HARRIET EVANS

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Cover art: *Chai*, the "awful mark" of demolition. Dashalar, Beijing, China, 2010. Photograph by Harriet Evans.

For the people of Dashalar,
with affectionate gratitude for all they taught me,
and in fond memory of Zhao Tielin (1949–2009)

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By the time I was completing this book in early 2018, the circumstances of most of those I had known since 2007 had changed, and Dashalar no longer resembled the neighborhood with which I was familiar. I therefore decided to use the past tense in narrating my friends' stories.

The full value of the characters for *Dashalar* is *Dashanlan*. Tourist websites tend to use *Dashilar* or *Da Zha Lan*. In previous publications I have used *Dashalanr*, but here I prefer *Dashalar* as a compromise between the phonetic value of the characters and local oral usage.

Dazayuan is variously translated as "compound courtyard," "big messy courtyard," "big, mixed courtyard," "tenements," or "slums." I use Wu Liangyong's "big cluttered courtyard," from his *Rehabilitating the Old City of Beijing*, out of respect for an architect who designed a model for the conversion of Beijing's dazayuan into modernized structures that retained a feel of the traditional courtyard.

All those who appear in this book wanted me to use their real names. However, I have preserved their anonymity due to the ongoing political sensitivity around the state's program of urban regeneration. The pseudonyms I have created combine characters from local people's names, some phonetic or semantic element from their "real" name, and the term of address I used with them. The only exception is Jia Yong, whose identity I have decided to retain, given his prominence as a local businessman and photographer.

All direct quotations as transcribed from my recordings or based on my field notes appear in quotation marks or indented paragraphs.

The chapter headings are mostly named after the head of the household in question. This includes chapter 2, named after the eldest woman of the household. Even though in local cultural custom, her gender meant that she could not be acknowledged as "household head" (*jiazhang*), she enjoyed a local reputation as the key figure maintaining the unity of her family.

Unless noted otherwise, translations from archival and recorded materials are my own. XWDG is my abbreviation for Xuanwu qu dangan (Xuanwu District Archives).

In the early summer of 2004, I had long conversations with Beijing anthropologist friends about the difficulties of conveying to young students a sense of the extraordinary intensity, pace, and reach of the changes engulfing Beijing in recent decades. I began to toy with the idea of developing a new research project tracing the transformation of a single district. One friend then introduced me to Zhao Tielin, who since 1997 had been compiling a photographic record of the everyday lives of the long-term residents—"typical old Beijingers"—of Dashalar, a small popular neighborhood just south of Tian'anmen Square that I had visited once in the 1970s but about which I knew virtually nothing. Zhao was one of a kind: loud, full of laughter, a heavy smoker and drinker, always on the side of the down-and-out. He took me to meet several of his friends in Dashalar whom he described as typical "old Beijingers"—born in, grew up in, or married into the neighborhood.

Mostly only minimally educated, Zhao's Dashalar friends were living a hand-to-mouth existence, picking up menial, short-term jobs where they could. Some were unemployed and earned money as unlicensed pedicab cyclists; others, particularly the women, worked long hours as cleaners in local restaurants, or as domestic help. They lived in crowded rooms in the "big cluttered courtyards" (*dazayuan*)—former brothels, native-place associations, and mansions that since the 1920s, and particularly the 1950s, had been divided up and filled in with single-room dwellings to accommodate the capital's growing population.[1] By 2004, it seemed that the extraordinary transformation of Beijing in the previous two decades or so had virtually passed them by. They all had electricity and television but no washing facilities or hot water and only a small stove burner that served as their kitchen, sometimes placed in the common space of the courtyard and shared with neighbors. Few of them knew much about life outside the capital. One, the son of a Hui man who was a mobile street vendor of meat (lamb), had been sent to the Great Northern Wilderness as a sent-down youth in 1967. There he was stripped of his urban registration. Without the connections to enable him to return to Beijing, he spent three decades in a small, desperately poor village in the northeast, where he married a local woman, before finally managing to return to Beijing with his

wife in the early 1990s. The wife of one local man visited Hong Kong as part of a group tour in 2010; most of those I knew, however, had rarely if ever left Beijing. Only one of those I met had made good and, as a well-established local restaurateur and photographer, had ample resources to be able to travel, both in China and abroad.

Zhao and I hit it off, and although at the time I had no clear idea about what might come of my visit to the neighborhood, Zhao welcomed me as his "collaborator" when introducing me to his local friends. Over more than five years, together with his research assistant, Huang Mingfang, we made numerous visits to those I first encountered in 2004 and to many more. Mingfang and I continued to visit them after Zhao passed away in 2009. Slowly, as I got to know them better, I became clearer about the themes that would underpin my research project.

My work on the project was suddenly interrupted by a near-fatal illness in early 2015, postponing completion of the book. However, once I returned to it in late 2016, it was as if, imperceptibly, unconsciously, all sorts of ideas had worked themselves out, making the final stages of writing much easier and more pleasurable than I had anticipated. Moreover, the Dashalar I was familiar with had been almost entirely gentrified, marking a physical, spatial, and social closure to the research interests inspiring this volume. In all, the timing of the completion of this book has come at a fitting moment.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The people of Dashalar who made this book possible welcomed me into their homes repeatedly between 2007 and 2014, patiently putting up with my faltering attempts to understand their jokes and anecdotes. Over time, I developed a growing awareness of the immense privilege they gave me, enabling me to share aspects of lives and experiences to which few researchers, Chinese or not, have had access. Their generosity in this gave me unanticipated and wonderful opportunities to reflect on how people strive to live decent, considerate, and ethical lives in everyday conditions of scarcity, social discrimination, and extreme hardship. This is something I shall always treasure, so I first want to acknowledge their place in my life as well as in this book.

For the initial opportunity to conduct this research, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the late Zhao Tielin, a courageous photographer who was committed to recording the everyday lives of some of China's most deprived people, including those he introduced to me in Dashalar. Zhao's capacity to listen and empathize gave me my first real lessons in oral history. His death in 2009 brought an end to his intention to publish his photographic history of everyday life in Dashalar. *Beijing from Below* is not a substitute for what would have been his, but it does affectionately and gratefully honor his memory. I also owe warm thanks to Zhao's research assistant, Huang Mingfang, who continued to accompany me on my neighborhood visits after Zhao passed away.

