

COLIN SIYUAN CHINNERY

# Sounding Out *Beijing's Past and Present*



Before the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, all civic housing in Beijing was limited to one storey with uniform grey walls and roofs, arranged in a grid radiating away from the Forbidden City and enclosed by an imposing wall. Old Beijing was based on a very specific idea of order. Only Imperial or religious buildings were allowed colour, following a strict code. Within this grid each house was its own enclosure, a series of courtyards within a wall, like a miniature version of the city. These courtyard houses were linked together by a series of narrow lanes called “*butongs*”, punctuated by parks and temples. A hundred years later, Beijing is an unwieldy city of over twenty million people, six ring roads and twenty subway lines. Although the idea of the grid still exists, each walled enclosure might now contain a government complex, a residential compound of over 10,000 residents or a massive shopping mall. It is becoming so immense that the Chinese government is building a new city, Xiongan, nearly three times the size of New York City, simply to accommodate Beijing’s overspill. There are thirty lane highways leading in and out of Beijing, and one particular traffic jam in 2010 stretched for over sixty kilometres and lasted more than ten days.<sup>1</sup> A mental image of Beijing that used to conjure up the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven, now equally brings to mind staggering air pollution and the city as an unruly monster, hardly the mirror image of celestial order.

The historical ruptures that took place between the drastically different Beijings of then and now are overwhelming to contemplate, from the Chinese Revolution that toppled China’s last Imperial dynasty to the Japanese occupation before and during the Second World War; from the 1949 Communist victory to the calamity of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76)—every seismic historical change created fundamental rifts in Beijing’s cultural and material fabric. The clashing disorderliness of the city today is a sharp reflection of that historical chaos. While these momentous times have been well documented and researched by academics, as an artist I am more interested in discovering how to represent a myriad of subjective experiences of such times, of a personal experience of history from multiple perspectives without resorting to a documentary approach. It seems that the answer is to attempt entering into a new kind of dialogue with residents of Beijing, to create a kind of social sculpture. But how to achieve that?

A resolution began to slowly emerge years before I considered this exploration. In 2005 while working for the British Council’s Beijing office I initiated a project called *Sound and the City*, for which four British musicians were invited to come to Beijing to experience its sound environment and to use these experiences to make sound pieces. Each musician had to approach their proposal from a different perspective. Although I set out to produce an alternative project aimed at Beijing’s art and music professionals, the ensuing content received limited feedback from that demographic; instead it attracted enthusiastic attention from mainstream media. As a result, organisations made contact about the possibilities of sound design in parks, museums and city planning. It was as if the medium of sound might open up a conduit between contemporary culture and everyday life, illuminating a new sense of possibility for people who know little about art. This was both inspiring and perplexing; an analysis of the project’s outcomes being instructive.

The invited musicians were Clive Bell, Peter Cusack, Brian Eno and David Toop. Clive Bell was fascinated by China’s unconditional surrender to the sentimental kitsch of Chinese pop, that Chinese people love to sing in the streets without any hint of self-consciousness. He took ten of the most popular songs in China at that time and created cover versions using instruments he had collected from across the world, plus those he bought at the *panjiayuan* antiques market in Beijing. Bell rearranged the music so that it would be personalised but still instantly recognisable to those who knew the songs, and invited experimental musicians to play and sing with him. His cover interpretations were then produced as a CD and freely distributed to music shops around Beijing, to be played in the streets together with

