



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

Michael Meyer

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Journalist Michael Meyer has spent his adult life in China, first in a small village as a Peace Corps volunteer, the last decade in Beijing--where he has witnessed the extraordinary transformation the country has experienced in that time. For the past two years he has been completely immersed in the ancient city, living on one of its famed *hutong* in a century-old courtyard home he shares with several families, teaching English at a local elementary school--while all around him "progress" closes in as the neighborhood is methodically destroyed to make way for high-rise buildings, shopping malls, and other symbols of modern, urban life. The city, he shows, has been demolished many times before; however, he writes, "the epitaph for Beijing will read: born 1280, died 2008...what emperors, warlords, Japanese invaders, and Communist planners couldn't eradicate, the market economy can." *The Last Days of Old Beijing* tells the story of this historic city from the inside out--through the eyes of those whose lives are in the balance: the Widow who takes care of Meyer; his students and fellow teachers, the first-ever description of what goes on in a Chinese public school; the local historian who rallies against the government. The tension of preservation vs. modernization--the question of what, in an ancient civilization, counts as heritage, and what happens when a billion people want to live the way Americans do--suffuse Meyer's story.

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