The British Academy and the Universities' China Committee in London funded short research trips at the beginning of this project. Funds from the University of Westminster's Department of Modern Languages and Cultures in part funded others. Generous grants from coREACH and the Leverhulme Trust encouraged me to think about Dashalar locals' responses to the heritage reinvention of "old Beijing."

Many people helped me over the years I was working on this project. In the first place, I thank Shen Yuan and Jing Jun for introducing me to Zhao Tielin. Zhou Xun inducted me into the complexities and pleasures of archival research in the early stages of my research and accompanied me on some of my early visits to Dashalar residents. She also helped with some of the transcriptions of my first recordings. Invitations to discuss my ongoing research at seminars

and workshops gave me welcome opportunities to think through questions of methodology and theory: Simon Gunn at the University of Leicester, Maria Jaschok at Oxford University, Laura Bear at the LSE, Paul Basu and Beverley Butler at UCL, Jeffrey Wasserstrom at UC Irvine, Stevan Harrell and Gonçalo Santos at the Max Planck Institute, Janet Carsten at the University of Edinburgh, Susanna Brandstätter at Cologne University, Rebecca Karl at NYU, Gail Hershatter at UC Santa Cruz, and Liu Jieyu at SOAS. Correspondence and conversations with Judith Farquhar, Erik Mueggler, Steve Smith, and Yan Yunxiang shed light on many issues. Zhang Lisheng and Luo Pan provided invaluable help by keeping me up to date with developments in Dashalar since I was last there in 2017. Conversations with friends and colleagues—especially Felicity Edholm, Stephan Feuchtwang, Raj Pandey, Peter Guangpei Ran, Mike Rowlands, and Sanjay Seth—were as stimulating as they were pleasurable. Chris Berry inspired the title of the book. Rebecca Karl and Gail Hershatter read the entire manuscript and pushed me to tighten up various arguments and ideas. Any remaining gaps and imperfections are my own responsibility.

Work completing this book was interrupted in early 2015 by a near-fatal illness, after which it took me some time to get down to unfinished business. I thank my brothers Richard and Mark; my sister-in-law, Sarah Jane; and my ex-partner, John, for traveling to Hong Kong from distant places during the first critical stages of my illness. I also thank my stepson, Hans, for helping to circulate email correspondence to keep friends far and wide informed about my progress. There are also many other dear people whose support gave me the confidence to be able to emerge from my illness to complete this book. I regret that I cannot name you all due to limits on word length, but you know who you are. I thank you all.

While I was in the hospital in Hong Kong, I had the good fortune to be treated by Dr. Yiu Wah Fan, whose skill and humanity enabled me, my family, and close friends who were with me in Hong Kong to pull through the first challenging stages of my illness. More recently, I also owe heartfelt gratitude to SF Studios and to Sebastian Hicks in particular for helping me recover a sense of fitness and well-being as I was finishing this book and for identifying the synergies between my attempts to find a new physical balance in my life and my efforts to complete this project.

I thank Grant Dommen's team at Snappy Snaps near my home in Kentish Town, Camden, for patiently digitizing numerous versions of maps for me before I decided on my final selection for this book. I particularly thank Ken Wissoker, Joshua Tranen, and Jessica Ryan for their efficient and speedy sup-

port in bringing this book to the light of day. It has been a great pleasure to work with them.

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INTRODUCTION

The spectacular speed and extent of the post-Mao transformation of Beijing's landscape is a familiar theme in commentary on China's global "rise." Beijing's architectural icons—the CCTV tower, the Opera House, Galaxy SOHO Beijing, the National Art Museum of China, and more—share a global visual language structuring a vision of the capital as the stunning pinnacle of China's global might. This vision is accompanied by a flourishing nostalgia industry producing huge quantities of soft-focus photographs of picturesque courtyards, authentic "old Beijing" objects, reprints of old maps, and stories of "old Beijing" customs, all lamenting the loss of Beijing's winding lanes and alleys—the *hutong*—to shopping malls and gated compounds catering to the property-owning middle class and the ex-pat elite.

Ignoring activist and media commentators' exposure of urban residents' difficulties in having to relocate from familiar neighborhoods to new periurban apartment blocks, and silencing lawyers who attempt to support urban residents' resistance to demolition of their homes, Beijing's new brand marshals its spaces alongside the teleological rhythms of progress orchestrated by the urban planners and property speculators.[1] In late 2017, a brutal effect of this process was the forcible eviction from the capital of large numbers of migrants—those whose labor has produced Beijing's spectacular transformation.[2]

Behind such oppositional descriptions of Beijing's transformation not much is known about the vast numbers of working-class Beijing inhabitants whose lives have been turned upside down by this process. While research on Beijing and Shanghai in the 1920s and the Republican era has produced rich descriptions of the lives of the urban poor, it is only recently that studies of urban change in communist China have begun to address the lives of the urban underclass.[3] During the Mao era, restrictions on conducting fieldwork and accessing archival materials, combined with an overriding media, academic, and official emphasis on the revolutionary transformations of working-class life under the state "work unit" (*danwei*) system, effectively prevented acknowledgment of the existence of an urban underclass. The dominant wisdom of the time was that the urban working class was entirely absorbed into the work unit system. A notable exception was Janet Weitzner

Salaff's prescient analysis of household-based urban residents' committees, in which she argued that in comparison with the danwei-based organization of urban residents, urban dwellers such as housewives, unemployed youth, and retired workers were organized under the residents' committees in the neighborhoods in which they lived.[4] The consequent limitations on such urban residents' daily interaction with others, in contrast with workers and professionals formally employed in the danwei system, meant that they were not so effectively integrated into small and controllable groups. Without structural social ties that could compete with their bonds of kinship, their basic loyalty was to the family.