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In search of sounds of lost Beijing

their antecedent Chinese songs. Although it was impossible to verify how often or even whether the music shops actually played his CD, his idea grasped the spirit of what sound means to a city in the way it is lived. Regardless of pop music's monopoly on Chinese music culture, what it meant for people's lives and how it formed part of their experience was relevant to how they and sound interacted in the city. Peter Cusack used a radio station to mount a public competition titled 'Your Favourite Beijing Sounds', for which he invited listeners to think of city sounds they liked the most. The response was compelling as many people, plus mainstream media outlets, realised that sound carries extensive personal, cultural and emotional information. Brian Eno created a sound installation in Ritan Park (Temple of the Sun) using sixteen CD players placed around the wall that circles the altar to the sun. Each CD played bell sounds at random, of different pitches and intervals, combinations and directions. Even though the sounds created were based on an historic Russian bell, the complete effect was inexplicably Chinese. The soft bell sounds were the perfect sensorial foil to the park's red wall, pine and cypress trees, and elderly men flying kites. David Toop devised a sound installation in a building specifically created in Sun Yatsen Park next to the Forbidden City, combining the sounds he recorded during his stay in Beijing with abstract electronic compositions to create an uncanny acoustic world—part old Beijing, part unknown future.

Although there was no follow-through with post-project overtures, *Sound and the City* was a breakthrough venture, both in terms of personal curatorial thinking and exploring new possibilities for the medium. Sound was not utilised in my subsequent artworks or curatorial projects, as it was considered incomplete as a suitable structure in the broader cultural sense for it to become meaningful.



I was subsequently invited to consult upon the content of the new Shijia Hutong Museum, of which I had a special relationship as it occupied my family's old courtyard home in Beijing. Owing to the aforementioned historical changes, our home passed into the hands of the government—even though it was returned to us in name, it was never returned in actuality. After a strange sequence of events, The Prince's Trust (co-founded by Prince Charles) funded the construction of a museum on these premises for their only project outside the United Kingdom. As part of the consultation process I recalled *Sound and the City* and the importance of sound in traditional Beijing culture, and so proposed that recordings of old Beijing be included in the museum. Upon reflection this presented an almost impossible realisation, to create a history of Beijing only through sound.

One element of approach was contingent upon the fact that much of traditional Beijing's culture has disappeared and what little remains is in the rapid process of being lost forever. The objective of recording vanishing sounds had cultural meaning, but lacked contemporary relevance. Neither a historian nor a cultural heritage researcher, I am devoted to the present. In considering this focus of past sounds and how they relate to living people's memory, it occurred to me while listening to *Sound and the City*, that the musicians would acknowledge how sound became embodied as part of people's living memory, and therefore part of the present. For me one distinctive sound was the ubiquitous taxi-metre jingle heard in Beijing taxis at that time. Hearing the recording in 2013, my memory was transferred back to 2005, a miniature Proustian experience, triggering buried emotional memories. I calculated that if I could faithfully record certain sounds it might trigger similar experiences for other people. Thus sound would be a conduit, and the emotional memory the substance.



This concept turned on its head the notion of the historical, as history is usually understood as the endeavor to discover or at least approach degrees of objective truth. This approach had the opposite effect, where a particular sound would trigger a completely subjective experience, likely incapable of being shared with another person. If a history of Beijing might be possible based on the premise of using only sound, it would mean something completely different for every Beijing resident. This would therefore approach the notion of a social sculpture, though it would be partisan—as only individual people would be the receivers of its purpose. For past sounds to be faithfully recreated it would require the participation of those who created them. This assistance would be a crucial element for the work to be meaningful in a social sense, as it would necessarily involve people of all ages and walks of life, creating multiple layers of experience, reaching back in time while based in the present.

Owing to the urgency of some traditions bordering on extinction, the project was initiated with capturing the sounds of old Beijing, of a time when the framework of traditional culture remained unscathed before the Communist Party took over in 1949. Old Beijing's culture was unique in that it was saturated with sound—the countless variations of street hawking, and the keeping of song birds. Existing all over China, especially in Beijing due to the large number of people who had money and free time to explore and refine eccentric amusements, one of these bird keeping pursuits was pigeon fancying. While pigeon fanciers around the world concentrate on the bird's looks or speed, in Beijing whistles were attached to them so that they made an extraordinarily, beautiful sound when flying in a group. Many Beijing pigeon fanciers bred numerous kinds of pigeons, while others specifically made different types of pigeon whistles. Of these, some were straightforward, consisting of two bamboo shafts each producing a different tone, but more complex whistles were made from small gourds, consisting of as many as fourteen whistles, some specifically angled for the air produced by the pigeon's beating wings. There were master whistle-makers whose work included elegant jade or ivory ornamentation that have since become collectors' items. While the popularity of this tradition had survived the Cultural Revolution for more than thirty years, it is now in steep decline as many people complain that pigeons are a health risk, and their whistles sources of noise pollution. Pigeon whistles are now collected as ornaments, this pursuit divorced from the quality of the sounds they create.

