
REFORMING BEIJING IN THE SHADOW OF COLONIAL CRISIS: URBAN CONSTRUCTION FOR COMPETING WITH THE FOREIGN POWERS, 1900-1928

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This paper focuses on Beijing's urban transformation from 1900, the twilight of the Qing dynasty, to 1928, the end of the Beiyang government. It firstly examines the urban segregation strategy applied by foreign powers between the Legation Quarter and the local neighbourhood, from both the foreigners' and the Chinese government's perspective, and further explores urban construction by the newly established local government to improve the transport system and sanitary conditions. The paper suggests that the post-colonial viewpoint could be a necessary theoretical aspect in understanding Beijing's modernization. Through the careful examination of historical materials, such as governmental archives, travel notes, memoirs and magazines, this paper pays special attention to the interaction of conceived space and perceived space. It attempts to argue that urban improvement by the local government played a crucial role in safeguarding the national sovereignty and enhancing resilience during the colonial crisis. Building a "modern" Beijing was regarded as a strategy that would not only reduce the differences between the Chinese and the colonial cityscape but also to foster a national identity and demonstrate the legitimacy of an authority.

Keywords

urban construction, colonial crisis, urban contestation, Legation Quarter, Beijing

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INTRODUCTION

There is plenty of research on Chinese cities in the early modern era from a post-colonial perspective, but Beijing is relatively neglected, mainly because it was unlike the paradigm discussed in previous research. Although Beijing was not forced to open to foreign trade or become a “leased territory”, many scholars claim that the Legation District was a kind of “concession” because it had an independent administrative system and military defences.¹ In this light, it is crucial to examine urban historiography through the interrelation of the construction and development of the Legation Quarter and the other part of the city.

During the period from 1900 to 1928, Beijing, like other Chinese cities, experienced a dramatic alteration, through the invasion of the Eight-Nation Alliance in 1900, the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 and the end of the Beiyang government in 1928, and was in the shadow of the colonial crisis until 1937, when it was ruled by the Japanese. From the beginning of the twentieth century, the Chinese social elites and bureaucrats learned from their defeat in the war and started to abandon the idea of “Chinese Learning as Fundamental; Western Learning for Practical Use”. They were aware of the significance and necessity of comprehensively learning from the West in fields of science, technology, ideas and institutions. Urban construction against this background became an important aspect for Beijing’s government to learn from and compete with the Legation Quarter and foreign cities.

This paper’s emphasis lies especially on the interdependence of the physical space and the mental space conceived by the government and foreigners as well as experienced by the city’s citizens. Although the discipline of “urban design” or “urban planning” had not emerged at that time in Beijing, the local government began to compose modern administrative laws and regulations, and to place emphasis especially on transportation and sanitary issues, which not only had a large impact on the daily lives of the ordinary people, but also dramatically changed their mental construction of the Beijing’s cityscape. Based on the documents of the local government, and memoirs and notes of the foreigners and general public, this paper attempts to re-read and re-understand the urban transformation of Beijing at the beginning of the twentieth century through the investigation of citizens’ experiences and imagination of a city.

The Boxer Rebellion and the Eight-Nation Alliance caused a great loss of the architecture in Dongjiaomin and Qianmen, but the city was soon resilient in the face of the war. This paper firstly considers the urban segregation strategy, which was applied by foreign powers between the Legation Quarter and the local neighborhood, as a typical case to examine both the foreigners’ and Chinese government’s intention. Since 1900 the Legation Quarter had acquired a special status of concession. For the foreign powers, urban segregation and its spatial symbol – the Glacis, the city wall and the gate as fortified spaces –strengthened the image of colonial power by associating it with effective governance, an improved built environment, and a richer, more virtuous and stable life, in contrast to local Chinese society, and thus symbolized an expression of the legitimacy of the colonizers. However, from the Chinese government’s viewpoint, this was also one of a limited number of feasible approaches capable of minimizing colonial impact.

Moreover, the paper explores urban regeneration via improving the transport system and sanitary conditions in the context of the Chinese city, which is closely connected to the demands of the government and social elites to compete with Western powers. Specifically, the government not only accepted and learned the “Western modern” in both technological and the ideological aspects in order to reconstruct Beijing as the same kind of “sanitary, beauty and [traffic] convenience”² as the foreign cities; the local government, especially the municipal council, also believed that the preservation of the city’s ancient imperial legacy could represent the city’s glorious past and China’s national subjectivity, which could serve the purpose of containing the colonial power and challenging the invasion of colonial modernity in Beijing.

