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# A History of Beijing

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## Introduction

Beijing, the capital of the People's Republic of China, is a city whose past stands as a microcosm of Chinese history itself: ancient, complex, turbulent, and transformative. Across more than three millennia, Beijing has grown from a small settlement on the northern fringes of the Chinese world to a sprawling metropolis at the heart of the nation's political, cultural, and international life. This book seeks to trace the story of Beijing—from the region's earliest human inhabitants to the city's latest incarnation as a global capital—unpacking how its unique geography, strategic position, and pivotal historical moments of triumph and tragedy have shaped the identity of one of the world's great cities.

The earliest evidence of settlement in the area around present-day Beijing—the famous "Peking Man" fossils at Zhoukoudian—reminds us that this landscape has witnessed the march of humanity for hundreds of thousands of years. With the emergence of the first cities, notably Ji and later Jicheng, the seeds of Beijing's enduring significance were planted. Over subsequent centuries, Beijing's fortunes would rise and fall with the tides of wars, dynastic struggles, invasions, and imperial ambitions. Each wave of conquerors and builders—Khitan, Jurchen, Mongol, Ming, Manchu—left layers of memory, culture, and architecture, weaving a historical tapestry unique to the city.

As a major node on the frontier between settled China and the steppe world of the north, Beijing has long been at the nexus of cultural exchange and military challenge. Its streets and palaces have witnessed the ebb and flow of empires, from the grandeur of the Yuan and Ming dynasties to the tribulations of foreign wars and the decline of the late Qing. The arrival of modernity in the twentieth century brought new tensions and transformations, as Beijing struggled to adapt to the challenges of republicanism, warlord rule, foreign occupation, and ultimately revolution.

The city's centrality was sealed with the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a moment that reshaped not only Beijing's political life but also its urban fabric and social composition. The last seventy years have seen Beijing expand rapidly—its cityscape transformed by waves of redevelopment, population growth, cultural campaigns, and technological innovation. Yet, amid modern skyscrapers and expressways, reminders of Beijing's ancient legacies persist: the Forbidden City's golden roofs, shadowed alleyways of the hutongs, the soaring temples and gates that have guarded the city for centuries.

To tell the history of Beijing is to explore not only the capital of China but also the evolution of Chinese civilization, identity, and power. This book attempts to bring

together the latest scholarship, archaeology, and accounts—both Chinese and foreign—to illuminate how Beijing’s story is inseparable from that of China itself. With each chapter, we delve into a different era or aspect of the city’s development, pausing to consider not just grand events and imperial directives, but also the daily lives of its people and the city’s changing landscape.

Ultimately, Beijing’s history is a story of resilience and reinvention, of destruction and renewal, of memory and ambition. Whether as the capital of mighty empires, the prize of invaders, the revolutionary heart of a new republic, or the global center it has become today, Beijing has endured and thrived. The following chapters invite you to journey across that extraordinary span of time and change, to understand how the city’s past lives on in its present, and how, in the history of Beijing, we glimpse the enduring spirit of China itself.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Land Before Beijing: Prehistoric Roots and Early Peoples

Long before towering skyscrapers pierced the northern Chinese sky and before imperial palaces commanded attention from the heart of a grand capital, the land that would eventually cradle the city of Beijing was a wilder, more ancient place. It was a landscape shaped by deep geological time, a region where early humans roamed, adapted, and left faint but indelible traces of their existence. The story of Beijing doesn't begin with city walls or dynastic decrees; it starts in the distant mists of prehistory, hundreds of thousands of years ago.

Deep in the limestone hills southwest of the modern urban sprawl lies Zhoukoudian, a place that offers a breathtaking glimpse into this unimaginably distant past. It was here, in a network of caves, that archaeologists unearthed one of the most significant finds in human history: the fossilized remains of *Homo erectus*, affectionately known to the world as "Peking Man." These ancient hominins lived in this region between roughly 770,000 and 200,000 years ago, seeking shelter in the caves, using fire, and crafting rudimentary stone tools.

