Issue Date: 19-12-2015 Zone: UKPB Desk: Christmas Output on: 11-12-2015----17:45 Page: CP1 Revision: 0

Park life

BEIJING

A day in the life of one of the capital's few green spaces

FROM the top of a stone pagoda Li Zhaolin is shouting, almost yodelling: "voice exercises", he calls them, to help him breathe. Several people appear to be wrestling with trees, gripping trunks and pushing against them. One man stands with his arm over a branch and rubs his left armpit against it while patting his head rhythmically with his right hand. A few elderly folk walk backwards, a practice that is believed to help back pain and relieve knee stress. Alone or in groups, many practice tai chi, a Chinese martial art, some with fans or swords.

Life in Beijing's Ritan Park begins even before day breaks. At 3.30am, when the gates are still shut, Wang Jiangyou is already chasing leaves with a long twig broom. For the past 17 years he has lived within the grounds, sharing a three-room dormitory with nine other park-keepers. His first shift is nearly finished by the time the gates open at 5.30. Hawkers are already selling fruit outside to the early birds, most elderly, who come to exercise or pace the park's circumference. Many are alone. One carries a radio; a gravelly voice retelling a long Chinese folk story emanates from his pocket. Five old men walk, chatting quietly, one turning wooden meditation balls over and over in his hand.

Aficionados know Ritan ("sun altar") Park as one of Beijing's oldest. The altar was built in 1530 in the Ming dynasty for the emperor to make sacrifices to the sun. It was once part of Beijing's formal layout, lying to the east of the imperial palace of the Forbidden City and balanced to the west by the moon altar (*yuetan*). Altars to the earth and heaven (*ditan* and *tiantan*) formed a north-south axis. These, too, are now parks.

When the sun altar was built, Beijing was probably the world's most populous city, with around 700,000 people. Now it ranks eighth, with 21m, and skyscrapers loom from all sides over the small patch of green, less than half a kilometre square. Private space in China is in such short supply that much activity is pushed into the open. Ritan Park is populated from dawn to dark with locals for whom it is playground, parlour, gym, tea-house and concert hall. Cypress trees, weeping willows and pines line winding paths that lead to painted wooden pagodas sitting over ornamental ponds and rockeries. Yet the park's history is one of constant reinvention, too; of a modern country catching at its past.

Greens for reds

For most of the 500 years since the altar at Ritan was built, it was closed to all except the emperor. Commoners lived in narrow *hutongs*, alleys with almost no open space. Inspired by the 19th-century park movement in Europe, China's first public park opened in 1907 when a former imperial garden was turned into a zoo, the "Park of Ten Thousand Animals" (*wanshengyuan*). Ritan became a

Issue Date: 19-12-2015 Zone: UKPB Desk: Christmas Output on: 11-12-2015----17:45 Page: CP2 Revision: 0

public park only in 1956, part of a socialist vision of opening up formerly proscribed land to the masses.

The authorities demolished walls, repaved the sacrificial area for dancing and later removed it altogether. They planted trees to "green the motherland", only promptly to replace many with nearly 10,000 "productive" fruit trees. In 1965 lawns were laid to "let no bare earth face the sky". Just months later the Cultural Revolution exploded, and the anti-communist "revisionist's poisonous grass" was dug up. At one point the park became a military barracks.

Private space is in such short supply in Beijing that much activity is pushed into the open

That turbulent history is all but invisible now. In the 1980s Ritan Park and others were reopened, with a conscious effort to incorporate apparently traditional Chinese designs, such as miniature stylised landscapes. A mural near the southern tip, "Sacrificing to the Sun", depicts an invented history: female dancers dominate it, though women were banned from imperial altars; the emperor wears clothes from the wrong dynasty. As China's economy started to gear up, so Ritan became more commercial: it charged an entrance fee and, for a while, hosted attractions such as a roller-skating rink and even a children's spaceship ride. But these closed as it became a place to preserve a supposedly traditional culture—albeit one that was newly invented.

In the 1950s belching factories populated this part of Beijing. These have all moved or shut now, replaced with foreign embassies, a shopping mall known for exhibiting avant-garde art alongside high fashion, and some of the world's priciest flats. But many former factory workers remain in state-provided housing, and it is they who cram life into the park. Over the course of any day almost every corner has multiple uses. Only the recently rebuilt altar, now enclosed by red walls, remains off-limits, still closed to the masses after nearly half a millennium.

The mass line

By 7.30am the north end of the park is covered with poems. A dozen people watch as a man dips a giant calligraphy brush into a bucket of water before writing in the dust. A 61-year-old accountant, he comes here every morning before work. Yesterday he copied six-character poems; today's selection includes Ming stanzas.