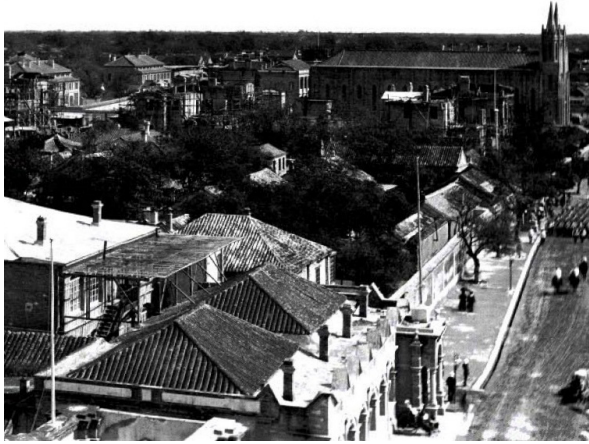


FIGURE 1 Legtion Quarter around 1901. The traditional Dongjiaomin street was replaced by street scene with two to five floor Western-style buildings, legation walls and compounds that exhibited a civilized, and technologically advanced power.

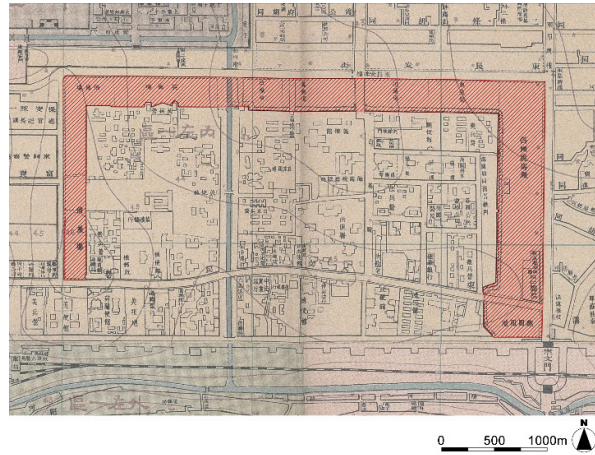


FIGURE 2 Glacis of the legation Quarter in the Map of Beijing in 1916. The Glacis outside the entrenchment measured around 30 zhang at the west to the Chinese government offices, 300 zhang at the east to Chongwen Gate Inner Street, 15 zhang at the north to Chang'an Street.

URBAN SEGREGATION FROM THE FOREIGNERS' AND THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT'S PERSPECTIVE

The establishment of the Legation District in 1900 initiated the modern transformation of Beijing. Centred on the Legation District, the foreign concession shaped the primary “modern” urban spaces differently from the traditional Beijing cityscape. The foreigners, mostly living in Legation Districts, organized the independent and autonomous Legation Administrative Commission to take charge of the public affairs, including the urban constructions. The institute attempted to improve the “backward” urban environment by duplicating the urban forms of their mother countries. Modern technology and European urban spatial elements were transplanted to transform the previous streets and canals of Dongjiaomin District.³ These spatial transformations presented a particular meaning as the Westernized cityscape became a symbol of colonial authority and its legitimacy (**Figure 1**).

The spatial representation of an urban segregation was the fortified space. The Legation Administrative Commission set up a European-style boundary wall and opened a broad Glacis in the crowded city centre to separate the Legation Quarter as an enclave. (**Figure 2**) The strategy of urban segregation contributed substantially to strengthening this spatial and moral difference. Robert Home claimed that spatial separation, which “was not unique to the colonial cities of European expansion”⁴, maintained both cultural difference and power relationships. Actually, before it was practiced in the Legation Quarter, racial separation as a colonial strategy had been applied in many colonies, like India, Singapore, etc., and also in colonies in China, such as Qingdao, Shanghai. The spatial isolation between the colonial settlement and the local neighbourhood, such as the building-free zone, or so-called neutral zone or green belt, is closely related to social separation. These forms of separation were often reflected in the spatial isolation between the colonial settlement and the local neighbourhood, and the zones in-between.

Although the objectives and intentions of the separation were various, the initial and immediate cause was normally safety needs, such as the Delhi fort built after the Indian Mutiny.⁵ The city wall, city gate and Glacis were also constructed, as Juliet Bredon in 1922 noted, for reasons of defence: “to defend it [the Legation Quarter] adequately iron gates were put up, loop holes made, subterranean passages constructed [...]”⁶.

