



WORLD CULTURES & EDUCATION

China Before the Silence

A journey through Beijing in 2018

A TRAVEL MEMOIR

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Travel writing

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This memoir concerns a visit to Beijing in 2018. References to applications, payments, hotels, and facilities belong to that journey and its period; this is not a guide to current procedures.

Observations are personal and do not describe all Chinese people or every region of China.

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Preface

In 2018, I traveled to Beijing carrying the habits of an educator, the eye of an artist, and the confidence of someone accustomed to thinking about culture. I expected differences. What I had not understood was how quickly ordinary tasks could unsettle that confidence. Reading a menu, finding a ride, or checking into a hotel could demand more attention than standing before a famous monument.

The journey described here moves between those two scales: the great landmarks and the small negotiations of everyday life. The Forbidden City and the Great Wall belong beside the subway, the restaurant table, and the stranger who helps when an application does not. Together they make the city I remember.

These pages bring the experiences and reflections of that journey into a single narrative. They do not attempt to speak for every visitor or every Chinese person. Beijing was larger than my experience of it, and the experience was richer than any single explanation. What follows is the account of a traveler learning to look more carefully, including at himself.

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1 A sky without a sun

My first strong impression of Beijing was not a building. It was the sky. A gray layer softened the horizon and made the city seem reluctant to disclose its outline. I remember wondering whether this was a passing condition or the atmosphere in which the whole journey would unfold.

Around me, daily life continued. People moved with purpose; some wore masks. What interrupted my attention did not appear to interrupt theirs. That difference mattered. A visitor can arrive believing that his own surprise is the most important fact in the street, while the street has work to do.

Outside, I noticed the heaviness of the air. My thoughts returned to a half-serious question: did Beijing ever see the sun? It was a traveler's reaction to particular days, not a measurement of the city's seasons. Yet it gave the journey its first emotional color.

Soon I was less startled. The surroundings had not suddenly rearranged themselves for my comfort; I was beginning to adjust. That small change in expectation would return throughout the trip. Before I learned a route or recognized a sign, I had to accept that familiarity would not be waiting for me at the airport.

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2 In the field of the cameras

The cameras were difficult to overlook. On poles, against buildings, and in stations, they became part of the visual language of the city. At first I registered each one with a small inward hesitation, an awareness of being visible in a way that I was not used to noticing so often.

As I moved through Beijing, that discomfort existed beside another impression: public order. Queues formed, crowds found their direction, and busy places often functioned with an efficiency that impressed me. I could feel reassured by an orderly space and still wonder about the terms on which that reassurance was obtained.

I could not know from looking at a street how every person in it understood the cameras. What I could describe was my own response. For me, visibility and security became connected questions, and neither question admitted a simple answer.

An educator is used to observing behavior. Travel reminded me how different it feels to consider oneself the observed person. The journey had shifted my position: I was studying a place while becoming conscious of the ways the place organized my own movements.



Space and symmetry in the Forbidden City

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3 An internet beyond my habits

The digital difficulty was more intimate than I expected. A traveler may prepare for an unfamiliar language and still assume that the familiar screen in his hand will remain a reliable companion. In Beijing, the applications I usually depended on did not always work as I expected. Google was unavailable to me; WhatsApp and email did not provide the continuity I had taken for granted.

The city around me was not digitally absent. On the contrary, its own applications and payment systems were deeply woven into ordinary life. The disconnection was mine. I had brought familiar tools into a different digital environment and mistaken their limitations for the limits of the environment itself.

That distinction changed the way I understood inconvenience. I needed to learn names such as WeChat and Alipay, to think about translation and saved destinations, and to stop assuming that a device alone made me prepared.

The experience belonged to my 2018 journey. What lasted beyond the details of any application was the realization that technological confidence can be local. A person may be competent at home and unexpectedly dependent abroad, without either place being simple or backward.

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4 The silence of the Forbidden City

In the Forbidden City, architecture seemed to speak before anyone offered an explanation. Repeated forms, symmetry, and the deliberate relationship between open space and buildings directed the eye. I found myself reading scale and distance as if they were sentences.

As an artist, I was drawn to composition. As a cultural observer, I wondered about the authority expressed by that composition. A visitor passes through an arrangement intended to establish distinctions: inside and outside, approach and arrival, the individual body and the larger order surrounding it.