Throughout the 1950s, vast construction projects were launched throughout the capital, involving massive demolition and the relocation of local neighborhood populations.[5] Some of these, particularly those associated with the conflict between the conservationists and the Chinese Communist Party's new leadership in the decision to locate the new government in the former heart of the old city, are well known.[6] The "Ten Great Buildings" constructed between 1958 and 1959 were huge projects involving massive investment, large-scale demolition of old buildings, and the relocation of their residents.

Among those most immediately affected by the disruption caused by these projects were the urban poor living along the sides of Tian'anmen Square before it acquired its current shape. Vast numbers of impoverished Beijing residents who had survived the effects of war, hunger, and destitution in the 1930s and 1940s now found themselves at the mercy of the new government in its bid to transform their neighborhoods into monumental celebrations of the victories of the Chinese Communist Party under its leader. The flagship pair of the "Ten Great Buildings" was the massive Great Hall of the People and the Museum of History, facing each other on the east-west axis of Tian'anmen Square.

The contrast between Tian'anmen Square's forgotten foundations of demolition and dislocation and its emerging presence as the center of a global power compelled my attention when I visited Dashalar, a small and dilapidated neighborhood just southwest of Tian'anmen Square, in 2004. I was taken there by Zhao Tielin, a Beijing photographer who since 1997 had been compiling a photographic record of everyday life in this poor neighborhood. I recall the visual shock of seeing Mao's mausoleum in the near distance, just a stone's throw north of Dashalar. Although I did not know it at the time, the disturbing architectural, spatial, and social juxtaposition between the ramshackle poverty of the neighborhood and the monumental austerity and symbolic might of Mao's mausoleum and Tian'anmen Square anticipated the story of

contrasts of power and poverty in the history of "old Beijing" that my research would bear witness to.

This book moves away from the big picture of Beijing's transformation to focus on a specific neighborhood and its disadvantaged residents, the capital's subalterns—the underclass—at the bottom of the social hierarchy, the unemployed and semiemployed outside the formal organizational structures of the work unit system, living hand to mouth on the fringes of the law as street vendors or unlicensed pedicab cyclists. In 2004, most of those who appear here still lived in the crowded courtyards—the *dazayuan*, or "big cluttered courtyards"—where they were brought up or into which they married.[7] Other local residents had already moved to the far outskirts of the city, some taking advantage of the local government's early offer of incentives to those willing to move.[8] Most of the children of those I knew were no longer living in the neighborhood.

The stories narrated in this book share memories of hardship, family fragmentation, struggles and strategies for family survival, sadness, anger and loss, cooperation, loyalty, violence, sickness and death, and occasional pleasure. Together, they span several decades, going back to the 1920s, but their main temporal focus is on the years of the People's Republic (PRC) since the 1950s. Their individual stories converge in common experiences of precarity, scarcity, determination, and resilience, folded into a sense of ethical living. They reveal conditions of deprivation long before the polarizing socioeconomic effects of China's embrace of global capitalism. Indeed, the evidence they give of significant socioeconomic differences among the urban population unsettles the view that there was relatively little urban economic differentiation during the Mao era, and that everyone ate out of the same "iron rice bowl." They imply that the common assumption that socioeconomic differentiation in China is a product of the marketization of the economy, in contrast with the "egalitarianism" of the Mao years, is too simplistic a rendering of a much more complex picture of the 1950s through the 1970s.[9] An oral history of daily life in a disadvantaged neighborhood in Beijing since the early years of the Mao era offers a more nuanced view of history. It does not, as I discuss below, offer an "alternative" and "more truthful" account of Beijing's transformation, but it does give an indication of how history is necessarily multiple.

This book emerged from a desire to understand how nonelite, working-class people in Beijing have accommodated the relentless pace and scale of change in their everyday lives in recent decades. How has the transformation of family and neighborhood, implemented through successive political campaigns, altered their sense of home, belonging, and neighborhood? What memories of childhood and growing up do they hold on to when the physical

and social spaces of those memories have been destroyed? How do they transmit those memories to their children when the material evidence sustaining them has disappeared? And what do these memories tell us about the capital's revolutionary transformation?

As my research progressed, I realized that it was only by getting to know local people over time that I could hope to answer these questions. A standard oral historical approach consisting of recorded interviews and life histories was not going to work. The people I knew were not accustomed to verbally reflecting on their lives, and the social and physical circumstances of their daily lives, living in very crowded conditions with lots of noise and people coming and going, made it impossible to imagine being able to record individuals' reflections without extensive interruptions. The result, in this book, is a series of sketches of local lives, which tell a largely subaltern story of Beijing's recent history. In directing a new lens to the social and cultural history of China's capital over the past half century or so, these sketches invite us to think about that history in hitherto unexplored ways.

Memory, the Subaltern, and History

> *In their rememberings are their truths.*
> *The precise fact or precise date is of small consequence.*
> —STUDS TERKEL, *HARD TIMES*

Memory is a crucial theme in this book, as it is in any oral history. Memories are articulated by their narrators in specific circumstances and for specific purposes. Far from telling the "truth" of the past, the shifts and occlusions of memory suggest a constant and selective reworking of the past to make sense of the present. Moreover, memories and their associated narratives do not stay still; they may point to a single event but describe it through different dates, places, and people, muddling temporal and spatial boundaries, corresponding with and/or contradicting the main time lines of hegemonic chronology. As Gail Hershatter put it, "Every memory is also a creation—not necessarily a whole-cloth invention (although there are also those), but a product of the confluence of past events and present circumstances" and always revised by or refracted through others' accounts of the same past.[10] The memories contained in individuals' oral narratives may also be reproduced as crucial elements of their narrators' sense of identity, of being a full person in the world. This is particularly the case when for their narrators those memories are all that are left of the only world they knew.

The state's program of "demolition and relocation" (*chaiqian*) launched around Dashalar since the early 2000s has been a process of physical, spatial, and social erasure of local lives such as those I describe in this book. Between 1990 and 2004, some half a million households were relocated in Beijing under a radical development strategy premised on a causal link between demolition of old housing and the creation of demand for new commodity housing.[11] In an evident process of gentrification, this strategy initially targeted other wealthier neighborhoods of "old Beijing." But as chaiqian approached Dashalar, younger residents began to move out. By 2014, some 60 to 70 percent of the people living in Dashalar were from outside Beijing. By 2017, even fewer long-term local residents were still there. Within the space of less than ten years, chaiqian, combined with the arrival of "outsiders" (*waidiren*), had completely transformed the social, spatial, and physical feel of the neighborhood. Capturing the memories of those who still lived there throughout this period was thus crucial to be able to record the importance of place in shaping local lives long after the physical traces of that place had disappeared.