As a rarely seen open landscape in otherwise Chinese dense cities, it dominated the cityscape of Beijing's city centre. It was because of the uncertainty and insecurity felt by foreigners that military power was strongly

emphasized so as to manifest their status in Beijing. Whether the space was reused for recreation and sports, or maintained its military purpose, it gave a strong impression of the Legation Quarter's highly secure character and complete separation from the Chinese (**Figure 3**). As Victoir and Zatspine concluded, "violence played a fundamental role in establishing colonial space in Asia."⁷

But, to the Chinese, the fortified space meant humiliation, inequality, even horror, which was a representation of the uneven levels of power in the city. A magazine paper recorded that the following observation: "I pass by East Chang'an Street at night and watched the Legation Quarter in the south. It was in the dark two or three meters away, like a deep pine forest, and like the gruesome city of hell. Only one or two lights blighting it, which was as ghastly as a will-o'-the-wisp. It was a place extremely horrifying, a den of monsters."⁸

It is because underlying the fortified space, other colonial strategies, such as residential segregation, also played the role of strengthening differences and inscribing them on the built environment. Urban segregation symbolized "the uneven distribution of power and wealth between the ruler and the ruled"⁹, which also contributed to expressing the legitimacy of the colonizers. Eventually, it was through the manifestation of a "new power" that a Europeanized, civilized and isolated "forbidden city" was constructed next to the Chinese imperial Forbidden City. Like the colony in Delhi, the Legation Quarter was planned to "symbolize the legitimacy of another foreign dynasty that had successfully conquered India"¹⁰, but, it hardly achieved success. China, in contrast to other colonies, was never entirely governed by a foreign country. In Beijing, the capital and hinterland city, colonial power was always, in a way, limited by the indigenous context and local government.

Because Beijing was still not open to foreigners they failed to obtain the necessary control over the whole city. The Chinese citizens in Beijing retained their national identity as "Chinese". This was different from the colonial citizens in other colonies in Singapore, India and South Africa. Therefore, although these Europeanization projects had an impact on the modernization process of Beijing, they were limited in the Legation Concession and barely affected the daily lives of local citizens. For instance, just as the Chinese were "uncivilized" in Western eyes, some Chinese still maintained the historical attitude that the foreigners were "uncultured", even after the Boxer Rebellion. Arlington and Lewisohn discussed this view, that "the Chinese used the expression as applying to those who did not "talk reason" and sought to override all argument by violence; in other words, foreigners were savages, like the rebels, who would not submit to the civilizing influence of the Middle Kingdom."¹¹ Although this attitude changed along with the dramatic development of the West's advantages, the national identity of the Chinese was still strong.

Therefore, if we consider the urban segregation strategy from the Chinese government's perspective, we can see the other side of the story that the social segregation of the Legation Quarter was not only the intention of the foreigners, but was also promoted by the Qing and Beiyang governments. From the Chinese government's viewpoint, this was one of the limited feasible approaches capable of minimizing colonial impact. Throughout history, the urban partition strategy had been used by the government to manage and guard against the foreigners.¹² For instance, in the Qing dynasty, the Chinese government ordered the foreigners to live together in the "Canton Factories", assembling the residences and offices of the business agents. The Canton Factories were under strict government control, ensuring exclusion from the Chinese community. The foreigners were not able to leave this "trading post" without permission, while Chinese natives could not enter this area nor communicate with the foreigners, so these grand and splendid two- or three-story building groups came to be described as "a gilded cage" by Hosea Morse.¹³ Even after the Opium Wars, while the power relations between China and the West had reversed, following the segregation strategy in the Canton Factories the Chinese government still forbade the foreigners to "freely choose their location" and confined them to restricted, concentrated inhabitation.¹⁴ Although some treaties finally established the right of foreigners to reside anywhere in the city officially, the local Qing officials still insisted on the partition strategy by forbidding them from renting a house or buying land outside of colonial concessions to the foreigners.¹⁵

