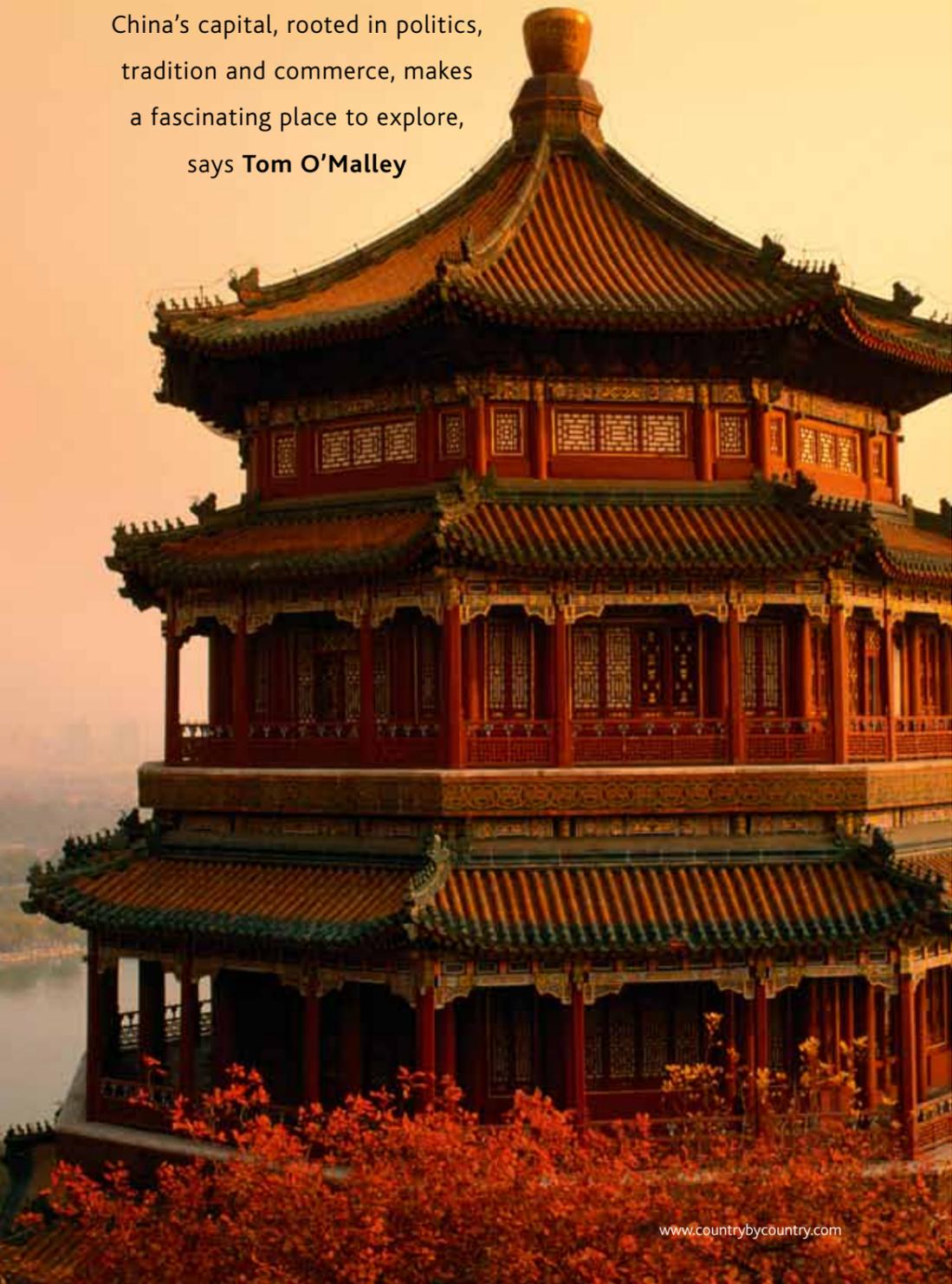


## TRAVELLERS' TALES

## BEIJING

China's capital, rooted in politics, tradition and commerce, makes a fascinating place to explore, says **Tom O'Malley**



## Imperial city

THE THIN MORNING sun barely crowns the cypress trees, but Jingshan Park is packed. Beneath a red pavilion, a lady in a bobble hat belts out an old revolutionary song in shrill soprano as her rag-tag group of supporting musicians, mostly elderly men, struggle to keep up.

Nearby, a line-up of tai chi enthusiasts glide in slow-mo, the most accomplished in the middle, the novices out of step at the edges. A man in a flat cap leads what appears to be a community singing lesson, the lyrics pinned to a tree trunk. It strikes me this do-it-yourself communal fun, with its odd absence of inhibition, is something I've never really encountered in the West. It's as endearing as it is fascinating.

