



**The Transformation of Traditional Beijing Courtyard Residences
In the Context of Historical Processes**

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Abstract

The traditional Beijing courtyard residence—*Siheyuan*—has for centuries embodied the spatial expression of Chinese architecture, family structure, and philosophical worldview. This article explores its architectural and functional evolution through the lens of historical processes. It focuses on the transformations brought about by the abolition of private property, the artificial resettlement of the population, and the developments during the Cultural Revolution. The article also examines the contemporary condition of *Hutongs*, restoration policies, and state-led efforts to align historic courtyard residences with modern standards.

Keywords: Siheyuan; Hutong; Cultural Revolution; urban heritage; traditional residence.

Introduction

Traditional residential structures occupy a distinct place in the history of Chinese architecture. The *Siheyuan*⁶² of Beijing stands out as one of the most prominent residential models, in which architectural design reflects social hierarchy, family organization, and the principles of traditional Chinese philosophy (李瑞君, 2021).

Socio-political upheavals, especially the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) profoundly transformed both the function and appearance of these residences. This article examines how the *Siheyuan* evolved from a private dwelling into a collective space and explores how these transformations influenced the urban landscape and the social life of Beijing's residents. It also addresses the current condition of these historical structures in the 21st century and the challenges related to their restoration.

Methods

The research is based on the analysis of historical documents as well as the review of contemporary studies and academic literature. A comparative analysis method is employed to examine how political and cultural processes of different historical periods have influenced traditional courtyard residences in Beijing. Through field research, it is possible to assess the current condition of these traditional dwellings and to identify modern approaches to their preservation.

⁶² The term Siheyuan refers to a traditional Chinese courtyard residence composed of four buildings arranged around a central courtyard. The Chinese characters 四 (sì) – “four”, 合 (hé) – “joined”, and 院 (yuàn) – “courtyard” together convey the concept of a dwelling made up of four joined structures enclosing a shared yard.

Discussion

According to archaeological research, the earliest model of the siheyuan dates back to the Western Zhou period (1046–770 BCE). Its architectural development became particularly notable during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE). By that time, residential planning already adhered to the principles of feng shui. The arrangement of rooms followed strict rules, and the spatial composition was designed to promote family well-being and spiritual harmony. (李瑞君, 2021)

The large-scale construction of such courtyard residences in Beijing began during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), when Beijing became the imperial capital⁶³ (陆波, 2024). The urban planning of that period was based on principles of symmetry and functionality—houses were built to allow ample sunlight into each room, equipped with proper ventilation systems, and the street network was well-organized for its time.

During the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, the rapid growth of the urban population and new construction led to the gradual breakdown of the previously orderly street system. Houses were built in very close proximity to one another, resulting in the formation of narrow streets and alleyways. These small lanes are known as *Hutong*⁶⁴. Over time, hutongs evolved into spaces that were not only residential but also centers of economic and social activity, housing temples, warehouses, markets, and entertainment venues. (陆波, 2024)

Description of the Siheyuan

A siheyuan typically had only one entrance⁶⁵ (Fig. 1), usually located on the southeastern side. According to residents, this orie-

⁶³ During the Yuan dynasty, the imperial capital was relocated to the area of present-day Beijing and was named Dàdū (大都), which translates as “Great Capital.” In Western sources, it is known as Tatu or Khanbalik, meaning “City of the Khan.”

⁶⁴ The term hutong (胡同) refers to narrow lanes or alleyways formed between closely built residential structures—literally meaning “alley” or “narrow passage.”

⁶⁵ The main gate (zhèngmén 正门 or dàmén 大门) was typically located on the southeastern side of the courtyard.

ntation was believed to attract positive energy into the home. The doors and windows of the residence faced inward toward the courtyard, while the exterior facing the street was mostly enclosed by solid walls, with only occasional small openings. It was widely believed that such walls protected the home from evil spirits and the “evil eye”; however, they also served practical functions. The northern and western walls were particularly high, shielding the residence from cold winds and dust, which are especially common in northern China. (贾琚, 2022)



Fig. 1

Directly opposite the main entrance stood a decorative screen wall⁶⁶ (Fig. 2). The Siheyuan was designed in such a way that outsiders could not see into the interior. Their line of sight would always be blocked by a wall or screen, intended to protect the household from prying eyes and malevolent spirits. Residences often included a small rectangular forecourt⁶⁷, through which one passed a second gate⁶⁸ to enter the main inner yard⁶⁹ (Fig. 3).

