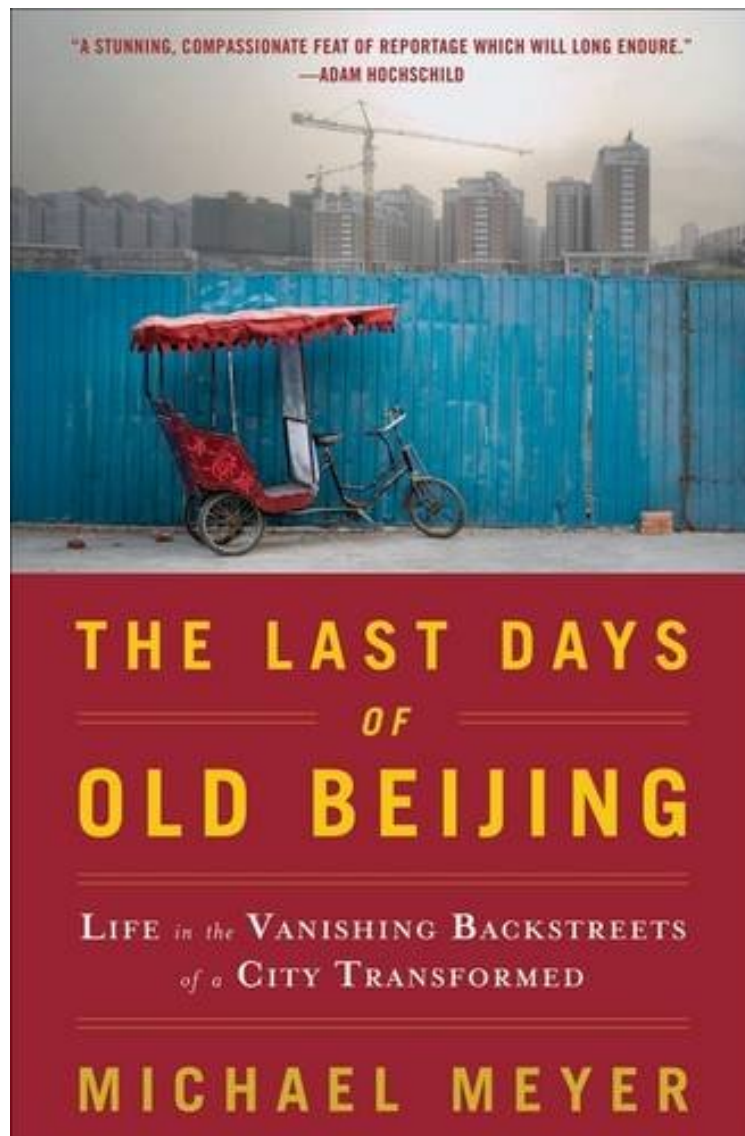


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The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed

Michael Meyer

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Michael Meyer : The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Not going to Beijing? You should still read this book!By Jim McCutcheon "The Last Days" is a real-life drama of both the author who lived there and dedicated years to understanding life in the hutongs of Beijing, and of the residents of this traditional lifestyle neighborhood. Although the story-line centers on Michael Meyer's own experiences while living in a space smaller than many American's walk-in closets, his weaving together of the histories of both the hutong's and of China in general produces a depth of understanding for the reader that other travel writers can only dream of creating. The book has plenty of facts and statistics for those readers who need that type of information - Mr. Meyer obviously had done his homework and then some. For me, though, what made the book compelling were the life stories of his neighbors, from school children, to the wise elderly widow, to the man who could and did recycle everything for a living. In no uncertain terms he relates the frustrations of the few native Chinese who recognized that destruction of the hutongs destroys a piece of everyone's cultural foundations, and who sought to stop the work of The Hand that mysteriously identified buildings for destruction. Although the edition I read contained the 2009 epilogue, I'd love to read "Part 2" of the story to learn what has happened in the last few years.If you plan on visiting Beijing, please read this before you go and then arrange a tour through one of the hutongs before they are all razed. If you are not going to Beijing, read the book for the insights it provides into a culture that is struggling to maintain a respect for its history while becoming a super-power in the 21st century.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. A must read before visiting BeijingBy lmsThis book is a non-fiction memoir, travelogue, and historical work about life in Beijing hutong. Hutong are narrow streets lined with old courtyard homes that are shared by many families and located in central Beijing. Written over the course of several years by an American ex-pat living and volunteering within a community slated for destruction, the book provides a compelling and comprehensive analysis of the current redevelopment situation in the city. The author's main premise is that the race to redevelop Central Beijing by government and private developers, the city is destroying the fabric of the traditional neighborhood and irreparably damaging the long-term growth of the economy and sustainability of the region. What is being lost is the community feeling, along with the basic functions of the neighborhood, in ways that will have impacts on Beijing, but also China as a whole.Beijing's urban renewal program is not a new subject for Western accounts of Chinese growth, nor of Beijing's efforts to modernize the city. However, the author's storytelling approach and vibrant writing style are unique and provide a new perspective on the old debate. Unlike other accounts of the hutong destruction or reports of the city's extensive preparations for the Olympics, which focus on documenting the breadth of the destruction, this book zooms into the fate of one community to tell the story. The author provides personal anecdotes and stories from his time living and teaching in the Fresh Fish Junction area of Beijing to illustrate the impact of the demolitions on individuals. I highly recommend this book.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Unique Viewpoint from American Living in HutongBy A. SilverstoneMichael Meyer has constructed an engrossing book about life in the traditional lower class communities of Beijing. The courtyard houses are subdivided into small one or 2 room dwellings clustered around narrow lanes, hutong in Chinese. They do not have plumbing or even proper kitchens. There are public latrines and bathhouses for taking care of the necessities of life. This is not an easy way of life, at least to Westerners used to a higher standard of living. However, these hutongs thrive with a communitarian spirit that is absent anywhere else in the city. Meyer chronicled his two years of living like no other Westerner, among the poor in the hutong. Despite initial apprehension, his neighbors accept him as their own. Meyer alternates between life in the hutong, teaching English at a neighborhood elementary school and describing the rapid destruction of hutongs, especially in the run up to the Olympics, in the name of "progress" and the loss of the lifestyle associated with them. He also puts it in the context of the greater history of Beijing, and attempts at preservation in China and around the world. This fascinating book gives a realistic view of the hutong life that is rarely seen, even in modern Chinese literature, but in a way that is very approachable for the Western reader. Meyer excels when describing the lives and the travails of himself and his neighbors in the hutong.