I did not need to reduce the place to a political lesson in order to feel its force. Beauty was present in its own right. Yet beauty and power were not separate experiences for me there. The disciplined proportions made each seem to reinforce the other.

After the practical confusions of travel, the visit offered another kind of reading. The city could challenge me through a menu or an application, but it could also address me through space. I left that encounter more attentive to the ways a culture makes its ideas visible without writing them on a sign.

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5 The wall and the visitor

The Great Wall arrived in my imagination before I arrived at it. Famous places usually do. Images prepare us for a monument, but they rarely prepare us for the company of other visitors, the demands on the body, or the commercial life that gathers around a celebrated view.

The wall was magnificent. That impression did not disappear because the experience also involved crowds, sellers, and physical effort. Instead, the grandeur and the inconvenience occupied the same day. The real visit was less pure than the picture I had carried, and more interesting for refusing to remain a picture.

I became aware of the distance between seeing a landmark and consuming its reputation. The desire for an untouched encounter can itself be a visitor's fantasy. I was one of the people who had come because the place was famous; I could hardly ask the others to disappear so that my own arrival would seem more authentic.

What stayed with me was the need to hold both experiences together: admiration for the monument, and patience with the circumstances of visiting it. Travel becomes thinner when disappointment with a crowd is allowed to erase the thing that brought us there.



The intimate scale of the old lanes

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6 In the old lanes

The hutongs offered a different scale of Beijing. After the formal spaces and the force of modern movement, the old lanes brought attention back toward proximity: the relationship between a passage and a doorway, between a neighborhood and the people who move through it.

My early notes called these alleys the place where China breathes. The phrase expressed relief at finding a more intimate city, but it also needed care. Modern streets are no less real because they move quickly, and an old neighborhood does not exist to perform authenticity for a visitor.

What I valued was the change in attention. Here I was less tempted to count achievements and more willing to notice ordinary human presence. The scale invited looking rather than rushing toward the next famous destination.

The lanes complicated the Beijing I had begun to describe to myself. The city was not a single system with one mood. It contained different tempos, different degrees of intimacy, and different ways of occupying space. To walk through them was to loosen the first explanation and make room for another.

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7 The conversation that cost more than tea

It began with a young woman asking whether she could practice English with me. The request touched something familiar: I teach language, and I value the meetings that language makes possible. We spoke about education, travel, and culture. I welcomed what appeared to be an uncomplicated exchange.

Then came the suggestion that we continue over tea. Inside the tea house, small cups and deliberate movements gave the encounter a ceremonial shape. I was pleased to think that an ordinary conversation had opened a door into local culture.

The bill altered everything. It was far higher than I had expected. The warmth of the conversation gave way to pressure, and the scene I had interpreted as hospitality acquired another meaning. No amount is needed here to describe the embarrassment: the more painful discovery was how confidently I had mistaken the setting for an assurance of fairness.

Later I could make a joke of it. This had not been tea; it had been tuition. But the joke did not cancel the lesson. Curiosity needs boundaries. Asking about a price does not insult culture, and declining an invitation does not make a traveler hostile to human contact. I had confused openness with the temporary suspension of judgment.

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8 A word that made the menu clearer

Hunger is simple until the menu is not. In Beijing, I could look at food with interest and still hesitate over what it contained. Where English was limited and ingredients were difficult to discuss, ordering became a problem of communication before it became a matter of taste.

My dietary commitments made clarity especially important. The word Qingzhen, identifying halal food, became a useful point of orientation. The Niujie Mosque district also gave me a place to connect the search for a meal with the presence of Muslim life in the city.

I did not want every meal to become an argument with uncertainty. Choosing places where my questions were easier to answer reduced that strain. It narrowed some possibilities, but it allowed me to eat with greater confidence and to give attention back to the journey.

There was a cultural lesson in this very practical decision. A traveler does not encounter cuisine as a neutral catalogue of dishes. Faith, language, habit, curiosity, and fatigue all sit down at the table. My choices told a story about me as well as about the city. Finding familiar ground did not mean that I had stopped exploring.



