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'The new New York is Beijing'

Posted: Wednesday, July 01, 2009 11:34 AM

Filed Under: [Beijing, China](#)

By Adrienne Mong, NBC News Producer

BEIJING – By all rights, Beijing should be suffering the post-Olympic hangover anticipated by skeptics and cynics.

China's exports-driven economy has taken a big hit from the global recession. Millions of college graduates are still unemployed. Newly built shiny commercial buildings stand unoccupied. And in recent weeks the Chinese government has [stepped up its ongoing efforts to control the flow of information on the Internet](#).

If anything, however, the Chinese capital is enjoying a renaissance in the arts and culture – normally what would be the first casualty in a climate of recession and censorship. And it's attracting a growing number of people from around the world who want to be part of the scene.



[VIDEO: Beijing is one of the world's most 'vibrant places'](#)

"Beijing has that combination of optimism, possibility, opportunity, as well as being an interesting city in its own right," said Aric Chen, a freelance writer, curator and design consultant who recently moved here from New York City.

The 34-year-old is juggling several international projects – a book on Brazil, an exhibition in Israel, and a biennale in South Korea – any of which could be launched from another base.

But in Beijing, he found that "there is still a hunger and openness for new things, so there's room for people like me." Within China, he helps to oversee projects like the "100% Design Shanghai," a major industry fair that he hopes will help to elevate the discourse on design in the country and nurture homegrown designers and artists.

A hunger for expertise

"Even with the economic downturn, there's a need for new things," said Melissa Wong, an entrepreneur originally from Vancouver. "In my industry they really want change here, but sometimes they don't know how to achieve that change."

The 36-year-old came to Beijing two years ago to try her hand in the food and beverage industry after a successful run in Hong Kong. Last year she opened a high-end Italian restaurant, "Sadler," which has since won a clutch of dining awards for its food, service and ambience.

The booming food and wine industry also brought Crystal Edgar to Beijing. "It's the perfect time to be here in China, to bring the level of service up, the level of knowledge up, in this industry," said Edgar, 27, who wins the prize for best business title. She's the "Cellar Master" at the [Aman luxury resort in Beijing's Summer Palace](#) and supervises their vast wine collection.

"There's just more opportunity, not just to make a name for yourself, but to make a difference," said Edgar, another former New Yorker who enjoys teaching her staff about the fine wines they collect and serve to guests. "I can do so much more here in regards to being creative or training some other people."

The flip side to this desire for new things, however, is the erosion of old traditions.

"[Chinese] cooking is a big cultural identity that is on the brink of being lost," said Lillian Chou, a former writer for Gourmet magazine who moved to Beijing from New Jersey four months ago to study the language and the food.

Chou, with more than 20 years' experience, expressed a singular passion for food "that's died out because of modernization," as she puts it. "I'm always meeting elderly people who say, this dish used to be made like this," she said. "But no one has documented it although part of that is because for so many years that wasn't essential. What was important was basic survival."

Moreover, her field lacks the same kind of openness as others.

"There's a real paranoia," she said. "Everything's clandestine - its secret recipes, secret techniques." During a recent encounter with a chef steeped in the tradition of Chinese imperial cooking, Chou was told, "You will fail. No one will talk to you."

At the same time, Chou still believes that "it's an exciting time, because the field's totally open. [Chinese food history] needs a teacher," she said. "And I need a teacher, too, to study it!"



Adrienne Mong/NBC News

"Chinese Portraits" by Anais Martane at the Pekin Fine Arts gallery in Beijing.

The new "New York"

The barriers to entry are also much lower than in other major international cities.

"Paris is great, but it's more of a place to spend money than to make money," said Liyu Yeo, an art consultant who was living in the French capital when he decided to decamp to Beijing earlier this year. Unlike the Chinese capital, "Paris is a very established city, which means there's a pecking order. So for younger people who want to create something or make something out of their career, it's not always the easiest thing to do."

Instead, Beijing's long history is combined with a rapidly evolving infrastructure and architecture that produces a shifting yet confident energy.

"What people don't realize is that this is an extremely textured city with historical layers that takes time to get to know," said Chen. "Beijing has a strong sense of itself. There's a pride in being in Beijing. But at the same time, it's a very outward looking city in the same sense that China is increasingly outward looking. Like China, Beijing has no intention of keeping to itself."

And the capital – with its manifold universities, think tanks, live music venues, museums, galleries, and cultural institutes – hums with a creative vigor that belies its laidback demeanor.