Similarly, the keeping of songbirds is diminishing. Once a beautiful feature of every city's soundscape, the government has since passed a law prohibiting their private ownership, as all Chinese domestic bird species are now classified as wild animals, bringing this grand tradition to an abrupt end. Beijing bird owners trained their songbirds to extreme lengths. Perhaps the most extraordinary example of this was the training of the lark to imitate a repertoire of thirteen different sounds, from a knot of sparrows in a tree to the sound of a creaky-wheeled barrel, of cats, dogs, and other species of songbird, all recited in a strict order. Such a bird might take several years of patient work to train, and their proud owners would invite select audiences to attend recitals (while searching them for cameras and recording devices, to avoid a competitor stealing his hard work).

Street hawking declined in the early years of the People's Republic as private businesses were co-opted by government-run shops that provided fixed incomes. The selling of each type of service and goods used to have a definite song or sound associated with it, so that it would be instantly recognisable from a distance. Now these songs are performed at temple fairs or television variety shows, mostly theatrically embellished shadows of the originals. In recent years the last group of elderly street hawkers have either passed away or became seriously ill. Without their living memory, future recordings or performances would lack historical validity. The importance of being able to accurately recreate the sound environments from that period will become invaluable for a cultural history that has been largely

neglected. Though 'old Beijing' seems like an extinct culture well beyond the reach of the city's new generations, it nonetheless attracts young followers eager for new experiences.

Correspondingly, the early period of Communist China is just as important—cultural sounds were largely replaced by those ideological, as the Communist Party sought to transform society through mass mobilisation. One such movement was the Great Sparrow Campaign, officially known as the Four Pests Campaign (1958-62), that aimed to eradicate all sparrows (along with rats, flies and mosquitoes), as part of the Great Leap Forward. Sparrows were identified for extermination to promote hygiene and reduce hunger, as they ate grain and fruit, which reduced crop yields. Chairman Mao Zedong, acting against the advice of scientists, mobilised the masses with military precision; people in cities and the countryside were synchronised into action to ensure the sparrow's complete destruction. Citizens of all ages, without respite, screamed and shouted, banged gongs, pots and pans, waved flags, and used sticks to hit trees, preventing the sparrows from perching anywhere such that they fell dead to the ground from exhaustion. Thousands of free-fire zones were created for people to shoot them. Schools, factories and army units were mobilised in a total war until the sparrows had all but become extinct in China. In social and environmental terms, the campaign was catastrophic. The eradication of the sparrows gave insects free reign over the countryside, decimating crops, the eventuating ecological imbalance contributing to the Great Famine (1959-61) in which an estimated thirty to forty million people died of starvation. By 1960 even Chairman Mao had to change course, ironically having to import sparrows from the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> In terms of sound, it would have been the most spectacular pandemonium—a whole species of animal exterminated using largely sound.

One of the biggest challenges of my project has been how to reenact such historical scenes with sufficient accuracy. In the Great Sparrow Campaign, the sounds would have come from all directions, screaming and shouting, with the clanging of metallic objects and distant gunshots mixed with the more subtle sounds of flags waving. Many people would have been involved, but how to source and organise survivors from that generation to take part in such a bizarre recreation, given that the end product would simply be the making of sound? Several cultural heritage organisations were interested in providing funding, but their participation would have clearly identified this as a heritage project, steering its content towards that outcome, whereas the project was envisioned to produce an artwork—its financial independence being central to its existence, as well as artistic merit. For the project to have meaning, it would need to engage audiences in a new way, and a wider section of society. For this to be possible, it would be important to understand China's *zeitgeist* at this point in time.