At this time of day most exercise is individual or confined to a dozen people at most. But for ten minutes from 8am, the park's north-east corner rings with the voice of 82-year-old Guo Baomu, a charismatic former chauffeur with a baseball cap and microphone, who counts as around 70 people pat their thighs 30 times, then their knees, shoulders, backs and heads. The session closes with a shouted "Be happy!" and Mr Guo goes off to breakfast.

Like much park activity, Mr Guo's is based on the principles of traditional Chinese medicine, which is enjoying a resurgence. Chinese medicine sees disease as a product of troubled interaction between different parts of the body. *Qi*—life energy or life force—must flow freely through it, hence the patting, which is believed to unblock the body's "meridians", or passageways. Other people do handstands to "make the blood flow backwards"; some use public back-massage machines to help circulation. Towards the centre of the park a man is teaching "natural yoga". He says he can diagnose people's maladies simply by touching their heads.

Urban parks are among the few places in China where people can engage in such activity. They are a haven where older and retired Chinese can socialise or exercise, and a rare zone of flat land for wheelchairs in cities with bumpy kerbs and giant roads. There are more gyms now, but they are pricey. Most Beijingers live in tiny apartments without gardens, often three generations together. But the provision of green space has failed to keep pace with massive urban expansion—which is not yet over. Half the country's population—around 700 million people—already live in urban areas; by 2030 about a billion will. Individuals now have control of their spare time, as they did not under Mao, yet many have little to do. Most women retire at 50 and men at 55 or 60, often with decades of good health remaining (life expectancy in Beijing is 82). Already one in six Chinese is over 60; by 2025 nearly one in four will be.

Public parks everywhere have their private aspects, providing a chance to escape prying eyes in occasional secluded spots. In China public displays of affection between adults are still rare: couples occasionally hold hands but never kiss in public. So, unlike park-life in other countries, there are no signs of secret sexual liaisons in Ritan, nor of drug-takers or drinkers.

But behaviour that many other societies consider private is public here: amateur singing, dancing, massage, even sleeping. By 9.15am most of the calligraphy at the northern end of Ritan has dried up and 12 dancers are strutting between the flower beds to "Xiao Pingguo" (Little Apple), a popular catchy tune. The leader (and radio owner), Ms Luo, wears a flowery sweatshirt adorned with "Love and Peace" in English. She learned the steps on the internet; now her crew is practising to smash a Guinness world record for 30,000 people dancing to the same song at once.

Some parts of the park are almost silent; others are crowded with competing groups. Towards the centre, members of a folk-dance troupe swirl broad red ribbons to "The Good Children of China", a schmaltzy song about nationalistic heroes, under fierce instruction from their permed, bespectacled leader. The plink-plonk nearly drowns out a nearby melody: two people learning the *hulusi*, a recorder-like instrument with a gourd at the top, originally from south-west China. Their instructor, a graceful man in a blue zip-up top, is teaching them "Marriage Vows", a melody from a 1950s film score, the music hooked on the tree with a nail and written in Chinese musical notation, where numbers rather than a five-line stave are used to represent the notes.

Little of this music or dancing is remotely sexual, or even sensual. Most dancers repeat a fixed set of moves without personal interpretation. Ritan's ballroom dancers, however, are a little different. Each couple does its own thing: some waltz gently back and forth while others twirl and dip; some are male-female pairs and others two women. Occasionally a man practises a step off to the side, his hands out wide for an imaginary partner. A nearby tree is adorned with coats and bags, to stop them touching the dirty ground.

Li Ruifen, a 53-year-old woman dressed in a green US army shirt, has been dancing here for the past three months with Min Baozhen, a man with boot-polish-black hair. As they waltz his palm is square on her upper back while she holds only the side of her hand to his; her face is impassive. Both are divorced; Ms Li is retired and lives with her son and his family. They dance for a few hours every morning and then again in the evening.

There is no clear division between performance and practice. ▸▸

One man sings all forms of opera and songs ("I admire Pavarotti"), fearing neighbours would complain at home. Twice a week a group of 25 men and women wheel a keyboard into a large pavilion to sing "I Love You, China" and other patriotic anthems. They erect a red banner, "Sing for better health and happiness".

She once was a true love of mine

Li Shuling, who is 65, sings every day with a friend, mostly traditional Chinese songs (plus a version of "Scarborough Fair", an English ballad popularised in China by a Peking opera star). She remembers the anarchy of the Beijing streets during the Cultural Revolution, when she avoided being sent to the countryside because she was caring for her sick mother. She was very upset when Zhou Enlai (communist China's first prime minister) died in 1976, she says, but "not so much" when Mao Zedong died the same year. Life is calm now, she says. She owns her own flat; while she sings, her husband cooks lunch at home.

