

The Greening of Beijing

Roland Boer

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For a month in the earlier part of 2019, I walked well over 100 kilometres – in Beijing.

Until then I had regarded my little corner of the city as an oasis, outside of which is the massive maze of one of the largest cities in the history of human civilization. To be sure, I was accustomed to taking the massive metro system to all corners of the city. But this practice makes no difference to the sense of living in a maze. One speeds along underground, emerging at one's destination in another part of town.

Walking is completely different.

Initially, I simply set out to find a bicycle shop for local supplies for my new Brompton foldup bicycle. Before I knew it, I had checked my Baidu map (much better than the woeful Google maps) to locate another bicycle shop. By the time I found it and returned home, I had walked in a south-westerly loop of about 10 kilometres.

I was hooked in a way that I had not expected. The next day I walked north to a church and bookshop, ambling back via another route. Soon enough I was off again, walking north again to find the old Summer Palace grounds, known in these parts as Yuanmingyuan. Having been inside before and knowing the ruins (a result of one of the European colonial rampages in the nineteenth century), I preferred to walk there and find another way home.

Now it was time for a serious hike. To the west of where I live begin the mountains that encircle Beijing. A favourite is Xiangshan, Fragrant Mountain, which I have climbed in the past. But now I decided I would walk to Xiangshan, a distance of some 14 kilometres. On the way I found the Beijing Green Belt, a carefully designed strip that runs along the western reaches of town. Soon enough I was striding along, absorbing the trees and the first blossoms of spring. Few were enjoying them at the time, for people were flocking to Xiangshan and its fabled spring blossoms. By the time I reached the village itself, at the foot of the mountain and outside the city, I was done, so I took the new metro back home.

More walks followed, to the massive Yuyuantan Park, south of where I live and full of people seeking spring flowers. But I was most thrilled by Xizhuyuan Park, or Black Bamboo Park. It had been a chance discovery on another walk, a green space that set a whole new standard for such spaces.

Originally it had been a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) minor palace area, but it had been closed for many a long year. What had they been doing in the meantime? It turns out that the Beijing City government had been working on a new plan for the greening of the city. Black Bamboo Park would be one of the model green spaces. It had opened only recently.

Inside I was amazed. The old buildings had been restored, but more importantly trees and birds and plants were everywhere. As I walked along the lake, a ranger with much excitement pointed to the water. There was a turtle – an amphibian that is most sensitive to environmental conditions since it moves between water, land and air – enjoying the clean water of the lake.

After my first visit to this particular park, I was able to map out an ideal walk. Initially I would head west along Wanquanzhuang Road, deep in the outer regions of Beijing where few foreigners tread and where locals do their thing. Then I would pick up the western Green Belt, along the Nanchang River, which was yet another new development. The river itself had been cleaned up and its environs were full of trees, blossoms and recreational spaces. It led me to the Black Bamboo Park, where I once again relished the breakthroughs in green planning and implementation. For the final leg, I walked along some four kilometres of the major Zhongguancun Road, but I did so by walking through one green space after another.

By now I had walked in all directions of the compass, east, north, west and south. I had hiked into the centre of the city, to its outskirts and the mountains, to historic sites of colonial humiliation, and along the ever greater number of green spaces.

Above all, I was most struck by the greening of Beijing. Not so long ago Beijing was a leitmotiv of the worst of city living. Row upon row of high-rise building, with an air quality that had become proverbial. Indeed, some foreigners and Chinese people from other parts assume that Beijing is still like that.

Not any more: the city government has been fully aware that residents would no longer put up with such conditions, so it had set about for many a long year to clean up the city. Some of the strictest environmental laws in the world are enforced ever more strongly, but this is only a beginning. Whole new standards have been set for a greening of the city. The air quality would be tackled through many a policy that has seen it gradually improve year upon year. Green spaces would abound, with designer planning and implementation, as only the Chinese know how. And water quality would be at a level where sensitive animals would feel at home, whether turtles or the fabled ducks – not the type of Beijing Duck that you eat at a restaurant.

How is all this possible, especially in a city that had become a parable for environmental degradation?

Long-term planning is the answer. A stable government that is able to implement five-year plans. This is of course a communist local government that is committed to a green Beijing. Forget the 'Greens' of bourgeois democracies, with their liberal policies as a political football. Only a communist government committed to 'ecological civilisation' can achieve what I experienced in Beijing.

