

Golden years put on silver screen

Traditional culture lovers film Beijing's historic hutong

By YU NAN
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When sculptor Bai Zheng first stepped into the Changong Hotel, a two-storey building on Dashilan market street in Beijing, he was completely astonished.

"Totally in wood, the roof is classical and elegant, the railings are delicate, the rooms are unsophisticated," Bai recalled. "The whole building dragged me back to several centuries ago."

Bai recorded those impressions with his camera, unaware of the enormous project he had unleashed. The "Guizhou Guild" hotel is just one of hundreds of memorable buildings in Dashilan, the oldest shopping area in Beijing.

Used as a hotel for two centuries, it was originally open only to people from Guizhou who came to Beijing either for business or the imperial examination.

Zhang Fengli, today's owner of the hotel, told Bai he spent 1 million yuan (US\$120,000) on renovations eight years ago to return the hotel to its original

image when it was occupied by more than 40 families.

Today, there are 1,430 shops like the Changong Hotel that represent the old building style in Dashilan, which used to be one of the most populous areas in Beijing with its 114 hutong.

"Each building, shop and hutong in this ancient district must have its own unique story," Bai realized.

He persuaded two of his friends, Cui Yong and Wang Weiqing, to help him record the old stories of Dashilan.

The three-man work group organized an 8-year project to videotape those stories, with the title "Dashilan Reminiscence."

"It is like old wine"
Dashilan street, also called "Lang Fang Si Yao," began construction in 1403 during the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). It gained fame because of its central market street area and the entire district that gradually developed around it.

Eventually, the entire area was called Dashilan, not just the street. Occupying about 1.3 square kilometres, the district has

changed little since it was built 500 years ago, despite having been destroyed by a fire in 1900 that was set by followers of the 'Yihetuan Movement (known in the West as Boxers Uprising), an anti-imperialist armed struggle waged by North China peasants and handicraftsmen.

In the ancient layout, the east section of Dashilan District was Beijing's earliest financial area where banks, jewellery, gold and silver shops were located, in addition to 29 official mints.

Venerable shops such as the Tongrentang Pharmacy, Neiliansheng Shoe Shop, Liubiju Sauce and Pickle Shop and Zhang Yiyuan Tea Shop stand in the north section. To guard against thieves, dozens of "Biao Ju" (commercial security firms providing armed escorts or bodyguards) operated in the area.

The western part, called "Dong Liu Li Chang," was known for selling old books, curios, calligraphy, paintings and "Wen Fang Si Bao" (writing brushes, ink sticks, ink slabs and paper).

The southern section includes theatres and tea shops. Most of the famous performers of the Peking Opera got their start in the area. "Ba Da Hu Tong, said to be the most popular brothel area in Beijing, was also located there.

Moreover, 49 newspapers and two broadcasting stations in Dashilan formed Beijing's original media centre.

After spending about half a year investigating the district, Bai realized it would be necessary to change his original plans.

"At the very beginning, we planned to classify the story into several pieces, including people, architecture, folk-customs, opera and Chinese medicine. But when we began to shoot, we found these pieces were so closely connected that they could not be separated," said Cui Yong, 34, a



Red-light relics: the old building is the relics of a brothel.

about each room.

The narrowest part of the hutong is about 70 centimetres wide, and the widest is more than 1.5 metres, which only allows one person to go through.

"We do it just because we love it"

Bai Zheng and Cui Yong, who both grew up in the developed special



CUI YONG

commercial potential while protecting its cultural value is a complicated issue. And a detailed implementation plan is under discussion," said Zhao Changshan, the vice chairman of Xuanwu District government in which Dashilan is located.

There are now about 20,000 people living in Dashilan, most of whom are looking forward to



Renovated hotel: Guizhou Guild, built in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), used to be a place exclusive for people coming from Guizhou Province to Beijing and has been renovated into a hotel.



Filming old scenes: Cui Yong (right) and Bai Zheng film in the narrowest hutong — "Qianshi Hutong" — in Beijing.

film art director.

"Look at this house," Cui said, pointing to his photo of a little house besides a public toilet. "It was the old residence of Mei Lanfang, the most famous Peking Opera singer."

In Cui's view, "It is the buildings and people together that make up a whole story." "It is like an old wine. The more you drink, the more you feel its brilliance and sweetness."