Looking back upon art history, Andy Warhol removed the barriers between high and pop art at a juncture when it was no longer viable to ignore the power of popular and commercial culture upon society. Christo and Jeanne-Claude took art out of the museum by realising exciting projects in the public realm, and the YBAs (Young British artists) created controversies that electrified the previous static relationship between art and public. In no way attempting to create the kind of authority of these artists, my project might at least attempt to recognise points of rupture. These previous art historical precedents appeared in the post-industrial Western world, where highly educated publics were open to new forms of artistic expression. In China, the existence of contemporary art has only just begun to enter the public realm, as private museum projects are flourishing, though without major institutions such as The Tate or Museum of Modern Art to guide public tastes; the formal aesthetics of contemporary art would mostly therefore be for professionals. The space where new possibilities are opening up is the Internet—given the tightly controlled mass media in China, increasing numbers of young people are using the Internet as a space for exploration. In particular, live streaming has become an increasingly

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popular agency through which people express themselves. The Internet economy has also become immense, creating a generation of *Wang Hong* or Internet celebrities who accumulate tens of millions of online fans, which translates into revenues that equal or perhaps even surpass the earnings of top Chinese film stars.<sup>3</sup> While a vast majority of these celebrities rely on fashion and lifestyle, an alternative culture is growing among this hierarchy, cultivating a generation of young people who want something different and unobtainable from mainstream media. Reflecting upon the project *Sound and the City*, it was perceived as alternative and experimental, attracting mainstream interest due to its content linking sound with real life experience. By making a history of Beijing using only sound, it established a framework that enhanced that link between life and sound, and as a result it created intense interest. Using an alliteration that would be instantly recognisable, I titled the new project *Sound Museum*, and began making appearances on television and popular Internet platforms. One particular mini-documentary produced by the WeChat media platform Sola received over a eleven million views, with the reality TV show viewership (both at the time of writing) now at 110 million views, presenting further consideration of the Internet as a site for developing an extensive audience. In conducting interviews and sound recording sessions through live streaming, with edited content for traditional video platforms, this approach allowed people to see the whole project develop in real time, including research and re-enactments. The project's development would be the work itself, live streaming sessions enabling interaction with audiences, for research leads and resources, volunteers and crowd funding for larger recording projects. *Sound Museum* would thereby become part of the Internet economy by sourcing all project resources from netizens via online platforms.

Yet the interactivity of the entire project cannot be restricted to historical times. Contemporary sound is just as important in understanding our relationship with the historical. Although there are many field recordists globally documenting contemporary sounds, including all major Chinese cities, there are few projects which seek non-professionals to make recordings themselves. The interactivity of live streaming is the perfect vehicle for asking netizens to search for interesting sounds in their city. In combination with the historical, contemporary sound becomes part of a much larger cultural context. The latter need not be restricted to any geological location, as there is no specific culture or history attached to them. What constitutes compelling sounds in different cultural or urban contexts is often unexplored, and while most artistic projects focus on the audience, here the endeavour concentrates on the experience of people who are interested in exploring their local environments for these engaging, stimulating sounds.

The straightforward proposition advanced by Peter Cusack's original London project transposed to Beijing, asked people to nominate their favourite sound. The results from both London and Beijing are a fascinating mix of the very ordinary and extraordinary. Like the taxi meter sound that triggered an emotional memory for me, many ordinary sounds can mean more to one's everyday experience than might be considered. I am currently working towards projects involving local communities in different parts of the world—the challenge is to determine what their precise outcomes might be, and to the meaning and importance that sound has for different people.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/aug/24/china-60-mile-motorway-tailback>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36802769>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-36802769>