Qingzhen as a point of orientation

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9 Familiarity with a different topping

At a tired moment I turned to Pizza Hut. A familiar name offered the promise of a decision that would not require much explanation. Travel can make such promises unusually attractive. Sometimes a person wants a meal; sometimes he wants a short holiday from interpreting everything.

But the familiar sign did not lead to an identical experience. There were seafood toppings, flavors I had not expected, and drinks that did not fit neatly into my usual categories. The brand was recognizable; the encounter still belonged to Beijing.

The surprise was small and, compared with other difficulties, pleasantly harmless. Yet it disturbed an assumption worth disturbing: that international names provide identical islands wherever they appear. A restaurant can travel and change, just as its customers do.

I found some humor in my own search for predictability. I had come a long way to encounter another culture, then occasionally hoped that dinner would excuse me from that encounter. The unfamiliar menu behind the familiar sign returned me gently to the purpose of the journey. Even a refuge could become a lesson in local taste.

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10 Learning the city underground

The subway first appeared to me as movement without a readable pattern. Lines crossed, people moved quickly, and the pace of decisions seemed to belong to everyone except the visitor trying to work out where he should stand and where he should go.

The frustration was real, but it did not remain unchanged. After several attempts, the system began to reveal repetitions. A route that had seemed an abstract puzzle became a sequence I could follow. Recognition replaced some of the strain.

Nothing dramatic had happened to the railway between those encounters. The larger change was in my reading of it. I was acquiring the small competencies that make a city less resistant: paying attention to direction, allowing time, and noticing what other travelers already understood.

There is a particular satisfaction in becoming capable of an ordinary journey. No monument records it. Yet the first trip made with greater confidence can feel like a modest personal achievement. The subway taught me that adaptation is not only a grand cultural idea. Sometimes it is simply the difference between staring at a system and finding one's way through it.

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11 A Romanian stranger and a ride

The limits of my digital confidence returned when I tried to use DiDi. A task that seemed ordinary in principle became difficult in practice. Language and the unfamiliar system stood between me and the simple act of arranging a ride.

At one point I was stuck. The journey moved forward because a Romanian traveler helped me navigate the application and obtain transportation. He understood enough of the system to bridge the gap that had stopped me.

The incident occupies little space beside a famous palace or wall, but memory does not assign importance according to the size of a landmark. A person who helps at the right moment can become one of the clearest figures in a journey.

It also complicated the darker story I could have told after the tea house. Caution remained necessary, but suspicion could not be the only lesson. One stranger had made openness expensive; another made dependence easier to bear. To remember both was to remain fair to the experience. Human contact was neither a guarantee nor a trap in itself. It required attention, and sometimes it offered exactly what was needed.

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12 The hotel and the passport

A hotel promises rest, but arrival does not always begin with a room. During my journey, passport and visa checks made registration a visible part of the encounter. The visitor was not only a guest with luggage; he was also a person whose documents had to be processed.

I was refused check-in at one hotel because I was a foreigner. In my notes, the refusal became entangled with questions about registration and the kinds of visitors different hotels would accept. What mattered immediately was less the explanation than the practical consequence: a place that appeared available could still be unavailable to me.

That moment disturbed the easy assumption that a paying traveler can settle anywhere a bed is offered. I had to allow for requirements I did not yet understand and for a difference between the service I expected and the service a particular establishment could provide.

I remember the incident as part of the logistics of my 2018 visit, not as a permanent description of every hotel. Its wider lesson was about preparation. The desire to move freely is one thing; knowing what a journey requires of one's documents is another.



The city read through its routes

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13 At the edge of the cashless city

The payment systems that impressed me could also leave me outside them. QR codes and mobile applications made transactions look effortless for people who knew how to use them. For me, the very ease of the exchange could reveal a new difficulty.

An advanced system does not automatically become an accessible system for every visitor. A familiar credit card, some cash, and the confidence that one of them must work were not always enough to make the moment comfortable. My journey included the strain of not knowing which tool would be useful in a particular place.

The experience connected with the problem of transportation and the unfamiliar applications. Access involved more than possessing a phone. It involved understanding an environment of language, accounts, and local habits that its regular users did not need to explain to themselves.