"Qianshi Hutong" (money market hutong), is one of the narrowest hutongs in Beijing, an area where old banks and mints were built. This hutong is said to be the birthplace of the earliest money market in Beijing. "The No. 6 room used to be a bank, but the No. 4 room was a mint to monetize gold," said Bai, holding a map he produced which clearly details history

towards Dashilan.

"Five star hotels and modern malls are just one part of Beijing," said Bai "If you want to see Beijing's past, you should come to Dashilan and ramble around the hutongs," he said.

Unfortunately, further work on the project is limited by inadequate funding, said Cui, who is the only sponsor of the programme, and has already spent 30,000 yuan (US\$3,627) to buy a pickup came a and tapes, as well as lunches for the work team. He is hoping that sales from each piece of film can be used to finance the next part.

"We hope it won't be demolished"

Dashilan, with its ancient buildings, is considered a declining commercial centre. "How to develop Dashilan's

Liu Zhiyuan, 82, who has lived in Dashilan for more than 50 years. "I hope I could live in a larger and brighter house," he said. "But, at least I no longer have to heat my house with a stove using coal briquettes."

But the three young men hope Dashilan will be rebuilt rather than demolished, as it could be turned into a museum, tour site and a commercial centre featuring Beijing's special folk culture.

"If it is demolished, the last ancient and integrated market street of Beijing will no longer exist," said Wang Weiqing, who is from Henan Province. "What is dying is always the most precious," Wang, Bai and Cui vow to preserve those special memories and record the exciting history of one of Beijing's most popular areas.

as such does result in a transferring of money, but hopefully even the losers have enjoyed the mental struggle. There is another "transfer" in bridge — the transfer bid. And it would have helped North-South in this deal.

North correctly upgraded his hand to 15 points because of the wonderful five-card suit. I know it sounds obvious, but many people "forget" that a five-card suit might be worth five tricks, whereas a four-card suit, even with the same number of high-card points, can be worth only four tricks — and winning tricks is the name of the game.

After South responded with an old-fashioned three spades, North raised.

West led the heart king: three, nine, six. West continued with the heart queen: seven, four, eight. Now West shifted to the club four. The contract was on the line. Did West have the club ace or the club queen? Eventually South called for dummy's king and went one down.

Of course, one example proves nothing, but on the whole, keeping the stronger hand hidden is a good plan.

Bridge game diagram showing card hands for North, West, East, and South, and a vulnerability table.

WHAT'S ON

STAGE

Keep it in the air: The Chaoyang Theatre is one of the Beijing theatres to present acrobatics all year round.

Top acrobatic artists invited from all over the country perform for Chinese and foreign tourists. The programme features trick cycling, leaping through hoops and Chinese magic tricks.

Time: 7:15 pm, daily
Place: 36, Dongsanhuan Beilu, Chaoyang District
Tel: 6507-2421, 6507-1818

Joyful jugglers: The China Acrobatic Troupe is staging a nightly variety show at the Tiandi Theatre, where the seemingly impossible is made real.

Spinning plates, juggling umbrellas, contortionists and acrobats fill the air. Integrating superlative juggling, unicycling, balancing and jumping through hoops with the finest ancient Chinese dancing, the star-studded cast will amaze.

Time: 7:15 pm, daily
Place: 10 Dongzhimen Nandajie, Chaoyang District
Tel: 6502-3984

Opera excerpts: The Liyuan Theatre presents traditional Peking Opera excerpts specially packaged in short programmes for foreign audiences in the original style.

The theatre revives the ambience of Old Beijing by setting up Ming-style tables that enable guests to sample snacks during performances.

Time: 7:30 pm, nightly
Place: Qianmen Hotel, 175, Yong'an Lu, Xuanwu District
Tel: 6301-6688 ext 8867

Peking Opera: Two excerpts from Peking Opera plays will be staged every evening during the coming week.

The shows include "King's Parting with His Favourite," "Eighteen Arhats Fight the Monkey King" and "Stealing Money from the Treasury."

Time: 7:30 pm until March 9
Place: Chang'an Grand Theatre
Tel: 6510-1309

Acrobatic show: The Tianqiao area of Beijing was the city's major outdoor performance area for acrobatics shows before the founding of New China in 1949.

Acrobatic shows are still staged every evening in a theatre located in the Tianqiao area.

The shows, put on by the Beijing Acrobatics Troupe, include many national and world award-winning programmes.