Most of the memories contributing to the stories I narrate in this book are those of middle-aged and older people. This was the result in part of my interest in tapping into memories of change in the neighborhood since the early years of the PRC. It was also because few of the offspring of my acquaintances in Dashalar continued to live there. Given the opportunity through work or marriage, most young people I knew of had left the neighborhood, returning only for family celebrations. I was thus unable to discover much about young people's responses to their elders' tales of past hardship. Indeed, my impression—corroborated by their elders' comments—was that few wanted to hear their elders' stories of woe; maybe they'd heard them too often, and/or had other priorities shaped by their own existential needs.

The stories of neighborhood life in this book reveal memories and experiences that are necessarily singular, shaped by the specific circumstances of family life and personal history. But while they are personal accounts, they are simultaneously social, because they intersect with multiple sources, associated with the various groups with which the individual interacts.[12] Moreover, as "a form of knowledge that is appropriated as a truth for that person and transmitted as such," the individual memory transcends the boundaries of personal experience and becomes enmeshed in a collective, though not necessarily public, memory of neighborhood, place, and space.[13] Even so, there is no necessary congruence between memory as "individual truth" and the larger group, let alone between individual memory/truth and its public presence.[14] Indeed, the individual stories I narrate in this book are not publicly accessible.

My acquaintances' individual stories reveal powerful, intersecting memories of hardship and precarity, yet it is only through the kind of attention a book like this gives them that they can become materials of history.

Long ago, in *A Shared Authority*, the social and urban historian Michael Frisch argued that oral history is "a powerful tool for discovering, exploring and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory—how people make sense of the past, how they connect individual experience and its social context and how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them."[15] It is particularly powerful for bringing to light the forgotten, overlooked, ignored, or repressed subjects of history—those at the margins of society and only tenuously associated with the hegemonic institutions of power, those to whom we could loosely refer as the subalterns of history. Without revisiting the debate about the classic question concerning the accessibility of the subaltern to the historian, I nevertheless want to affirm that the subaltern is always constitutive of history, even if in modes of expression—in traces—that are neither apparent in dominant historiographical narratives nor totally accessible to the researcher.[16] Juxtaposing the subaltern oral narrative and history "writ large" gives us the opportunity to analyze the tensions and overlaps between the two, through marking the key moments, events, and temporalities of subaltern experiences distinguishing them from those of the elite. My analysis then is not primarily shaped by a hermeneutical impulse to fill in a gap in the historical record; nor does it follow—indeed, it cannot—the subaltern experience on its own terms, defined by a subaltern subjectivity. However, the terms of subaltern experiences are never entirely immune to the normalizing discursive effects of big history. Attending to the subaltern's disturbance of hegemonic power, as narrated in big history, invites us to reflect on how the system of power is challenged from within by agents who refuse to succumb to its controls. Thus, far from seeing the subaltern as beyond and inaccessible to possibilities of representation by the researcher, I prefer to think of subalternity as a discernible trace *within* the dominant system yet resistant to complete appropriation by it. In Gyan Prakash's words, "Subalternity erupts within the system of dominance, but only as an intimation, as a trace of that which eludes the dominant discourse. It is this partial, incomplete, distorted existence that separates the subaltern from the elite. This means that the subaltern poses counterhegemonic possibilities not as inviolable otherness from the outside but from *within* the functioning of power, forcing contradictions and dislocations in the dominant discourse."[17]

The lives of the subaltern subjects of my study, as anywhere, are powerfully shaped by the shifting forces of politics and the political economy, apparent

in common experiences of social and economic disadvantage, and in shared terms of identification as members of the social "underclass" (*shehui diceng*), disdained and neglected by the elite.[18] In the specific history of twentieth-century China, which they both inherit *and* constitute, their shared experiences range from fatalistic resignation to angry resentment against a state system that they see as trapping them in conditions of everyday precarity. They only occasionally make direct reference to the state—"them up there" (*shangmian*) is the standard term used—and rarely narrate their own histories within the temporal frameworks of official discourse. While the party-state has been and continues to be the hegemonic force shaping their material and social conditions of existence, the separation between their terms and temporalities and those of dominant discourse makes language and temporality an important site where the relationship between the urban poor and the elite is played out. Seen in this light, the stories of my Dashalar narrators offer important insights into the entanglements between subaltern lives and state power.

The Official Archive, Oral Narrative, and Ethnographic Knowledge

This book is the result of a combination of different methods: of archival research, oral history, and the ethnographically based practices of anthropology, which together grant rich insights into more than six decades of everyday life in Dashalar. My ethnographic understanding of the places and people my subaltern narrators describe grounds their stories in the spatial, social, affective, sensory, and ethical dimensions of lives that neither the archive nor words alone can convey. Their stories enrich the archival detail about local neighborhood life—such as occupations and incomes, conditions of health and hygiene, educational levels, food shortages, and housing. In turn, this kind of archival detail sheds helpful light on the oral testimony and its references to space, place, time, event, and feeling. Let me explain what I mean here by discussing how I understand the relationship between my acquaintances' narratives, my long-term familiarity with their neighborhood, and the archive.

At first glance, the chronological and thematic organization of the local Xuanwu District archives (which contribute most of the archival material I draw on in this book) closely corresponds with the main contours and rhythms of China's dominant, official history, with what Hershatter calls "campaign time."[19] A 1990s introductory survey on Chinese archives suggested that they "reflect the changes in social life since 1949."[20] Far from "reflecting" changes in social life, however, the publicly available materials in the Xuanwu District archives reveal the party-state's attempts to order its subjects according to a

grid of legibility designed by the central authorities to underwrite their claims to implement progressive policy.