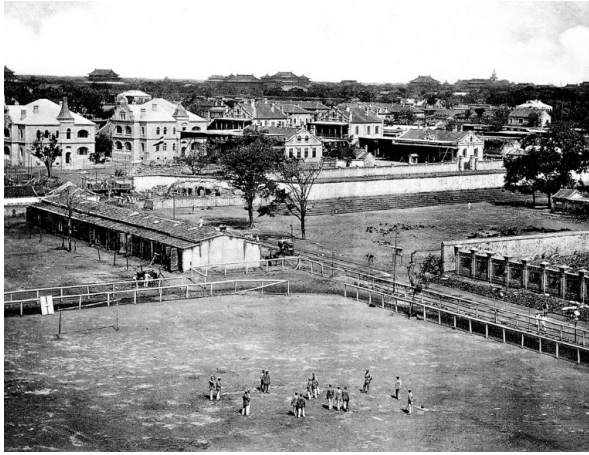


FIGURE 3 German Glacis. The British, French, Russians, Japanese, Americans, and Austria-Hungarians each had their own fields, which represented colonial power through the daily training of military forces, something which distressed the Chinese people strongly.



FIGURE 4 Chongwen Gate Inner Street. The street, which next to the Legation Quarter, was understood by foreigners as a typical dirty and disordered avenue.

Still in Beijing, as the Chinese political centre, the foreigners were forbidden from owning property and restricted from renting houses from native Chinese people. The Qing and Republican governments maintained the segregation strategy, intent on preventing the permeation of foreign forces. Sidney Gamble's Social Survey recorded that:

As the police must approve all renting contracts, they are able to limit the districts in which the foreigners are allowed to live. [...] It is only recently that foreigners have been allowed in the West City, and even now the police practically refuse to allow any foreigners to live in the South City. They say that they must see that all foreigners are protected in case of any trouble, and to give them adequate protection in the South City would take a larger body of men than could well be spared.¹⁶

As clearly demonstrated in Gamble's study, although the government's segregation policy was effective to a certain extent, it still failed to achieve its original goal. In fact, the segregation policy was not able to impede the Western powers' intervention in Beijing, from either political or economic standpoints.

SOVEREIGNTY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

While the foreigners attempted to rebuild the Legation Quarter in a "modern" style, to create the discrepancy between the Legation Quarter and the Chinese community in terms of the cityscape, civilization and power, the Chinese government, from the Qing to Republican periods, constantly considered as a great threat to sovereignty. For centuries Beijing had had no official city government until the 20th century. The power of local Beijing administration was decentralized and overlapped as the city was under the jurisdiction of the state, regional governments, and the army.¹⁷ These complex and redundant agencies reflect the order of Beijing as the core of imperial power, where the emperor encouraged officials and censors to monitor and criticize each other. After the occupation of Beijing by foreign powers in 1900, the local gentry and merchants took the responsibility to maintain public order. They created self-governing Pacifying Councils that cooperated with the Western powers. When the Qing court regained power in 1901, the General Administration of Residual Affairs, based on the model of the Pacifying Councils, was established. It later developed into the Inner City Administration of Public Works and Patrol (founded in 1902) and the Outer City Administration of Public Works and Patrol (founded in 1905). These two separate administrations were then combined as the Metropolitan Police Board of the Inner and Outer City in 1905.

In Republican Beijing, president Yuan Shikai constructed the Capital Police Board to replace the Metropolitan Police Board of the Inner and Outer City in 1913. In the same year, Zhu Qiqian proposed establishing a special city government to perform public works and provide social services, in order to “learn from the Western experience of municipal administration” and to “meet the challenge of a modernizing capital”¹⁸. He drafted the Capital Municipal Principles and established the Municipal Council of Beijing in 1914. It was “the first time a clear distinction was made between national and local administrative expenses”¹⁹. The Municipal Council of Beijing coordinated with the Capital Police Board in charge of the Beijing municipal affairs, with the former responsible for urban planning and construction of urban infrastructure, e.g. road, ditch and sewer, and the latter for maintaining social order, tax collection, fire protection, the census, and so on. From 1900 to 1928, the local government of Beijing paid special attention on the circulation of traffic and sanitary conditions, as the focus of “functionalist model of planning”²⁰, which was already prevalent in 19th century European countries and their colonies.