Imagine the scene: small bands of early humans navigating a landscape vastly different from today, perhaps a mix of grasslands and forests, facing challenges from predators and the elements. The discovery of Peking Man at Zhoukoudian provides compelling evidence of a long and continuous human presence in the area, predating the concept of settled life or organized communities by vast epochs. It reminds us that the ground beneath Beijing has been trodden by human feet for an immense span of time, a deep history often overshadowed by the grandeur of later empires.

While Peking Man represents a key chapter in the broader story of human evolution in East Asia, they were not city builders. Their existence speaks to a time when humanity lived in intimate, raw connection with the natural world, finding sustenance and shelter directly from the land. The caves at Zhoukoudian served as transient homes, not permanent cities, yet they are the earliest known "addresses" in the region's human story, hinting at the potential of this land to support life.

As the millennia rolled on, the climate shifted, landscapes changed, and *Homo sapiens* eventually arrived and thrived. Evidence of more sophisticated human activity begins to appear in the archaeological record as we move closer to historical times. The Neolithic period, beginning around 10,000 years ago in China, saw a revolutionary shift in human lifestyle – the advent of agriculture.

In the outlying districts and fertile river valleys around what is now Beijing, archaeological sites reveal settlements dating back some 7,000 years. These were not yet cities of brick and stone, but collections of dwellings, often semi-subterranean, clustered together by people who had begun to cultivate crops and domesticate animals. They made pottery, wove fabrics, and worked jade, demonstrating a growing mastery over their environment and a more settled way of life.

These early Neolithic villagers were laying the groundwork, both literally and figuratively, for future urban development. Their decision to settle in one place, to invest labor in cultivating the land, and to form larger, more complex social groups were essential steps on the path towards civilization and, eventually, the emergence of cities. The fertile plains at the edge of the northern mountains offered a suitable environment for these early farming communities to take root.

While these prehistoric and early historic inhabitants were part of the broader tapestry of ancient Chinese cultures, their settlements in the Beijing area remained regional rather than central. The major centers of power and culture in the earliest dynasties – the Xia, Shang, and early Zhou – were located further south, in the Yellow River valley. The Beijing region was, for a long time, on the periphery of the main stage of Chinese civilization.

However, its strategic location held inherent future importance. Situated near the boundary between the fertile agricultural lands to the south and the vast steppes to the north, the region was a natural crossroads. It lay along potential routes for trade and migration, but also for conflict and invasion from the nomadic peoples who inhabited the northern grasslands. This geographic reality would profoundly shape the destiny of any settlement established here.

The first verifiable step towards the establishment of a formal, walled city in the Beijing area occurred during the Western Zhou Dynasty (11th century BC – 771 BC). The Zhou conquered the Shang dynasty and established a decentralized feudal system, granting lands and authority to loyal relatives and allies. One such grant led to the creation of the State of Ji.

Archaeological evidence confirms the existence of a walled city known simply as Ji, which served as the capital of this eponymous state. This early city was located in the southwestern part of present-day urban Beijing, an area that would later form the historical core of subsequent capitals. Establishing a walled city was a significant undertaking, requiring organized labor, resources, and a degree of political stability.

The city of Ji in the Western Zhou period would have been relatively modest by later imperial standards, but it represented a concentrated center of political and economic activity in the region. It was a local hub, a place where the ruling elite of the State of Ji

resided, collected resources from the surrounding agricultural lands, and maintained a degree of control over their territory.

Its strategic position, even at this early stage, would have been crucial. As a Zhou state on the northern frontier, Ji would have played a role in maintaining Zhou authority and interacting with neighboring, non-Zhou peoples. It was a stepping stone, a small but significant urban node in the developing network of states across the Zhou realm.

The State of Ji existed for several centuries, its history intertwined with the changing fortunes of the Western Zhou. However, as the Western Zhou weakened and eventually collapsed under pressure, the political landscape of China fragmented, leading into a tumultuous era known as the Spring and Autumn period (771-476 BC) and then the Warring States period (476-221 BC). This was a time of intense rivalry and conflict between numerous competing states.