Nowhere are these claims more apparent than in the selection of and gaps in the archival materials available to the researcher. Made publicly available by the district government in 1980, the gaps clearly correspond with the political sensitivities of the government, which was keen to avoid difficult issues. Hence, there is little evidence about the effects on either the district or the neighborhood of the Three Antis (Sanfan) and Five Antis (Wufan) campaigns of 1951–52 to eradicate corruption, embezzlement, and waste in urban enterprises and bureaucracy.[21] Given the large number of entrepreneurs operating in the neighborhood around the time of Liberation and immediately afterward, one could reasonably anticipate that these campaigns were not inactive in Xuanwu District. Nor are there references to the policies to nationalize private enterprise (*gongsi heying*), which a number of my acquaintances mentioned as a key moment in their memories of the 1950s. While there were not inconsiderable references to the collective canteen experiment in the early stages of the Great Leap Forward (1958–59), and to difficulties kindergartens faced in finding enough food for their children, there was little indication of the overall extent of the shortages affecting local neighborhood families during the famine years. There was a total absence of reference to the destructive violence of the Red Guards in the district during the early Cultural Revolution. Such gaps and absences make these archives no more than a highly fragmented record of local social and economic life.[22]

Alongside such gaps, detailed attention to names, addresses, dates of birth, gender, and ethnicity appears in local social surveys on issues such as housing, substantiating the existence of the human subjects to which the survey data refer. Yet the ideological and disciplinary interests apparent in the selection, organization, and language of the archive generally abstract the subaltern subject as an unwelcome statistic, pejoratively described under the generic term "social problems" (*shehui wenti*). Under this category, fractious workers employed on low wages in small local factories appear as irrational irritants, "antisocial" elements, thorns in the side of the local government and requiring disciplinary measures as a condition of integration into the system.

Nevertheless, these materials contain much detailed and painstakingly written information—handwritten, and replete with crossings-out and ink smudges—about housing conditions, wages, rations, conditions of work, children's nutritional health, clothing, and so on, that adds important data to our understanding of neighborhood life in Dashalar. A tone of despair emerges in a brief letter written in March 1973 by the Street Revolutionary Committee of

Dashalar, pleading with the Xuanwu District Revolutionary Committee for funds to repair a primary school's toilets and build a flushing toilet *inside* the school's courtyard. The same letter also pointed out that the night soil collectors did not regularly clean out the toilets, increasing children's exposure to potentially serious hygiene and health problems.[23] Another document written by the Xuanwu District Committee for the Movement of Patriotic Hygiene (Xuanwu qu aiguo weisheng yundong weiyuanhui) noted the improvements in local people's attention to litter in Dashalar, where past tendencies to dump litter and leave coal anywhere had led to environmental hazards in the form of big heaps of coal and rubbish.[24] The same committee also recorded the numbers of households in Dashalar in which poison had been put down to kill rats, along with the numbers of rats that had been killed.[25] Detailed monthly handwritten tables recorded the numbers of children in each of Xuanwu District's nurseries and kindergartens affected by different kinds of illness or health issues, including lung complaints, colds, and digestive problems.[26] Occasional references to individuals who had a "stubborn attitude," who "did not observe work discipline" and went around saying "bad things," depicted individuals' use of language and behavior in ways that could easily have described some of the people I knew in Dashalar. For example, in early 1961, a former prostitute, age forty-six, whose husband was a drug addict, and who complained about the cotton and grain rations, was recorded as saying, "What the hell can you make with two inches of cloth? I might as well come to work naked . . . or with a cloth over my front and a bare bum." When her leader criticized her for her attitude by reporting her to the head of her small work group, she retorted, "You are a small pig so I suggest if you have anything to report then go to the big pig."[27] I laughed out loud as I read this: it corresponded so closely with the character of one of my Dashalar acquaintances, also a former prostitute, whose story I narrate in chapter 4. This report was one of a series of documents about problems that arose during the "communist wind" (*gongchan feng*) of the Great Leap Forward. It referred to the financial pressures created by 10 percent of the 3,416 workers in the thirteen factories in Dashalar commune, who were "old, infirm and sick, disabled or had onerous domestic responsibilities"—in other words categories of people who could well have resembled the older family members of those I introduce in this book.[28]

All such data, and more, including the number of beds each dazayuan household had and the number of households where three generations had to share the same bed, offer important archival evidence of the messy poverty and lack of hygiene of the neighborhood, particularly at the height of the famine between 1959 and 1961. During these years, there were numerous

documents submitted by the Women's Federation and the Dashalar People's Commune about food shortages in nurseries, malnutrition, and local people's attempts to supplement their meager rations by searching for wild plants in the suburbs. A short September 1959 document from a local branch of the Women's Federation praised a kindergarten in a Dashalar hutong for improving itself by changing its political outlook and "relying on the masses." But the initial summary of the problems the kindergarten had faced before this was devastating. It described an environment of chaos and filth, with untrained nursery personnel dealing with the toddlers as if they were "herding sheep," no one discussing what they were doing, personnel completely uninterested in their work, dirty bowls and dishes all over the place, and no attention to kids' sicknesses.[29]

These examples reveal the official record of the fractures in the state's attempts to administer its subjects within its own standardized categories of legibility. James Scott, in his *Seeing Like a State*, argued that across different ideological persuasions, the modern state's schemes to implement social engineering programs to improve the lives of its peoples—whether in the form of modernist urban planning or Soviet collectivization, to name but two examples—failed, largely because they ignored local, practical knowledge (métis) and regarded their subjects as "far more stupid and incompetent than they really were." However, as Scott argued, the informalities of local practices are essential to maintenance of the center's plans. The plan can thus never work according to its own logic because of the inevitability of divergent local practices. While nearly all of the documents noted above, as official records of the state, contain formulaic repetition of official policy rhetoric, they also give detailed attention to "the particular, situated, and contextual attributes of the local population" that constantly interfere with the center's plans.[30] The archival examples above belong to moments of the past predating the memories of most of my Dashalar friends, but the insights into local life they reveal repeatedly surfaced in locals' conversations with me about the government's long-term neglect of the dilapidated congestion of the neighborhood. In this sense, far from entirely excluding the subaltern residents of Dashalar, this archival evidence illuminates and substantiates their narratives.

