

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.