

Editor's note: On July 16, the Beijing municipal government announced it had selected 200 *siheyuan* as the first batch of traditional courtyards to receive municipal protection. These were from the list of 539 courtyards selected by the Beijing Bureau of Cultural Heritage after it spent a year investigating 132 city areas set for demolition. Another 700 courtyards were added to the protection list recently, according to official sources. The following stories by China Daily reporters **Yu Nan and Jia Hepeng** look at the lives of residents of the first *siheyuan* on the list and the status of other *siheyuan* in downtown Beijing.

Bulldozers raze old Beijing

Work to preserve Beijing's historic streets and houses has begun, but the old imperial capital is still under threat, according to leading preservation experts.

The plate of No 1 *siheyuan* now hangs by the gate of the courtyard home at No 39, Dongsi 12th Lane.

However, when China Daily reporters called the municipal bureaux of cultural heritage and of city planning, no official would say which traditional courtyard is listed as No 2 or offer the addresses of the other 199 *siheyuan*.

Some precious courtyard houses still face demolition or destruction, said Liu Xiaoshi, a leading architect active in the preservation of old Beijing.

Liu, 80, was the director of the Beijing City Planning Bureau in 1980s, the predecessor of the current Beijing City Planning Commission which has the final say on which areas can be demolished.

China's registered cultural relics are divided into four levels — State-level, provincial or municipal level, city level, and district or county level.

The 200 selected *siheyuan* are not listed among the registered cultural relics, Liu noted. The few courtyard houses on the official registration list are homes of well-known historic figures.

But even listed cultural relics sometimes cannot escape destruction.

Yu Qian (1398-1457) Temple in Beijing is a case in point. It has been nearly ruined, even though it was added to the municipal-level protection list of cultural relics in 1980.

Yu Qian was the minister of defence in the early Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Under his lead, Ming soldiers and people successfully defended the capital against the attack of Mongolian nomads in 1449. However, Yu was beheaded on the orders of the then Ming emperor, who accused Yu of putting his life in danger.

But people built the Yu Qian Temple in memory of Yu's courage.

"Originally it was said the residence would be removed to build a new mansion, and now the cultural heritage bureau says it will be preserved and I was sent here to guard against thieves," said the woman, who only identified herself as Li.

Chen Zhihua, a professor of ancient architecture with Tsinghua University, said the wooden structure of the ancient rooms would be destroyed within one rainy season because of the holes in their roofs.

Officials from the municipal cultural heritage bureau said the temple would not be demolished, but the protection plan had not been finalized.

The race between bulldozers and conservation is a fierce one, despite the fact that top Beijing municipal officials have repeatedly called for ancient Beijing to be protected.

About 50 metres south of Yu Qian Temple lies a silent and delicate courtyard in which plants, rockwork, a bridge and small pond form a carefully devised garden.

However, on the wall of the 500-square-metre courtyard, the word *chai* (to be demolished) is clearly marked.

The courtyard, now the temporary home of the widow of a former minister, used to be the home of Tang Shaoyi (1860-1938), the first premier (Mar 1912-Jun 27, 1912) of the Republic of China. It is on the cultural relics protection list of Dongcheng District.