The government hoped to establish a strong sense of national identity as its defensive strategy against the colonial powers. The newly established modern local government in Republican Beijing paid specific attention to street construction in order to modernize the old capital city. In the *Municipal Bulletin*, it was said that “in the municipal administration, the most urgent task is to clean the road to facilitate the transportation.”²¹ The urban street, in a dilapidated and potholed condition, had thus damaged national independence and dignity (**Figure 4**). The report from Hu Yufen, head of the Rehabilitation Bureau after the Boxer Movement, stated: “The streets of the capital were extremely filthy, and were inevitably jeered at by the foreigners. Please let the Department of Revenue raise funds to repair these streets in order to achieve urban grandeur.”²² Similarly, the Municipal Council linked the street reconstruction to the national identity. “The capital should be the best city of the state, with flourishing commercial economy and effective transportation. It is the key national feature and the model for all other providences.”²³

But the deterioration of the road condition and the imperial sewer system continued to challenge the government’s intention of promoting the city’s beauty in order to contest with the foreign settlement. It was often recorded in official archives criticizing the open carnal and urban streets were intolerably dirty, emitting unbearably nasty and pestilential smells, and were a threat to pedestrians.²⁴ Beijing was thus even named as “a stinking city”²⁵. Consequently, the government and elites accepted the superiority of Western culture and civilization, and thought of the city as a “backward” place in view of the Western idea of civilization and hygiene. A newspaper article made the following criticism: “Only one queer characteristic of Beijing, that other nations don’t have, guess what, is the stink.”²⁶

In fact, since the idea of hygiene in traditional China is different from the one developed in the modern West, the repulsive, smelly alternately muddy or dusty unpaved roads had already existed for hundreds of years. Egor Timkovskii noted that every spring, “all the filth which has been collected during the year is piled up in the streets, and fills the air with noxious exhalation.”²⁷ However, this smell only gained an international significance when it played an essential role in defending the sovereignty. To a certain extent, the urban regeneration to improve the transport system and sanitary conditions, and create more convenient facilities for citizens, became so importance when it was used as a tool for manifesting the national image and competing with the foreign powers by the social elites.

Therefore, the Legation Quarter was often used as a point of reference by the elites to criticize Beijing’s local urban environment. As Yu Xiezhong claimed, the roads in Legation Street were clean, but could not be held in account with local roads, because most local roads were dirty and filthy, with dust flying in the air, sometimes along with feces.²⁸ Through the comparison with Western cities and the Legation Concession, the elites concluded that “the foreigners are laughing at us, considering us an undeveloped nation”²⁹, and satirized that Western foreigners would think the Beijingers “favor the dust and flies, even more than the sugar and flavorings.”³⁰

Similarly, by comparison with the dramatic reform of municipal administration in foreign countries, many elites were disappointed that the government was incompetent in urban construction and the masses were uncivilized:

The wise citizens of New York devoted themselves to urban regeneration and did their utmost, ultimately accomplishing their plans successfully. Nowadays, New York has become a remarkable metropolis in the world. On the contrary, after the past year's construction, we have to admit that Beijing's urban construction has failed to achieve accomplishments and discover solutions for old urban problems, such as the horrible roads and poor sanitary conditions.³¹

In this sense, the reconstruction of the city by the government aimed to reshape the “backwards” city image in both the foreigners' and elites' minds, and further compete with the foreign settlement. These projects, represented by the demolition of city wall, reconstruction of city gate and the rebuilding of the urban streets, paid special attention on improving the urban traffic and hygiene.³² The Chinese government accepted and learned the “Western modern” in both the technological and the ideological aspects, in order to reconstruct Beijing as the same kind of modern and civilized city as the Legation Quarter. A “modern” cityscape demonstrated the state's right of sovereignty and its power, that “no foreigners would still have reasons to ridicule the Chinese”³³, and no foreign power could expand its influence to the Chinese territory.

Although they aimed to learn from the West, the Beijing government believed that the protection of the city's ancient imperial legacy could be a means of representing the glories past, rendering Beijing different from the foreign capital cities. The attitudes of the foreigners towards China, specifically the ancient site, could be summarized in two polarized opinions. One considered that Beijing was the representation of the stalled and disadvantaged Eastern civilization. All the ancient sites should be thus removed completely to transplant the Western civilized urban environment, in alignment with the urban reconstruction in the Legation Districts. On the contrary, for the nostalgists, their opposing attitude encompassed the disillusionment of the former oriental idol; they hoped Beijing could retain the ancient cityscape and oppose the process of Westernization, or even any change to the old capital, as Henri Borel noted:

What I, as an artist, cannot forgive my white brethren is that they have made this European Ghetto in Peking so ugly and commonplace. Their modernity is so hideous compared with the antiquity that had to give way to it. Almost every Chinese cottage in Peking, even the smallest and poorest, has some beauty of line and colour, but nearly every European building in the Legation Quarter is a vulgarity. [...] A dull, crude, commonplace city of barbarians, shapeless, colourless, lacking in distinction, huddled in the midst of the exquisite old Chinese architecture which makes Peking a magnificent dream.³⁴