My long-term familiarity with Dashalar and its residents offered me a spatial, material, and sensory knowledge of the neighborhood that brought to life the detail of the written archive. Observing how people used the spaces of their dazayuan and nearby lanes, witnessing shouting matches between neighbors and the local patrol officers, or coping with the stench of local public toilets all constituted situated practices that set a real-life scene for understanding

archival and oral references to overcrowded housing, complaints about the poor condition of public services, and local residents' obstinate refusal to bow down to the dictates of the state. Alongside the individual oral narrative, my familiarity with the neighborhood and its people has permitted a kind of intertextual reading of the relationship between the archive and lived experience that reveals the state's attempts—and its limited ability—to absorb the subaltern within its own disciplinary project.[31]

Paul Thompson, whose work established him as one of the pioneers of the use of life stories and oral history in social science research, wrote that "oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects,' makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heart-rending, but truer."[32] According to this line of thinking, and with reference to China's recent history, local experiences narrated by subjects themselves that diverge from official claims may emerge as the source of the "true" history of China's revolution and the collective repository of evidence exposing the lies of the party-state. This may well apply, for example, to the oral evidence about the great famine in China.[33] Yet the relationship between the oral/local and the official/archival is much less clear than such an oppositional argument suggests. To elucidate this relationship demands disentangling various issues, such as fissures in state interests, whose "truth" counts as more truthful, and connections between campaign and neighborhood time.

It is also necessary to point out that the Xuanwu District archives do not reveal a single unified voice conveying the local authority of an all-powerful single-party state. On the contrary, they reveal the struggles of the different branches of the district government—the poorest of Beijing's municipal districts—to find ways to cope with impossible conditions of crowding and scarcity. On the one hand, these struggles could take the form of submission to higher levels of government for assistance and support, as I have noted above. On the other, they could correspond with tense exchanges between the Dashalar neighborhood committee and the Xuanwu District party secretary. It is even possible to read potential conflicts of interest into some of the relevant archival evidence. For example, the repeated appearance within a few weeks of more or less the same letter urging a response from the higher authorities to neighborhood concerns about lack of funding may be read as evidence of various issues, including the authorities' negligence, overwork, and lack of human resources, and silence as a response to not knowing how to deal with the enormous pressures on resources at the time. The archival detail thus reveals tensions and divisions within state interests as well as fluctuating connections between neighborhood and official concerns.

The key events structuring Dashalar locals' recollections may on the surface have had little to do with the main events of campaign time, as recorded in the archives. Their memories were articulated in a language that rarely echoed either the terms or the temporalities of official discourse. Although its main institutions are only a stone's throw away from their neighborhood, the central party-state barely figured in local people's narratives. Leaders' names occasionally featured, but the "state" appeared only in the vague form of a higher authority—"them up there" (*shangmian,* literally "above")—or in the personified form of local government officials and their henchmen—the police and patrol officers.

However, silence about the party-state in local people's narratives should not be romanticized as resistance to party-state authority.[34] On the one hand, it could, of course, be interpreted as the enactment of agency in the form of a diluted kind of everyday subversion, apparent in deliberate exclusion or feigned ignorance of the authorities' policies, indicative of a recalcitrant detachment from the terms of dominance. It could be seen as a kind of "hidden transcript" giving silent voice to resentment against state power.[35] On the other hand, the entanglements between neighborhood lives and state interests over time just as importantly traced shifting contours of complicity with and fatalistic acceptance of officialdom. Most importantly, however, to read into their silence a distance from the state is to ignore the government's constitutive influence over long decades on the lives of those to whom the archival record implicitly refers. The political interests privileged in the archival record have been major factors shaping local residents' conditions of existence ever since 1949. The individual oral narrative and the official archival record therefore need to be read as distinctive, mutually constitutive, and contradictory parts of a multiply layered history that incorporates both, not simply revealing the truth of the one against the other but also shedding light on both and their conflictive interaction over time.

My attempt, then, in this book, is to try to make sense of Dashalar residents' singular memories and experiences of their pasts to trouble a historical narrative from which they have been absented. Their testimonies and their lives give evidence of an understanding of time and event that departs from the progressive vision of history that dominates the historiography of the PRC. My aim is to interrogate what historical knowledge is, to explore subaltern lives as a strategy of "thinking at the limit" of history, as the great postcolonial cultural studies thinker Stuart Hall put it, through engaging with the stories of individuals who do not appear as agents in the archive or in mainstream history, and by asking how narrating their stories contributes

to a fuller, more complex understanding of the past evoking different possibilities and truths.[36]

This oral history of Dashalar does not give evidence of the disastrous effects of a particular campaign or policy, nor does it focus on identifying how local people subverted political authority. Calamity, precarity, suffering, subversion, and resistance all have their part to play in local neighborhood knowledge of China's recent past. Attention to the temporalities structuring local residents' memories of the past, to how their everyday lives and ordinary experiences and understandings, including ethical understandings, have been shaped by the places they inhabit, and to how their social, economic, and cultural activities have at the same time been inseparable from the formation of those spaces offers glimpses of subaltern experiences of change and the fissures between the policies directing change and their implementation at neighborhood level.[37] The temporalities and spatialized memories and accounts of my Dashalar acquaintances invariably diverge from those of dominant historiography, and for their narrators, they certainly do reveal their truth of the past. Yet in the broader terms of historiography, they do not have the prerogative to a single "truthful" ownership of the past. Rather, they complicate our understanding of that past in ways that the institutional and political powers sustaining dominant historiography occlude. They compel a view of history that is multiple.

Methodological Choices

I had to make difficult choices in researching and writing this book. I was aware of the sensitive nature of the project from the outset when I started my research with Zhao Tielin. Across the country, the government's chaiqian strategy had long generated extensive criticism and protest, within China and abroad.[38] Following criticisms of the heavy-handed methods used to implement this policy, official pronouncements began to emerge about the need to reduce the use of coercive methods. Nevertheless, local protests continued, and the individuals involved were routinely harshly treated.