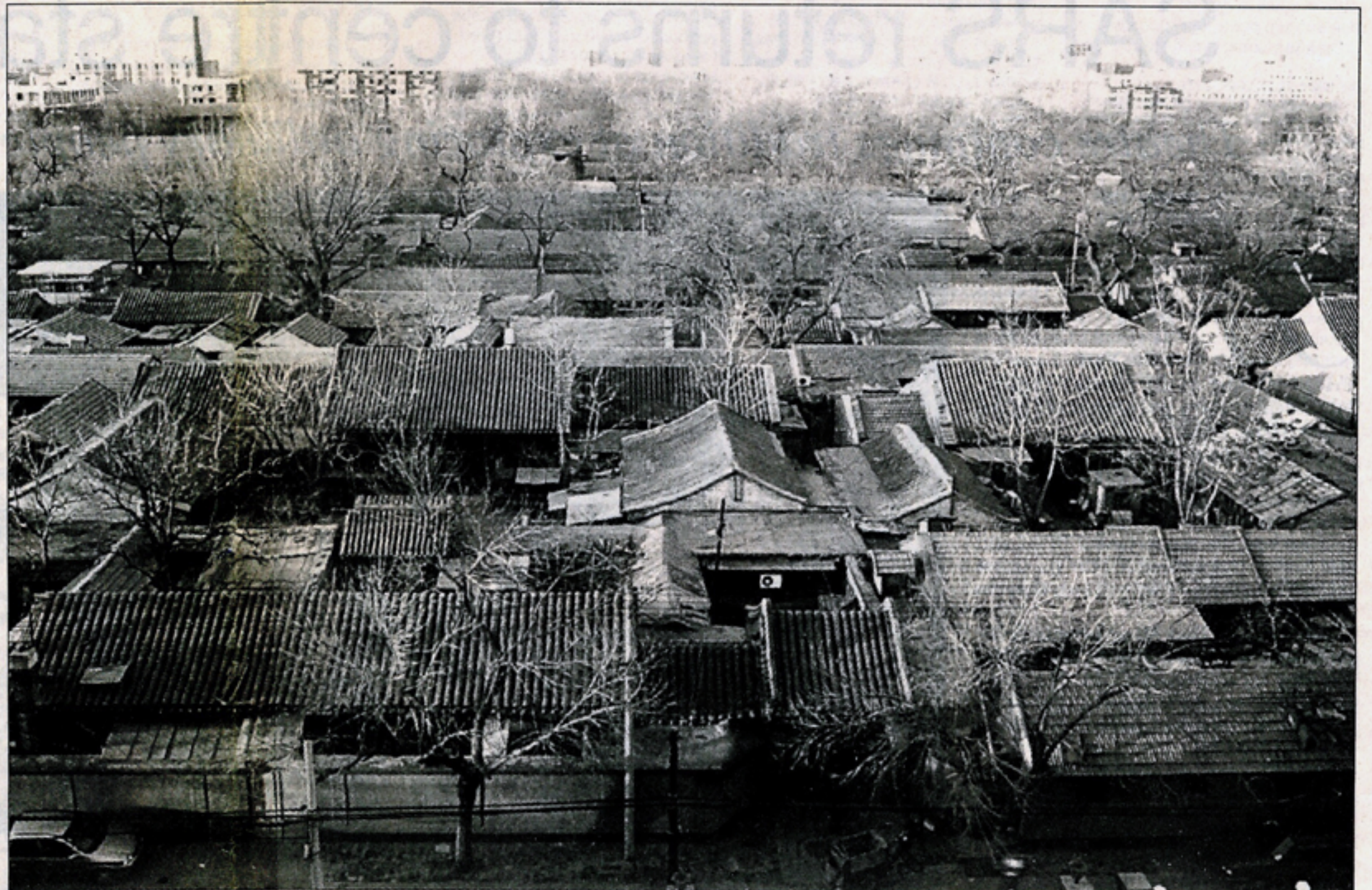
"We have been told that the courtyard will be demolished to build a luxury mansion," said the courtyard guard. "We cannot interfere with the development because this house is government-owned."

An official with Dongcheng District Bureau of Cultural Heritage said it is discussing with the developer of the luxury mansion how to protect the site. But they did not deny the courtyard home could be removed or rebuilt elsewhere.

In Xicheng District's Wudinghou Street, near the business hub Financial Street, residents are moving out of their ancestral homes. Courtyards here will be pushed down to build luxury apartments.

"We would not move, but we do not have any other choices," said 73-year-old Li, who shares with seven other households a big courtyard which used to be the residence of Yan (US\$120,772) each.

"Even if we do not talk about protection, residents should be compensated more. On the other hand, a higher and market-based compensation cost would curb developers' desire to destroy old houses," Liu suggested.



A world apart: The No 39 courtyard in Dongsi 12th Lane in Beijing has a new title — The No 1 *siheyuan* under the protection of the Beijing municipal government.

Space for city's living history

Residents speak of their lives in the capital's No 1 *siheyuan*

The harsh midday sun of a Beijing summer beats down on the shiny leaves of the trees along Ping'an Avenue.

Cars and buses brush past bicycles and swarms of passengers wait to cross the busy street.

Tucked only about 40 metres away from the hubbub, an old courtyard impresses visitors as an oasis of calm.

Sitting under a pomegranate tree, an elderly woman sews a small piece of mat, while a first or second *siheyuan* is used for parking by Beijing municipal government.