Nearing the crest of the hill, I overtake a man tramping backwards up the steps,

Drinking in the physical, political and symbolic centre of Imperial China from up here, a purported 9,999 rooms stretching over 700,000sq metres into the polluted haze, is the singular view of Beijing. I try to imagine what life would have been like in this sealed-off world, where two dynasties of Emperors ruled 'all under Heaven' for 550 years. Where palace eunuchs plotted and schemed, and harems of hand-picked concubines awaited the amorous attentions of the 'Son of Heaven'.

One could spend days exploring the halls and open courtyards of what is today officially titled the 'Palace Museum', though the Beijing climate is rarely kind. Winters are

time on Beijing's north-easterly outskirts: the Summer Palace.

A pleasure park of temples, pagodas and classical gardens skirting an enormous artificial lake, the Summer Palace was the royal playground of the notorious Empress Dowager Cixi in the late 19th century. Selected as an Imperial concubine when just a young girl, she gave birth to an Emperor and consolidated power for herself, effectively ruling China for nearly half a century.

In a stroll along the ornately carved 'Long Corridor' beside Kunming Lake, and gazing up at the resplendent Tower of Buddhist Incense with its perch on Longevity Hill, her great wealth and influence becomes clear. I arrive at the famous 'Marble Boat', a two-tier, boat-shaped lakeside pavilion incorporating elements of European



Dancing in Jingshan Park. Opposite: The Temple of Buddhist Virtue, Summer Palace

patting his chest like he's shaking off the dust of a long hibernation. "You're outside!" he declares, stating the obvious — a typical local greeting. Beijing is a city that rises early, and to think if I'd stayed in bed I'd have missed all this.

Emerging atop the 45-metre high mound of Jingshan Park, made centuries before from the spoil dug out of the Forbidden City's moat, is a kind of awakening. To the north, the Drum and Bell Towers, and beyond the Olympic 'Bird's Nest' Stadium; eastwards, the skyscrapers of Beijing's Central Business District; to the west, the great, glimmering lakes of Shichahai and Beihai; and south, astonishing in their scale and symmetry, the mighty citadel walls that enclose the Forbidden City.

bone dry and bitterly cold, while midsummer becomes a blast furnace. So much so that the occupants of the Forbidden City didn't hang around — they'd decamp north-east in hot weather to another must-see site, this

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architecture. Fitting, in a way, since Cixi had ordered the boat rebuilt atop a previous incarnation heavily damaged by Anglo-French forces during the Second Opium War.

So much of the Summer Palace was restored and rebuilt under Cixi, the extent of the destruction is not apparent today. But a short walk to the seldom visited 'Old Summer Palace' is sobering.

It covers an enormous green site; a few crumbling hefts of stone scattered on overgrown meadows or beside lotus pools stand as a memorial to a period when the Western powers exerted a dominance over China almost unimaginable today; and a reminder, like the 'two vast and trunkless legs of stone' of Shelley's Ozymandias, that power perpetually ebbs and flows. ►

### Modern days

In Beijing, power means the Communist Party of China, which has ruled the nation from the capital since 1949 and is still helmed, ideologically, by the cult of Mao Zedong. His giant portrait hangs above the front door of the Forbidden City, gazing out, in an odd twist of history, at his own final resting place in the centre of the great square he commissioned to be the largest in the world: Tiananmen.

I'm in a queue that snakes around the southern edge of Tiananmen Square, comprising hundreds of Chinese tourists in red caps, chattering into mobile phones, smoking cigarettes and busily taking photographs. For a group about to file past

the corpse of the 'Great Helmsman' in the Chairman Mao Memorial Hall, we're a merry bunch, much to the consternation of the white-gloved guards, futilely extolling people to remain silent.

I'm surprised, more than anything. Here is an example of how folks in today's China, contrary to what you might imagine, are able, on this small level at least, to hold the mechanisms of the state in a sort of casual disdain. One can only imagine how this scene might have played out in the early 1980s, a few years after Mao's death.

Today's China of contradictions embodies what has been dubbed 'communism with Chinese characteristics'. Unprecedented

economic growth, under the reforms of Deng Xiaoping, lifted millions out of rural poverty and with it caused a seismic shift: in 2010, China's urban population overtook its rural population for the first time in the country's history.

Beijing is a magnet for millions of migrant workers, taking jobs in the city's restaurants, shops, offices and factories. Up to and since the Olympic Games in 2008, Beijing has a large and growing cache of world-class hotels and restaurants. In a puff of construction dust, the cityscape has mushroomed upwards and outwards, often at the expense of Beijing's traditional low-rise *hutong* neighbourhoods.