Official accounts of the state's plans to transform Dashalar and its immediate environs were explicit in referring to the difficulties involved, due to the neighborhood's long history of congestion, poverty, and social disadvantage.[39] Demolition of adjacent neighborhoods was accompanied by a high level of state surveillance, and local journalists were routinely prevented from taking photographs.[40] "Interpersonal relationships" (*renji guanxi*) in the crowded alleys of Dashalar were—and remain—complex and fraught, and Zhao cau-

tioned me to adopt a careful approach to what I said, where, and to whom, so as not to encourage local rivalries and tensions. To begin with, the people I met politely treated me as Zhao's collaborator, and if initially curious about why I, a foreigner, was interested in their lives, they soon seemed relatively unconcerned about my status as a foreign researcher. All were aware that they were to feature in Zhao's intended publication about Dashalar, and they welcomed his project to "tell the truth" of their lives.[41] After his death, they saw me as his successor and were encouraging and supportive of my research. One claimed me as her "friend" who was putting her center stage in writing about her life. She also started sharing details with me about her intimate life in ways that were very different to how she had been accustomed to talk in Zhao's presence. Financial expectations followed in some cases, inflecting my research in ways I had not anticipated. I had to confront the realization that I was seen—at least by some—as a wealthy foreigner whose presence offered the opportunity to make life a bit easier. To be so clearly confronted with the imbalance in the relationship between privileged researcher and disadvantaged "informants" made me feel intensely discomforted.[42] However, my growing familiarity with individuals' family and personal circumstances sometimes revealed a generosity of spirit that went far beyond the etiquette of hospitality expected of attitudes toward the foreigner. In some instances, I had to observe activities and listen to conversations about matters that were the source of shame and humiliation to those involved. In trying to find a narrative path through the complex needs, aspirations, and emotions of the people whose stories I tell here, I have tried to be as respectful as I can of what they shared with me, omitting some things when I know that to publicize them would cause unease and a sense of shame, if not anger. The fact that my local friends will not be able to read this book seems poor excuse for including references that I know they would rather exclude.[43]

Ou Ning's documentary film *Meishi jie* offered important insights into the potential difficulties caused for local people who protested against the authorities' plans. The film focused on the early stages of transformation of the neighborhood, when the famous Meishi Street, along the north-south axis, was being widened, involving extensive demolition of houses and shops. The film's record of the forcible demolition of a house, along with many media reports about local people's responses to forcible relocation in neighboring districts, paints a clear picture of the disciplinary methods the state's law enforcement agencies used in order to impose their chaiqian plans.[44] Over the years there have also been various reports about local people's responses to forcible relocation in neighboring districts. On one occasion, a local journalist told me

about the example of a woman in an adjacent district, who refused to leave her dazayuan as required in the local chaiqian plans. After weeks of holding out in what the media increasingly called an example of the *dingzi hu* (nail house), she was eventually left with no alternative when the emergency services all turned up together to evict her: the police to order her out; the fire brigade in case she set fire to her house rather than leave; the ambulance in case she attempted to commit suicide; and the lawyer to keep a record of the proceedings.[45]

The people I knew in Dashalar were not involved in any organized attempt to thwart the state's plans; during the years of my research there, there was little evidence of local interest in overt protest, in contrast with Qin Shao's revelations about Shanghai and media reports about local protest in other areas of Beijing.[46] Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of local chaiqian in Dashalar, and following Zhao Tielin's advice, I had to be cautious about how and with whom I talked about the neighborhood's recent transformation. I decided not to approach the local neighborhood committee offices, since to do so would have called direct attention to my presence and could have potentially jeopardized my relationship with local people, as well as complicate things for them. Some of my friends were quite nervous about how my relationship with them might attract the attention of local authorities. It is possible that nothing untoward would have happened had I attempted to contact the local neighborhood committee. Nevertheless, given my position as a foreign researcher, I decided not to do so, to avoid scrutiny of my work and of my acquaintances. While my decision to limit my research in the local archives to the district level leaves omissions from my account of local neighborhood life, the district archives' inclusion of many neighborhood committee documents was more than adequate for my purposes, given my primary focus on local people's perspectives.

People in Dashalar were routinely cynical about local lawyers' efforts to represent people who wanted to resist government eviction and demolition orders. Their cynicism was eventually borne out by the experience of the only individual I met who decided to go to court to assert his rights over his courtyard home. This was an elderly man, already in his eighties, who as a former opera singer had been sent to Xinjiang in the anti-rightist movement of 1957. On his return to Beijing in the 1990s he had taken up residence in a small courtyard house not too far from Dashalar that had belonged to his ancestral family. One of his neighbors was a lawyer who decided to take on the local government when it issued a demolition order. Needless to say, without leasehold papers proving the elderly man's family's ownership of the property, the court ruling was upheld.

Fig. I.1 Old courtyard on borders of Dashalar due for demolition, 2011.

In carrying out this project I have borrowed mainly from history and anthropology. Much as I approach the archival and personal account as different dimensions of a shared past, so I use the methodological techniques of the oral historian and the anthropologist to enrich each other's findings. Few of the personal narratives I relate here derive from the standard life story interview. Rather, the stories I narrate are compilations drawn from many conversations held in local restaurants and the homes of my acquaintances. Spending time with them in repeated visits over many years gave me the opportunity to observe their comings and goings, witness family quarrels, heartache, and reunions, and to acquire some understanding of their neighborhood relationships. If my understanding of the temporalities—time frames—their memories revealed emerged in large part from their narratives, my understanding of the importance of place in their lives—how their everyday activities and relationships over time gave meaning to that place, and how, in turn, the physical spaces of that place shaped their choices, activities, and relationships—emerged more from observation.