⁶⁶ 影壁 (yǐngbì) – decorative screen wall

⁶⁷ 外院 (wàiyuàn) – entrance yard

⁶⁸ 二门 (èrmén) second gate

⁶⁹ 内院 (nèiyuàn) – inner yard



Fig.2

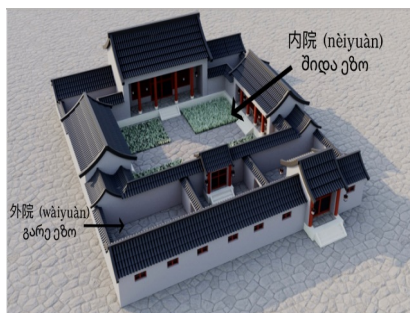


Fig.3⁷⁰

In a Siheyuan, the layout of each building strictly followed hierarchical principles. The most honorable position, the main house⁷¹ located on the northern side, traditionally belonged to the eldest members of the family, such as the grandparents or parents. As the largest, most shaded, and most comfortable part of the complex, this placement expressed the family's respect for the older generation. The eastern and western wings⁷² were typically assigned to the descendants: the elder son and his wife lived on one side, while the younger son or unmarried daughter resided on the other. The southern section⁷³ was used for storage rooms, the kitchen, servant quarters, or could accommodate guests overnight (李瑞君, 2021) (Fig. 4).

⁷⁰ The presented three-dimensional visualization was specially created for this article by Avtandil Akhaladze.

⁷¹ 正房 (zhèngfáng) the main house

⁷² 厢房 (xiāngfáng) The eastern and western wings

⁷³ 倒座房 (dào zuò fáng) the wing opposite the main house

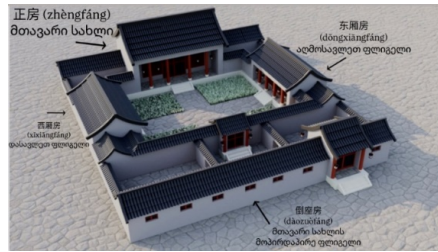


Fig. 4

Residents of Beijing paid great attention to the decoration of the inner yard of the Siheyuan. It featured essential elements of a traditional Chinese garden: decorative rocks, a pond, flowers, and trees. In the case of Beijing, pomegranate trees were most commonly planted in these yards (Fig. 5),(Fig. 6).



Fig.5



Fig.6

As noted above, a siheyuan refers to four houses arranged around a single yard. However, this represents the earliest and simplest model of such a residence. Over time, this configuration underwent slight modifications, with additional structures appearing and the number of yards increasing accordingly. Alongside the traditional model, more complex compounds gradually emerged, featuring two or more yards and supplementary buildings. Such multi-yard residences often indicated the family's high social status and material wealth.

Historical-Political Context in 20th-Century China

In the first half of the 20th century, China became the epicenter of intense geopolitical conflicts and internal strife. Japanese aggression in the 1930s, followed by the Second World War, significantly deepened the existing crises within the country. After the war, the civil conflict between the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang entered its decisive phase. In 1949, Mao Zedong⁷⁴ proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic of China in Beijing, establishing a socialist state that brought about fundamental changes in the political system and forms of property ownership (陆波, 2024).

In the 1950s, large-scale reforms were launched, including industrialization and the nationalization of private property. Over the following decade, a series of economic and social experiments were carried out, culminating in the "Great Leap Forward" (1958) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)—a radical movement aimed at transforming traditional culture, education, and institutions.

These events not only reshaped the political system but also had a significant impact on urban structures, including the historic residences of Beijing. The abolition of private property, the reorganization of the population, and the neglect of cultural heritage laid the groundwork for the architectural and social changes that became evident in the transformation of the Siheyuan.

The Transformation of the Siheyuan into "Dazayuan"⁷⁵

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the country's socialist orientation had a significant impact on residential spaces. As a result of the abolition of private property, traditional Beijing homes were transferred into state ownership. (Uffelen, 2021). Residential complexes that had historically belonged to a single

⁷⁴ 毛泽东 (Máo Zédōng) – Mao Zedong: leader of the Chinese Communist Party and founder of the People's Republic of China in 1949.