A fascinating, intimate portrait of Beijing through the lens of its oldest neighborhood, facing destruction as the city, and China, relentlessly modernizes. Soon we will be able to say about old Beijing that what emperors, warlords, Japanese invaders, and Communist planners couldn't eradicate, the market economy has. Weaving historical vignettes of Beijing and China over a thousand years Michael Meyer captures the city's deep past as he illuminates its present, and especially the destruction of its ancient neighborhoods and the eradication of a way of life that has epitomized China's capital. With an insider's insight, *The Last Days of Old Beijing* is an invaluable witness to history, bringing into shining focus the ebb and flow of life in old Beijing at this pivotal moment.

From Publishers WeeklyStarred . Just in time for the Summer Olympics in Beijing, the Old City's narrow lanes and shops are being bulldozed and their residents displaced to make way for Wal-Marts, shopping centers and high-rise apartments. Part memoir, part history, part travelogue and part call to action, journalist Meyer's elegant first book yearns for old Beijing and mourns the loss of an older way of life. Having lived for two years in one of Beijing's oldest hutongsmazes of lanes and courtyards bordered by single-story housesMeyer chronicles the threat urban planning poses not only to the ancient history buried within these neighborhoods but also to the people of the hutong. The

hutong, he says, builds community in a way that glistening glass and steel buildings cannot. His 81-year-old neighbor, whom he calls the Widow, had always been safe because neighbors watched out for her, as she watched out for others: the book opens with a delightful scene in which the Widow, a salty character who calls Meyer Little Plumblossom, brings him unsolicited dumplings for his breakfast. The ironies of the reconstruction of Beijing are clear in the building of Safe and Sound Boulevard, which, Meyer tells us, is neither safe nor sound. Meyer's powerful book is to Beijing what Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was to New York City. 25 bw photos. (June) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist One of the wonders and terrors of freewheeling capitalism is its dynamism. Old ideas, technologies, and physical structures are swept aside without sentimentality or regard for the human costs. This is especially evident in the rapidly emerging economies of India and China, where the old struggles to coexist with the new. Meyer first went to China as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1995, and he continues to reside in one of the few remaining old neighborhoods in Beijing, one that is clearly doomed, as high-rises, shopping malls, and widened avenues move ever closer. Meyer describes his adopted home ground with a mixture of affection and hard realism. Living conditions are harsh, homes are crowded, the wood in many structures is rotting, and outhouses rather than indoor plumbing are the norm. Yet residents, including Meyer, have a strong and stubborn attachment to their community; he provides touching examples of how many strive to stay put. A wistful, charming paean to a community and way of life that is soon to be swept away in the name of progress. --Jay Freeman Meyer's powerful book is to Beijing what Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* was to New York City. Publishers Weekly, Starred An emissary from a nation that routinely junks its own past and starts anew, Meyer finds himself a champion of an unpopular cause. Holly Brubach, *T: The New York Times Style Magazine* His book reads like a love letter to the hutongs and to Old Beijing itself, a snapshot snatched before the scene disappears forever. Rob Gifford, *Slate Magazine* A charming memoir and a compelling work of narrative nonfiction about the city itself. Ian Johnson, *Wall Street Journal* The book...is a delightfully observed view of a vast part of Chinese society that barely was glimpsed during the recent Olympics, yet is fading away. Kim Ode, *Minneapolis Star Tribune* Heartfelt, understated, readable prose. Utah Daily Herald But his history of land development in Beijing, from the time of the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci to Mao to the present, and of attempts in Hanoi, Havana and other Communist cities to preserve their own sense of place, are just as compelling (and sad) to read. Richard B. Woodward, *New York Times Travel Section*. [A] substantive, smart book...Meyer knows the ins and outs of hutong history because he's one of the few Westerners to have ever lived in one. Maureen Corrigan, *Fresh Air* In *The Last Days of Old Beijing: Life in the Vanishing Backstreets of a City Transformed*, longtime resident Michael Meyer eloquently portrays the madness of the city during this period. Karl Taro Greenfeld, *Los Angeles Times* Michael Meyer tells the story of Beijing's destruction from the perspective of one tiny hutong (narrow lane) neighbourhood to the south of Tiananmen Square where he taught in a school. A spiritedness shines through among his earthy neighbours, even in the face of what Mr. Meyer calls "the Hand", which, visiting always at night, paints the Chinese character for "destroy" on houses that are to be razed. *The Economist* All in all, his record of the dying ways of a city is an impressive feat. Kate Sekules, *New York Times Book*