During this period of fragmentation and consolidation, a neighboring state, the State of Yan, grew in power. Yan was another state established during the Western Zhou, also located in the northern part of the Zhou realm. Eventually, the ambitious State of Yan conquered the smaller State of Ji.

Upon conquering Ji, the State of Yan recognized the strategic value of the site. Rather than abandoning it, the rulers of Yan chose to make the former capital of Ji their own. They expanded and rebuilt the walled city, renaming it Jicheng, literally "City of Ji," acknowledging its historical identity.

Jicheng now became the capital of the powerful State of Yan. This decision profoundly elevated the city's importance from being merely a regional center to the administrative and military heart of one of the major powers in northern China. For centuries, Jicheng would serve as the seat of the Yan rulers.

The name "Jicheng" persisted for a long time, well into the imperial era. However, because it was the capital of the State of Yan, the city also acquired an alternative name that would echo through history: Yanjing, meaning the "Yan Capital." This name remains in use today, often carrying a poetic or historical resonance, particularly in cultural contexts.

Under the rule of the State of Yan, Jicheng/Yanjing developed further. While details from this distant past are scarce, archaeological finds suggest a growing and increasingly sophisticated urban center. The city served as the focal point for Yan's military power, a base from which it projected its influence and defended its borders, particularly against the nomadic groups to the north.

During the Warring States period (476-221 BC), Yan grew to become one of the seven

major states vying for dominance over China. Its location gave it a unique character, balancing its identity as a core Chinese state with its position on the northern frontier, constantly interacting with different cultures and facing distinct military challenges.

The capital, Jicheng/Yanjing, reflected this dual nature. It was built according to Chinese urban planning principles, but its strategic importance was inextricably linked to the frontier dynamics. It was a center of government and culture, but also a military stronghold, a vital node in the defense of the north.

Life within the walls of Jicheng during the Warring States period would have been a dynamic blend of administration, commerce, and military readiness. Officials managed the affairs of the state, merchants facilitated trade, and soldiers trained to defend Yan's borders. The city was a nexus of activity, drawing resources and people from across the state's territory.

The walls of Jicheng would have stood as a physical manifestation of the state's power and a symbol of protection for its inhabitants. They delineated the urban space from the surrounding countryside and served as a crucial defensive structure in an age of constant warfare between competing states.

While we don't have detailed accounts of daily life from this era, we can infer that the city was a microcosm of the State of Yan itself – resilient, strategically minded, and deeply connected to its northern geography. The people of Jicheng would have been keenly aware of their position on the frontier, a place where the settled world met the nomadic world.

The State of Yan, with Jicheng as its capital, played a significant role in the complex political and military struggles of the Warring States period. It engaged in alliances and conflicts with its powerful neighbors, such as the states of Qin, Zhao, and Qi, striving to maintain its independence and expand its influence.

The city's location also made it a key point for understanding the interactions between the Chinese states and the various non-Chinese peoples beyond their northern borders. Jicheng was a place where different cultures met, traded, and sometimes clashed, contributing to a unique regional identity.

The existence and growth of Jicheng/Yanjing during the Western Zhou and Warring States periods were foundational to the future history of Beijing. It established the site as a location suitable for a major urban center, endowed it with historical significance, and highlighted its enduring strategic importance on the northern frontier.

Even though Jicheng was not yet the capital of a unified China, its role as the capital of the powerful State of Yan solidified its position as a major city in the northern part of the country. It was a regional powerhouse, a center of administration, culture, and

military strength in an era of intense competition.

The legacy of this early period, the State of Ji and its successor the State of Yan with its capital Jicheng (Yanjing), provided the historical and geographical context for the city's future development. It marked the transformation of the region from a landscape of scattered prehistoric and Neolithic settlements into a place anchored by a formal, strategic urban center.

This early history, stretching from the deep past of Peking Man through the establishment of the State of Ji and the rise of the State of Yan with Jicheng as its capital, set the stage. It laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of a city that would not only survive the unification of China but would, much later, rise to become its enduring and powerful capital. The story of Beijing, in essence, begins with these ancient roots and the strategic significance recognized by the rulers of Ji and Yan.

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