When the "No 1" blue plate was hung by the gate to the courtyard of No 39, Dongsi 12th Lane, on July 16, it marked the beginning of the largest *siheyuan* protection campaign in the modern history of the capital.

"I am happy that our courtyard will not be demolished in the future," said Na Manhua, the elderly woman taking a break from her sewing.

Na, 72, has lived with her 80-year-old husband Sun Huanming in a 50 square-metre two-bedroom house for more than 40 years.

"The house, over 3 metres high, is higher than most new apartment buildings in the city," said Na. "The wooden floor of the house, although dark yellow, still has a soft springy feel. We do not need air conditioning even on the hottest summer days because we just feel naturally cool inside."

The roar of bulldozers from construction sites in Dongsi 10th Lane, now Ping'an Avenue, used to bother Na.

She worried about whether her comfortable old house would be demolished and replaced by wider streets, a modern plaza or upmarket mansions.

The couple's three children — two sons and a daughter — used to live with them but all

moved out when they could afford their own apartments. Na said her children tried to persuade her and her husband to move out of the courtyard and live with them. But neither wanted to leave their *siheyuan*.

"I think the *siheyuan* is convenient and comfortable for us elderly people," said Sun Huanming, Na's husband and once an employee of the Ministry of Communications. "There is no need to worry about climbing stairs when the elevator doesn't work, and the quiet courtyard and *hutong* are the best places for with a stove using coal briquettes."

"But it's not a big deal now," said Na. "We only need to make a phone call and coal briquettes will be sent to our home immediately."

According to Na, the courtyard was built in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and was once home to one of the emperors' *kung fu* (martial arts) instructors. The gate opens towards the south.

Within the courtyard of about 1,000 square metres, there are 70 rooms. Half are the original buildings and half were built by the residents over the past few decades.

The largest room is about 30 square metres and the smallest one only 10 square metres, according to Na.

Today, 26 families, totalling about 80 people, make their homes in the courtyard — six in the western part and 20 in the eastern part.

Na has seen little change to her section of the courtyard. "The western part that we live in has retained its original appearance the best," said Na.

The classical and elegant roofs, delicate corridors and old pomegranate tree still stand there, as remnants of history.

While the new No 1 plate protects the court-

yard from demolition, for Na it could also mean change.

She and other residents want to know what the new policy means in terms of renovations, whether the extra houses, kitchens or toilets they have added to the yard over the years will be demolished, and whether some may have to move out if the courtyard is deemed to be too crowded.

But unlike Na and her husband, not everyone in the ancient courtyard wants to stay there for life.

Yuan's dim house is separated into two little rooms by a large wooden plank. The outer room, stuffed with a washing machine, a large TV, a DVD player, two bookcases and a double bed, is for the couple and is also used as a living room. The inner one is for their 1.78-metre-tall son who is 18.

The white plaster of the wall has fallen off due to dampness and the old grey bricks are exposed in some corners.

However, Gao He, Yuan's husband, said he would not move anywhere else even in exchange for a larger, sunnier highrise apartment.

"The harmonious community here in the *siheyuan* cannot be replaced. Although it is crowded, our neighbours are like a big family sharing each other's every tiny happiness and sadness," he said.

"But in some highrise apartment buildings, people do not even know the family who lives next door."

Gao was born and grew up in the *siheyuan* and thinks the ancient quadrangle dwellings are perfect for local Beijingers. The real culture of Beijing lies deep inside the narrow *hutong* and ancient but elegant *siheyuan*, "without which, the Beijing I know can no longer be called Beijing," he said.



Above: The courtyard which used to be the residence of Yan Xishan (1883-1960), one of the top warlords in modern China, has been bulldozed. **Right:** The front of the Yu Qian Temple. Will it survive in the face of modern development?



JIAHEPENG/China Daily

Volunteer creates picture of the past

Zheng Xicheng, once an ivory sculptor, has developed his own way to preserve the memories of the ancient *siheyuan*.

He does so by immortalizing them in exquisite pictures.

Zheng lives in his family's *siheyuan* in the Xintaicang area of Dongcheng District.

He recalls the courtyard was built by his ancestors in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Five large rooms line the northern part of the courtyard and a kitchen and a small storeroom fill the two corners of the southern section. Between the rooms is a small garden, where the fragrance of Chinese roses and orchids lingers in the air and a century-old jujube tree is still lush and heavy with fruit.