Going through my field notes and listening to the transcripts of my recorded conversations with Dashalar people has yielded rich material, flashes

of wisdom, and a powerful sense of ethics. It has also provided evidence of my own changing relationship with local people. One cliché about long-term ethnographically based research is that it grants the researcher the opportunity to develop increasingly trusting relationships with her research subjects. This by no means happened with everyone during my research in Dashalar. Even toward the end of my research there and in conversations with those I knew best, there were evident silences and gaps, about people, events, and periods about which, for whatever reason, my interlocutors chose not to talk or maybe simply didn't remember. Some topics remained difficult to broach. Few talked about the Cultural Revolution, and only two mentioned the events of May and June 1989, despite their spatial proximity to Tian'anmen Square. I repeatedly reminded myself that here, as elsewhere in China, no public space or place of commemoration of these events and their victims is allowed.[47] Without access to events or places of public catharsis, local families' losses and hardship had long been contained behind the walls of their dazayuan homes, occasionally erupting in angry assertions of their rights to be treated as proper people, or internalized in abject states of depression, as I describe in the chapters that follow.

Structures, Stories, and Themes

It took me a long time to find a satisfactory narrative structure for my material. If from a sociological perspective my acquaintances in Dashalar mostly belonged to the same class category, their narratives revealed considerable differences not only in family circumstance but also in how they negotiated a livable life in conditions of precarity and scarcity. These differences were revealed not only in their material conditions of existence but also in their interests, cultural references, and use of language. I therefore wanted to use as much direct quotation from their narratives as possible, in order to give the reader some of the flavor of these differences. After considering different possibilities, I eventually decided to devote each chapter to the story of a particular family. Building on this, the "solution" I finally came up with was inspired by Susan Mann's wonderful work *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*. While I had long admired this book, its focus on elite households and literary texts did not make it an obvious choice for me to consult in my attempts to find an appropriate structure for my work. But conversations with fellow historians convinced me to look afresh at Mann's revisionist application of the historiographical approach of the great Han historian Sima Qian, who viewed his task as a historian as a way of bringing

to life "people from the past with their feelings, words, and deeds intact."[48] Once I decided to investigate this as a possibility, it became increasingly attractive as a way of incorporating my analysis with my interlocutors' memories in a way that could respect the singularity of the narrative style each of them used. Accordingly, the main chapters of *Beijing from Below* combine descriptive narrative with direct quotations from the transcripts and my field notes. The interludes that follow each of the main chapters offer brief analytical discussions of the main themes that emerge from the previous family story.

The main body of the book, then, consists of stories of local lives, put together on the basis of numerous conversations, some recorded, some not, held over many years. All of them, in different ways, center on Dashalar, as a place and symbol of belonging and marginalization. Chapter 1 traces the history of Dashalar's "reconstruction" over the past half century or so to set the spatial, material, and sensory scene for the memories and experiences I narrate in subsequent chapters. Each subsequent chapter is devoted to a single family, mainly narrated by one or two members. The sequence of the family stories combines attention to chronology, in order to convey a sense of the shifts over time in everyday family life in the neighborhood, with local people's self-positioning in relation to the state and market. I start with the oldest people I knew, who had lived in the neighborhood the longest. Then, given that most of my interlocutors were born between the late 1950s and early 1960s, I follow up with a sequencing based on people's view of their relationship to the state and the market. The last two chapters move from those for whom the state, implicitly or explicitly, signified as a negative and even oppressive entity to those in a position to benefit from it, finishing with the only born and bred local individual I knew who had unequivocally benefited from both the Mao era privileging of the industrial working class, *and* from the marketization of the economy since.

Each main chapter contains many direct quotations, of varying lengths. The result is that some chapters contain much more direct narrative than others. I have many recordings and detailed field notes for all the stories I relate in these chapters. However, my decision in some of them to reproduce sometimes lengthy quotations is based in part on the decipherability of my recordings and the verbatim precision of my notes, but more importantly on my desire to convey a sense of how the people in question talked about their lives, and how their narrative style offered clues about how they related to their worlds and concerns—in other words, to their subjective sense of being a person in specific and changing circumstances.

Again, following Susan Mann, my decisions about structure and narrative in these main chapters are my attempt to bring people to life in their own terms.[49] The discussion in the intervening interludes conveys my summaries of what I see as the main topics, historical, conceptual, and theoretical, that emerge from the chapter in question. Chapter 2 leads to a discussion about an elderly woman's agency in turning the bitterness of her past into a source of moral strength acknowledged by her family and near neighbors, and her son's abject self-recrimination for failing to live up to the moral standards associated with being a supportive son and husband. Some of these themes resurface in chapter 3, but the strategy of survival developed by its main character, Zhao Yong, was to transcend the mundane material issues of everyday life by talking about "big" political and universal issues. The strong and impressive woman character in chapter 4 presents us with a paradox of an independent-minded woman, well able to depend on her own resources to sustain her own and her daughter's livelihood, but who at the same time saw dependence on a man as key to her own and her daughter's material and emotional security. Chapter 5 tells the story of the only migrant family I knew in the neighborhood, and the daunting obstacles to survival faced by those even more disadvantaged than the local residents. Tracing a couple's determination to make enough money to support their children's education, and particularly their son's, this chapter exposes the devastating existential despair for parents when their son does not to live up to their expectations of his filial support. The couple in chapter 6, in considerable contrast, reveals a family history that, despite one individual's physical disability and terrible trauma experienced during the Cultural Revolution, generated access to cultural capital and material conditions of modest comfort, as compared with those of the families in the earlier chapters. Chapter 7 tells the story of the only local person I knew who benefitted both from the status of his parents during the Mao era as stably remunerated industrial workers, and from his own personal talent in exploring his social and political connections to his own entrepreneurial advantage. Each story highlights themes particular to that family's experience and touches on themes shared—in different ways—by others. In each I address the particular modality of agency exemplified by the individuals in question, to build up an argument about agency and recognition that departs from the emancipatory liberal ethos associating individual autonomy with subversion of the dominant order.

In the concluding chapter, I return to develop some of the key conceptual and theoretical issues raised in this introduction, but with reference to the main themes elucidated by the main chapters. I structure these in

a sequence of arguments, starting with questions concerning what Dashalar people's stories reveal about memory, temporality, and place, weaving themes about gender and family into experiences of precarity and oppression, and linking them into what I understand as the modalities of my acquaintances' enactment of agency and their ethical claims for recognition as social subjects. Taken together as subaltern narratives of real, living people whose experiences are integral to Beijing's recent past, they demonstrate that history is multiple and multilayered and cannot be reduced to a single truth or temporality.