Time: 7 pm, daily
Place: Wangsheng Theatre, 95 Tianqiao Market
Tel: 6303-7449

Opera selections: A rollicking tale of forbidden love between a young student and a nun during the Song Dynasty (960-1127) is among the Peking Opera selections being staged at the Huguang Guild Hall.

Mix and match: "Story of Puppets" tells of a fairy, Zixia, who looks for true love in the human world. After watching a puppet play of "Peony Pavilion," she thinks it must be true love in reality, so she uses magic to turn the puppet characters into humans, wanting to fall in love with the puppet hero. But things don't go as she planned...

Li Luyi, the director of the play, has made several successful attempts to merge different traditional operas into one play. This time, he combines Peking Opera, Kunqu Opera, Pingju Opera and an orchestral accompaniment, using the structure of modern drama.

Time: 7:15 pm until March 10
Place: small playhouse of Beijing People's Art Theatre
Tel: 6525-0123

Perfect pipa: Students from the China Central Conservatory of Music will perform two concerts featuring traditional pipa music.

Students will play "Ambush on All Sides" and "Dragon Boat" among other famous pieces.

Time: 7:30 pm, March 8
Place: Forbidden City Concert Hall
Tel: 6559-8308, 6559-8221

Piano perfection: A concert featuring the piano concertos of Johannes Brahms will include famous tunes like "Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor," and "Piano Concerto No. 2 in B Flat Major."

The concert will be given by the China Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of guest conductor Shui, who has carved out a successful career overseas.

Gerhard Oppitz, a pianist from Bavaria, will play the piece.

Time: 7:30 pm, March 10
Place: Poly Theatre
Tel: 6500-1188 ext 5176

Out of this world! The Beijing Symphony Orchestra will perform famous pieces like Gustav Holst's "The Planets," N. Ravel's "Bolero" and "D Chloe."

The concert will feature the orchestra's new season performed under the baton of Li Hua, the orchestra's a director.

Time: 6:30 pm, March 15
Place: Forbidden City Concert Hall
Tel: 6559-8308, 6559-8221

ties Song and Dance Ensemble, made up of members of these minority groups.

Time: 7:30 pm, March 22
Place: Concert hall at the National Library of China
Tel: 6848-5462, 6841-9220

Your cup of tea?: The teahouse on the second floor of the Sanwei Bookstore is a good place to sample a little Chinese culture on Saturday evenings.

In addition to offering various kinds of Chinese tea, the venue also showcases live pipa and guzheng music every Saturday evening.

If noisy pubs are not your thing and you just want to relax in a quiet atmosphere, this is worth a try.

The music is played by professional performers from the Central Folk Orchestra or teachers from the Central Conservatory of Music.

Time: 8:30 pm-10:30 pm, every Saturday
Place: Sanwei Bookstore, 60 Fuxingmennei Dajie
Tel: 6601-3204

CROSSWORD (No 6532)

ACROSS

- 1 The ... Squad
4 Long timber
8 Coquette
12 I, for Wolfgang
13 Soft metal
14 Bloodhound's clue
15 Tolerates
17 Stadium feature
18 Hauled
19 Look for
21 Above, to abard
23 Classical language
27 Say frankly
30 Gouda
32 alternative
33 Ga. neighbor
34 Nods off
35 Convent dweller
36 Stroke
37 Can. province
38 Frame of mind
39 Hostess Max well

Crossword grid with numbers indicating starting positions for clues.

DOWN

- 1 Fine spray
2 Eight, in combos
3 Red Sea vessel
4 Leaf of grass
5 Common Mark ket abbr.
6 Contented murmurs
7 Dept. store inventory
8 Russian export
9 Shakespeare title word
10 Pop's mate
11 Kin of "ante-
16 Pet sounds
20 "Nightmare" street
22 Attorney general Janet Plane part

- 58 Scratch
59 Raw metals
60 Parson's expletive
61 That yacht
25 Henri's islands
26 Zilch
27 By and by
28 Barn topper — out (withdraws)
29 Twosome
30 Twosome Singer
31 Williams
32 Sports locale
36 Flavor enhancer
38 Ocean's motions
41 Sitcom's DeGeneres
43 Killer whale
44 Motel rental
46 They need a PIN
47 US Western state
48 Shriveled from heat
49 Cinemax rival
50 Dinghy's need
51 Pindar forte
52 Navajo foe

Solution to No 6531

Solved crossword grid for No 6531.