Zheng knows the courtyard, although beautiful and solid, is not on the protection list. Neither is

the whole Xintaicang area.

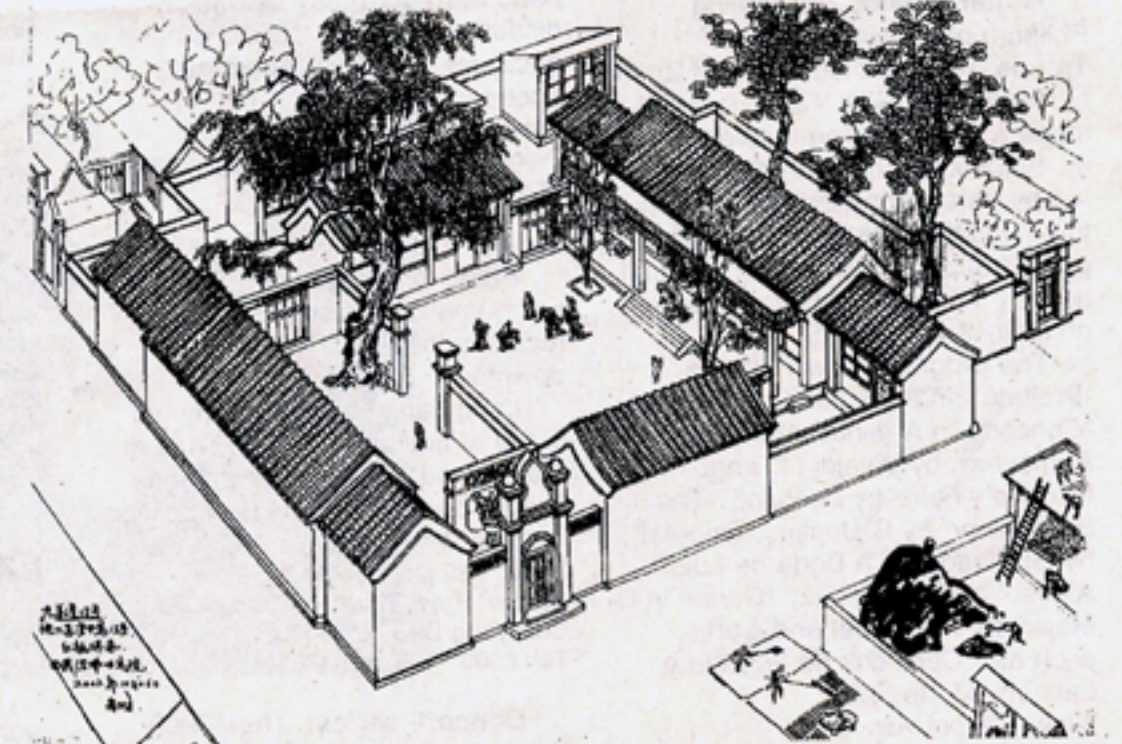
Zheng said he has heard so many excuses to justify demolishing the area, from "the houses are too old" to claims that the narrow lanes pose a fire hazard.

"Beijing's *siheyuan* and *hutong* have survived for centuries even through chaotic wars. Why can't they survive today?" Zheng said.

He said local residents do not oppose renovations if ownership of the courtyard is respected and a plan exists for the neighbourhood.

"Most residents here don't want to leave. If the policy is clear that the area is protected and will no longer be demolished, I will pledge at least 400,000 yuan (US\$48,600) to renovate my courtyard and I have already drafted a blueprint," he said.

Zheng has now finished sketching nearly 100 *siheyuan*, some of



Step back in time: No 13, Jiudaowang Zhongxiang Lane, Dongcheng District, sketch by Zheng Xicheng.

which have vanished under the bulldozers and iron hammers.

"My conservationist friends call me if they hear about some places to be demolished. I take pictures of them for our descendants to see or research," he said.

"Beijing has become the latest arena for the heated debate over the centuries-old question of how

China can move forward and still preserve its cultural identity," said Hua Xinmin, a leading conservationist and French writer brought up in a historic Beijing *hutong* or traditional alleyway.

"Perfect solutions are not so easy to find but at least don't so easily destroy what our ancestors have left for Beijingers," Hua said.