I began to notice how easily convenience can conceal its prerequisites. Watching someone else complete a transaction in seconds is different from being able to complete it oneself. This was one of the trip's least picturesque lessons, but one of its most memorable. It made me more attentive to the hidden work that allows ordinary life to appear simple.

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14 The body and its expectations

Travel is not experienced by the mind alone. The body asks questions about air, food, rest, and privacy long before the traveler has finished forming an opinion about culture. Those questions were part of my Beijing journey, not an interruption of its supposedly more important subjects.

Some public restrooms surprised me because the privacy they offered differed from what I expected. Older facilities and unfamiliar arrangements made an ordinary need into an uncomfortable encounter. My notes recorded the shock plainly. Looking back, I wanted to keep the encounter specific rather than turn it into a judgment on an entire country.

Traditional medicine and massage practices also appeared in the landscape of the journey: herbal treatments, acupuncture, and the promise of relief. Interest did not remove the need for judgment. A service presented as a cultural experience was still a service whose terms and credibility mattered.

These less celebrated details complicated the easy romance of travel. The person admiring a palace is also the person who needs a comfortable place to rest. To acknowledge that body is not to diminish the journey. It is to remember who actually makes it.

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15 The quiet rules between people

Some of the rules I felt most strongly were not written where I could read them. They appeared in the pace of interaction, the distance people maintained, and the subtle change in atmosphere when someone disturbed an arrangement that others understood.

My notes spoke of respect, modesty, and collective awareness. Those were attempts to describe what I noticed, not a key that opened every Chinese personality. A quiet encounter might have many explanations, and my limited language made some of them unavailable to me.

Still, the impression changed my own behavior. I watched longer before assuming that I knew what a situation required. The adjustment did not erase discomfort, but it made me less quick to treat discomfort as evidence that someone else was wrong.

For someone who teaches culture, this was an important correction. Concepts are useful until they become a substitute for looking. The individual before us cannot be exhausted by a category. Beijing asked me to connect my professional vocabulary with the modest discipline of being a guest: observe, listen, and allow the possibility that the first interpretation is incomplete.

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16 Beyond the silence

When I gather the journey in memory, the monuments remain, but they no longer stand alone. Beside the wall are the crowds. Beside the tea cups is the bill. Beside an application I could not manage is the Romanian traveler who helped me. The city becomes more recognizable when these uneven pieces are allowed to remain together.

The phrase that returned through my early notes was that China was a system one entered rather than simply a country one visited. It captured a real feeling of dependence and adjustment. Yet a feeling is not the whole place. Beijing also offered beauty, ordinary kindness, local taste, and neighborhoods that resisted a single account.

I had arrived prepared to observe. I came to understand that the observer also needed examination. What did I expect to work without explanation? Which comforts had I mistaken for universal arrangements? When had my desire for authenticity made me less careful, and when had caution threatened to close me to an encounter worth having?

Those questions are what I carry beyond the silence. Travel did not give me the right to summarize a nation. It gave me a more difficult and more useful task: to describe honestly the part I encountered, and to recognize the changes it made in the person who was looking.

Words carried home

These expressions are small reminders of the effort to meet everyday life in another language. Romanization is included as a reading aid.

Nǐ hǎo
Hello

Xièxiè
Thank you

Duōshǎo qián?
How much?

Qīngzhēn
Halal

Wǒ bù dǒng
I do not understand

Tài guì le
Too expensive

About the author

Dr. Wagih Elgohary is an educator, artist, and founder of World Cultures & Education WCE. His work brings together Arabic-language education, cultural understanding, visual arts, and the development of learning materials.

He holds a Ph.D. in Organization and Management, an Ed.D. in Instructional Leadership, a master's degree in Management and Leadership, and a Bachelor of Fine Arts.

His travel writing connects an interest in language and culture with close attention to everyday encounters. This account of Beijing follows that interest into the practical and personal experiences of a journey.



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China Before the Silence

In Beijing, a story may begin before a palace—or with a ride, a menu, or an unexpectedly expensive cup of tea.

An educator and artist revisits his 2018 journey through the Forbidden City, the Great Wall, and the old lanes, alongside the ordinary encounters that made the place personal.

A travel memoir about curiosity, caution, kindness, and the experience of becoming a little less certain—and a little more attentive.

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