Restaurant in Beijing. Opposite: The Drum Tower. Below: A game of *xiangqi*, Chinese chess

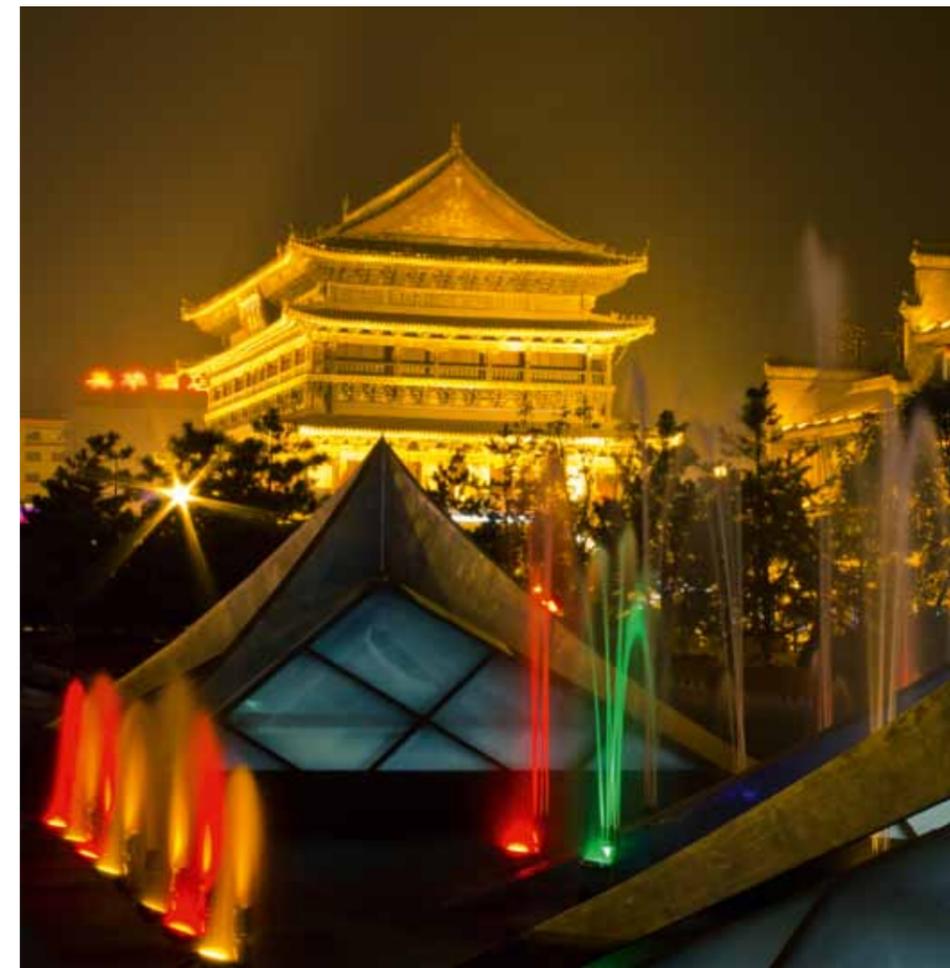
### Preserving the past

The city's remaining *hutongs* (traditional alleyways) once viewed as an ageing misuse of prime real estate, may well have tourism to thank for their survival. And while it cannot guarantee the ultimate protection of the buildings and their occupants, in some parts of town the *hutongs* are gentrifying in exciting and unpredictable ways.

I'm standing in a square between two ancient bastions of time-keeping: Gulou and Zhonglou, the Drum Tower and the Bell Tower, which lend this district its adopted name of Gulou. Roughly bookended between the lakes of Shichahai in the west and the Lama Temple in the east, Gulou is one of Beijing's most thriving *hutong* districts.

Along narrow, tree-shaded lanes, it's still possible to glimpse a lifestyle from way back when, with local men playing chess street-side in their pyjamas, and vegetable sellers, coal merchants and knife sharpeners selling their services to the residents of grey-brick courtyard homes. But these days you're just as likely to chance upon new boutique hotels with neatly tended garden terraces, or hidden cocktail bars.

Nanluoguxiang is the epicentre of the area's emergence as a tourist hot spot. Until recently a sleepy, unpaved alley, today it's a bustling press of snack stalls, cafes, bars and souvenir shops. On the weekend I visit, the lane throngs with Chinese tourists, but the dozen or so 'fish-bone' alleyways



IMAGES: GETTY

that traverse it — so called for the way they criss-cross the lane's spine — are blissfully empty and full of discoveries, from craft beer breweries to tiny galleries. This trendy, bohemian Beijing comes into its own along the main artery of Gulou East Street, with vintage fashion stores, boutiques selling the work of local designers, and music venues like Mao Livehouse, base camp for Beijing's vibrant indie music scene.

As well as rocking harder than any other Chinese city, Beijing is the centre of China's contemporary art scene, as I discover on a trip out to the 798 Art District in the eastern suburbs. Here China's art superstars like Ai Weiwei and Huang Rei first set up shop in the 1990s, in disused warehouses providing cheap studio space.

While the serious creative work has moved on, 798 is now a hugely appealing cluster of domestic and internationally backed galleries, with world class exhibitions,

arty book shops, boho cafes and even the occasional government sanctioned rave.

It's yet another confounding slice of a city that, though rooted in politics, tradition and commerce, seems to develop ever more outlets of self-expression. As China grows in confidence, so Beijing, at the vanguard of the country's mad dash to super power status, does too. It's a fascinating place to visit. ■

### Sample

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