edition in 1933, by the famous Kelly & Walsh in Shanghai and Hong Kong, and Dodd, Mead & Company of New York in the USA. This map is obviously from a post-1927 edition given it is titled "Peiping".

The maps in Crow's *Handbook for China* were also updated over the years. We cannot be sure of the cartographer though the most likely candidate appears to be the long-serving art director at his advertising agency Carl Crow Inc. in Shanghai, a Mr Y. Obie.


SKETCH MAP OF
PEIPING
DRAWN FOR CROW'S "HANDBOOK FOR CHINA"
TEMPLES
MISSIONS AND CHURCHES
To The Yellow Temple
Altar of Earth
TE SHENG MEN
AN TING MEN
Kuang Hsu's Ancestral Hall
Palace
Union Theological Seminary
Bell Tower
Drum Tower
Hall of Classics
Temple of Confucius
Lama Temple
Temple of God of War
Temple of Great Budha
HSI CHIH MEN
TUNG CHIH MEN
T A R T A R C I T Y
Imperial Granary
Imperial Store
Prince's Tomb
Mission Church and School
Ancestral Hall
Peitang Cathedral
Coal Hill
TAI WANG MIAO
FU CHEN MEN STREET
PING CHIH MEN
HWA MEN
Old R.C. Cathedral
Forbidden City
Altar of the Moon
Palace of P. Cheng
Altar of Sun


President's Palace
Old Examination Hall
Observatory
Foreign Cemetery
CHANG AN STREET
Legation Quarter
Palace
Government Offices
Gov't Offices
CHUNG HUA MEN
Methodist Mission, School and Hospital.
TUNG PIEN MEN
CHIEN MEN
HA TA MEN
PEI RING - HANKOW SHUNG CHIN MEN RAILWAY
GOVERNMENT RAILWAY OF NORTH CHINA
Tomb of Prince Yu
Temple of Heavenly Peace
Tile Factory
CHINESE CITY
Tomb of Prince Ju
SHA WO MEN
Gold Fish Ponds
Temple of Heaven
Altar of Agriculture
Tomb of Prince Su.
Arsenal
HAN MEN
YUNG TING MEN
CHIANG MEN