Actually, there was a common implication embedded in these two opposing attitudes: that the modernity equalled the West, while the traditional appearance equalled the East, and modernity and tradition were a pair of fundamentally antithetical notions. Hence, in order to construct the Legation Districts with “modern comfort”³⁵ in the ancient city, it was necessary to sweep out either “backward” or “glory oriental” traditional traces. Only the Western urban configuration and spatial form could explicitly express urban modernity and cultural superiority.

On the contrary, the Beijing government treated the imperial past as a crucial component of Chinese modernity. The preservation of historical legacy had become a crucial approach for the government to strengthen the national identity, aiming to prevent the impact from the West. Peter Carroll's study on Suzhou demonstrates that: “Preservationist modernizers appropriated the ostensibly ancient material and metaphysical verities of local *guji* as bulwarks of national culture. This conservation partly sprang from proprietary concern for the integrity and vitality of National Essence because the foreign-derived norms of modern transformation threatened to dilute the distinctiveness of China's national subjectivity.”³⁶ Therefore, the historical legacy still played a fundamental role in government-led urban reform, because it was viewed as an “allegory for the nation's very existence”, with the result that “[its] preservation symbolized the preservation of the nation.”³⁷ The same was true of the preservation of the Zhengyang Gate as a state monument at the newly building urban square (**Figure 5**). Consequently, for the government, both the domestication of the “foreign modern” that aimed to shape a new national identity, and the reuse of the historical legacy that endeavoured to bridge Beijing's modern development with past glories, to a certain extent served the purpose of containing the foreign power and challenging the invasion of colonial modernity in Beijing.



FIGURE 5 The Zhengyang Gate tower. It was preserved as imperial heritage and a monument dominating the newly constructed urban square.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines urban modernization and underlying factors from the perspective of urban competition between the new local authority and foreign powers in Beijing. Michael Hays suggests “[t]he role of the historian is rather to be concerned with the larger conditions on which architectural knowledge and action is made possible”³⁸. Regarding Beijing’s condition as the capital of China, the city was not only under the latent threat of foreign power, war and colonialism but also in facing the role of representing a new government and state. Under these circumstances, the contest between the Chinese government and foreign powers helped to foster the national identity and further establish the legitimacy of the new authority. This paper thus argues that for the Chinese government the significance of the urban construction strategy laid in its crucial role of safeguarding the national sovereignty and promoting national dignity in order to be resilient regarding the colonial crisis. To construct a “modern” Beijing was regarded as a strategy to reduce the differences between the Chinese and the colonial cityscape, a demonstration that the capital of China should be recognized as the same kind of great, independent and civilized capital city as those of the West. It did not deserve to be seen as a “backward” or even a colonized city. To a certain extent, it was the comparison and competition with the “Western cityscape” in the Legation Quarter, or in other concessions in China, that promoted the reformation of urban space in Beijing. Furthermore, if we understand modernization as an on-going process, the competition on urban construction and cityscape is still an important consideration of the Chinese government and an aspect of understanding the current monumental urban construction project in Beijing.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

HUANG Xusheng (Xi'an, 1983) has just finished his doctoral research at Department of Architecture at ETH Zurich. His doctoral topic is about the Chinese urban modernization and urban space at the beginning of 20th century, titled "Contested Beijing: The Modernization of Urban Space, 1900-1937".

Endnotes

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Figure 1: Jiawei Shen, *Old China through G.E. Morrison's Eyes: Catastrophe at the Turn of the Century*, 莫理循眼里的近代中国:世纪之交的战乱 (Fuzhou: Fujian jiaoyu Press, 2005), 130.

Figure 2: Beijing Municipal Council, "Map of Beijing, 京都市内外城地图," (Beijing: Beijing Municipal Council, 1916).

Figure 3: Alfons Mumm, *Ein Tagebuch in Bildern* (Berlin: Ausführung: Graphische Gesellschaft, 1902), 120.

Figure 4: Sanshichiro Yamamoto, *Peking* (Peking: Sanshichiro Yamamoto, 1906).

Figure 5: Sidney D. Gamble Photographs, from Duke University Libraries, Digital Collections, Item ID: 202-1126.