⁷⁵ 大杂院 (dàzáyuàn) – a single-story courtyard residential complex inhabited by multiple families; literally "large mixed-yard."

family were gradually inhabited by multiple new families often against the wishes of the original owners.

This process gave rise to the term *Dàzáyuàn*, which literally means “large mixed yard.”⁷⁶ Whereas the original principle was “one Siheyuan—one family,” in the second half of the 20th century, this structure shifted to “one Siheyuan—multiple families.” Rapid population growth and the uneven distribution of living space significantly worsened housing conditions.

By the 1960s, the average living space per person had decreased to just 3 square meters. Multigenerational families often lived within two rooms, creating overcrowded and uncomfortable conditions. The need for additional space drove residents to build unauthorized extensions—mostly within the inner yards—disrupting the traditional spatial structure of the siheyuan and destroying its harmonious design (Fig. 7, Fig. 8). (罗东生, 2021)

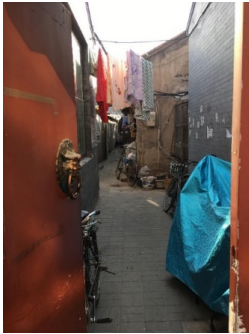


Fig.7



Fig.8

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the situation worsened even further. In addition to damage inflicted on the living environment, mass campaigns also targeted historical and architectural heritage. Numerous hutongs were destroyed, damaged, or stripped of their authenticity.

⁷⁶ 大 (dà) – large, 杂 (zá) – mixed, 院 (yuàn) – yard

The Current Condition of Hutongs

Following the transformations described above, most of the old Siheyuan today still function as a kind of collective housing. Under such conditions, it is difficult to maintain proper living standards. In many cases, the physical state of these old buildings is poor walls and roofs can no longer retain heat, and during the rainy season, leaks and humidity remain persistent problems. One of the most pressing challenges is the lack of private sanitation facilities. In many Siheyuan, there are no individual bathrooms, forcing residents to rely on shared, outdoor public toilets.

Residents often attempt to improve their living conditions independently; however, since hutongs are considered sites of historical value, any reconstruction requires permission from local authorities and must comply with strict regulations.

Alongside Beijing's urban modernization, traditional hutongs increasingly came to be seen as problematic spaces for urban development - they occupied large areas in the city center but no longer met physical or functional standards of modern life. Against the backdrop of rapid economic growth beginning in the 1990s, the government decided to gradually demolish deteriorated housing and replace it with high-rise residential complexes.

Based on assessments of housing conditions, buildings were classified into five categories. Those in critical condition—categories IV and V—were actively demolished toward the end of the 20th century. As a result, residential structures occupying thousands of square meters were permanently destroyed, and the population was relocated to newly constructed high-rise apartment buildings. However, historically significant houses that remained structurally sound were spared from demolition.

In 2002, the Beijing municipal government launched a 25-year plan that includes an annual investment of over 0.5 billion yuan for the renovation of Siheyuan and the improvement of living conditions for residents in the inner city (Resources, 2023).

In 2015, the architectural studio URBANUS⁷⁷ carried out a project aimed at the detailed documentation and analysis of hutongs in Beijing, specifically in the Qianmen district (Fig. 9). Their research and recommendations laid the groundwork for subsequent practical initiatives undertaken by other architectural firms. These firms began transforming historic spaces and adapting them to modern standards. Thus, the URBANUS project played a significant role in the preservation and revitalization of hutongs, leading to the active involvement of other architectural companies in this direction. (urbanus.com, 2015)



Fig.9

Conclusion

The transformation of traditional Beijing courtyard residences in the context of historical processes reflects the profound political and social shifts that reshaped the city's landscape and way of life in the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century. The transition of Siheyuan from individual family spaces to collective housing is emblematic of an era in which forms of property ownership underwent radical change. Although repeated interventions in historic neighborhoods have often damaged their original character, the recent efforts in conservation and rehabilitation have offered renewed hope

⁷⁷ Founded in 1999, URBANUS is one of the most influential independent architectural firms in China, distinguished by its research-based approach to urban transformation and the renovation of historical heritage.

for preserving this unique heritage. The study of such residential forms provides important insights into the interrelation between architecture and broader societal developments, as well as into models of coexistence between tradition and modernity that remain relevant for today's urban policy.

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