Jerome Sans, Art Director at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art (UCCA) in Beijing's 798 art district, said he had the privilege of living in New York and London in the late 70s and early 80s and sees similarities. "For me the new New York is Beijing."

Open only two years, UCCA has become a driving force in developing a greater appreciation here for contemporary Chinese and international artists. Sans recently oversaw the opening of three different shows at the center – including a stunning installation of 34 flags painted by Yang Pei-Ming and a sweeping collection of photographic portraits of French actress Isabelle Huppert – which was initiated by the Museum of Modern Art/PS 1 in New York.

"Beijing is the single most important place for an emerging arts center," noted Marc Hungerbuhler. In August, as Curatorial Director, he will help to launch the first Beijing 798 Biennale 2009, an independently-organized exhibition of works by more than 70 artists from China and around the world.

That's perhaps surprising for a bureaucratic capital of a communist nation, but, as Hungerbuhler said, "Art is always flourishing in situations where things are changing dramatically or where ideology is very strong."



Adrienne Mong/NBC News

Flag portraits of Chinese 34 babies by artist
Yan Pei-Ming at the UCCA.

'Bi-hemispherical is the new bicoastal'

Without a doubt one of Beijing's biggest draws is the pace of its transformation.

It's still nowhere near the dizzying speed of pre-Olympic build-up.

"We're settling back to a level of normalcy," said Meg Maggio, Director of Pekin Fine Arts, which just opened three different exhibitions in one weekend.

But life still moves at a fast clip.

"It can be definitely a new kind of melting pot if you want, something between future and past," said Hungerbuhler. "Whenever I get back to New York, I'm in middle earth, and when I'm in Europe I feel like I'm in a museum. And here it feels like the right pulse of time."

And perhaps confirming Beijing's emerging role as a global city, commuting between Beijing and North America, Europe or Australia has become the norm for many.

"I like to say the new bi-hemispherical is the new bicoastal," said Chen.

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Comments

Beijing may indeed be dynamic, but it glaringly lacks the one thing that made New York--and indeed, the United States--what they have been and still are: freedom. Things may seem perfectly fine in today's China--unless, of course, you care about Tibet, or Darfur, or want to practice Falun Gong, and surf the Internet uncensored, etc., etc., etc. I'll still take Manhattan any day!

RR, Washington, DC (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 1:29 PM)

There's still quite a lot to be excited about right here in New York. Oh, and they let us vote and say what we like, too. That tends to make things much more pleasant. Please don't compare our life here to that of the people in Beijing, just because they now have ziplights and some expensive foreign-designed architecture. Did I forget to say we can breathe the air without getting emphysema?

jh, nyc (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 1:30 PM)

WHY,? Beijing? United States of America, There shall we look. Time has changed but looking abroad is not the answer. We as a nation of dominance need at crucial times. What happened to our most inner feelings of being a strong nation with the most growth in all aspects, especially INFRASTRUCTURE! We need to get back to BASICS. 13-15% easily not our current 2-3% What is wrong with this picture? Has our New Generation lost our ethics completely? REMEMBER, New York is new york! Beijing is Beijing When we look for change look within!, or Move change your cloths, darken your hair, and learn your new language! Sincerely, Disgruntled!

Fred Applegate (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 1:34 PM)

I was in Beijing last year in the weeks leading up to the Olympics. While it is true that the city is a vibrant, and bustling metropolis (reminds me of Chicago, actually), there are so many issues still to address. There were walls and flowers installed to hide ghettos, there were beggars in the streets with acid burns, missing limbs, malnourished, and hollow eyed. Soldiers were everywhere, in uniform and plainclothes. In Tianamen Square, we were warned of spies for the government, and the very real possibility of detainment for those who spoke of what truly occurred there. For those lucky enough to be on their way up, it is a wonderful city, with business, cultural, and historical aspects. However, let us not forget all the problems that are hiding just below the shiny surface.

Aly, Gainesville, FL (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 1:50 PM)

I think an argument could be made for Shanghai, or even Hong Kong, but not for Beijing.

Russell, Fairfax, VA (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 2:07 PM)

If she thinks it is so great, let her make one piece of art that questions the Chinese government. THEN we will see how great Beijing truly is. I doubt it would get through the censors.

Even this stupid process of writing this message had to deal with a censor. What the hell have we become?

[Albert Einstein](#) (Sent Wednesday, July 01, 2009 2:07 PM)