In every country tribes converge on parks at particular times of day. In the West, early-morning dog-walkers are succeeded by lonely buggy-pushing mothers, then lunchtime joggers. After school come running, shouting children, then lounging and smoking teenagers. A Chinese park's rhythms are different. Dogs are banned. Most runners are gone by 10am (the activity is new enough to China that some jog in work boots and jeans). Teenagers, burdened with homework, are rarely seen during the week.

But Ritan Park has its own tribes, nonetheless. One is the bird-lovers. Every day Mu Xionglu, a former factory worker, comes to "walk the birds and walk myself", meeting friends in a quiet corner, each with two thrushes shrouded by blue cloths. They unveil small wooden cages and hang them on trees, "to let the birds sing together and feel as if they're in nature again". An hour is enough for the birds to let it all out, he says.

A large number of the children in a Chinese park are with grandparents, who most often shoulder the child care. Dai Wei, a shining 16-month-old with stars on his trousers and shoes that squeak at each step, is here with his grandparents, 75-year-old rice farmers from Henan province, who moved to Beijing a year ago to look after him. They spend far more time with him than they did with their own children when they were his age, but avoid fellow park-dwellers, who "look down on us for being farmers".

Even after school finishes for the day, most children in the park are under three, the age at which they start kindergarten. The absence of older children is not owing to Beijing's notoriously polluted air—even on bad days smog rarely stops play and few wear masks—but because Chinese young people spend far less time outside than those in Europe and North America. Many sleep at lunchtime until they are five or six, and study at night. The share of boys who are obese is twice as high as the share of men who are, and nearly 80% of 16- to 18-year-olds are short-sighted, a common consequence of getting too little daylight.

Childhood frolics are simply not a priority. Playgrounds are rare, and usually charge a fee. In Ritan, bumper cars, a mini-train and other rides are crammed into a small enclosure. Even the slides cost 10 yuan ($1.50) an hour. The competing, off-key tunes of the different activities recall a horror film rather than a temple to joy; often the attendants (many of them smoking) outnumber the children.

China's government does promote activity for the elderly. "Adult playgrounds"—public, open-air exercise equipment for grown-ups—are ubiquitous and include frictionless cross-trainers, benches for sit-ups and leg exercisers. Such machines first appeared in the 1990s and millions now populate roadsides, parks and villages. In Ritan, their creak and clank is audible all day.

As the number of Chinese people engaged in manual labour dwindles, cardiovascular exercise is becoming more common. Badminton starts at 6.45am. Several men lift weights they made themselves from a wardrobe rail and two concrete blocks. Every afternoon a group of hotel workers kick a *jianzi*, a cross between a shuttlecock and hacky sack, which they try to keep in the air.

There are lessons in "tai chi softball", where martial-arts moves are made with a racket in hand, its soft latex head enveloping a small ball. Each activity is part-game, part-show: in China, even card-playing is a spectator sport. Most popular in Ritan is *Dou Dizhu* (Fight the Landlord), a form of Chinese poker. Groups bring small cushions to sit on and several use a bathmat as a card table. Though gambling is banned in China, most are playing for money.

Beijing groovin'

As the light fades, many elderly go home to eat and the average age of park-dwellers falls. At 6.15pm three women are dancing to a soppy tune by the trees, when a man plants a far larger stereo by the next flower bed and without even looking in their direction starts performing ballet-like moves to a thumping beat. The women turn up their sound but within minutes their rival has attracted more followers, and they harrumph off. Though the pace and volume of the park have stepped up, ballroom dancers sway on under the 1,000-year-old cypress tree. A few late arrivals swirl in skirts but most foxtrot in trousers and trainers. Three young women in thick jumpers groove to the ballroom tempo individually, as though at a school disco. The evening crowd is more varied: people stop by on their way home from work; there are more out-of-towners.

Ms Li and Mr Min, the dance partners from earlier on, return after eating steamed dumplings. She is hesitant about dating him, she says, partly because he is not from Beijing but also because he worked for a private business so he has no state pension or health insurance, which "could make things difficult". But he has a good, moral character. Her son likes him.

As the clock reaches 9pm, the park lights flash off and a patrol of guards in red armbands wielding torches urge the masses out. Most obey immediately. The tree is stripped bare of the bags hanging from its branches and people funnel towards the park's three exits. The dance partners gather their things and leave without saying goodbye to their fellow waltzers. They walk slowly together towards the north gate. Tomorrow they will be back. ■

Broom with a view