



The Forbidden City in Snow.

# Scenes from the Memory of a Native Beijinger

By staff reporter CHEN JUN

**L**IAO Zengbao, 72, was born in a *hutong* in Xijiekou, Beijing's Xicheng District. He has been witness to many of the city's vicissitudes. For him, these transitions are not historical tableaux, but rather memories of his everyday life. An amateur painter, Liao has used his brush to recreate scenes from his life over the past few decades.

Under the theme Beijing's Hutong Memory, dozens of Liao Zengbao's works went on exhibition recently in Meiliyuan Community square in Haidian District. Picturing such aspects of Beijing life as *hutongs*, temple fairs, and the Meridian Gate of the Forbidden City, each painting reflects Beijing's historical features at a certain time.

## Depictions of People's Lives

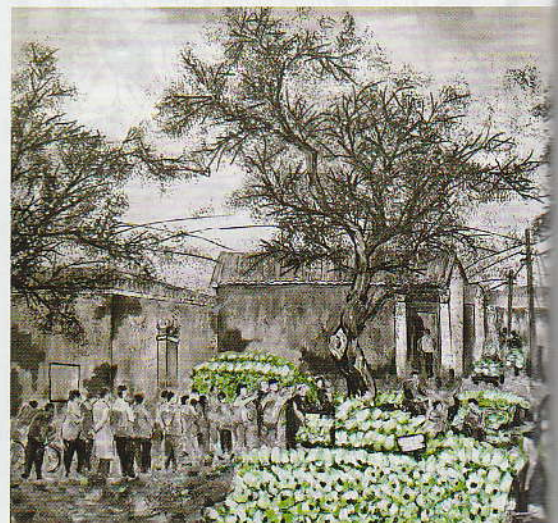
Mrs. Liu, 80, admired Liao's painting of *Jiangyangfang Hutong*. Portraying bygone scenes of the *hutong* (today's Xijiekou East Street), it brought back many memories. Liu often walked past the *hutong* on her way to a nearby barber's shop. Once, after suffering a bone fracture, she cut through the *hutong* to Jishuitan Hospital. "Many of the shops that used to be there are long gone," Liu said. The exhibition also includes paintings of Beijing's temple fairs, of the Rusticated Youth Campaign, when young people were sent to work in rural and mountainous areas, outdoor cinemas in the 1960s and 70s, and storing cabbages for the winter. All are aspects of bygone daily life in Beijing's *hutongs*.

Among Liao's works are a series of 18 oil paintings entitled *Changes to Shibe Hutong*. Originally located in Liubukou, one third of it housed the quadrangle dwellings of magnates and merchants. The remainder was occupied by warrens of workers' family homes.

These paintings reenact people's daily life after the founding of the

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The Shibe Hutong.



People's Republic of China. Urban development brought a mushrooming of new communities which completely changed *hutong* life. "When I was at high school, we would go to harvest cabbages in the bitter cold winter weather. Even the ground was frozen. But winter in Beijing is much warmer now," Liao said.

### Teahouse Enlightenment

Having been born and raised in Beijing, Liao has witnessed the city's extraordinary development. He has particularly profound memories of the capital's *hutongs*. When he retired, Liao painted to record his experiences, and what he saw and heard.

Liao says that the influence of famous Chinese novelist and dramatist Lao She is the main reason why he uses *hutong* as a medium to reflect the city's changes. "I greatly admire Lao She. His drama *Teahouse* is still popular and will undoubtedly endure. A standard *hutong* seems to me the perfect showcase for Beijing's twists and turns," Liao said.


### Learn More about Beijing's History

One particularly striking painting in Liao's exhibition is the long scroll portraying a typical Beijing temple fair. With Huguo Temple Fair as the backdrop, Liao has recreated this vivid, colorful 1960s scene, featuring folk acrobatic performances, handicrafts, and traditional snacks, in all its vibrant vitality.

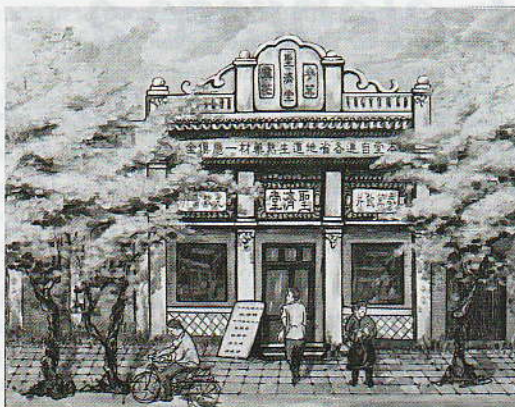
Liao says that snacks are the main attraction at temple fairs these days, but go beyond traditional Beijing specialties to include Western favorites like pizza. "I think the entire essence of temple fairs has changed," Liao said. "I wish more people could know what a real temple fair was like."

Liao intends to recreate these aspects of Beijing life for those who missed out on them. For instance, there used to be a huge vat of water in each household, replenished by the many water wagons rolling through Beijing. This feature of everyday city life is not dissimilar from that of today, with large bottles of water delivered by tricycle. In earlier times, it was customary to keep a small crucian carp in the vat. Its health was an indicator of the water's quality.

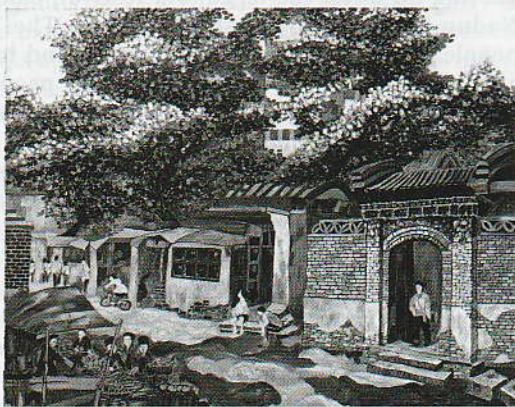
"I hope through this exhibition people could see the contrast between Beijing's past and present," Liao said.

*Hutongs* are a unique view of Beijing and carriers of its history and culture. Liao's exhibition also includes supplementary information about *hutongs*, including photos of how they look now, if indeed they remain, to amplify its visual impact. "If the exhibition acquaints people with Beijing's history and how life progressed from liberation to the present day, then I ask for no more," Liao said. 

Liao sees *hutongs* as a unique view of Beijing and carriers of its history and culture.



An Old Herbal Medicine Shop in Beijing.



The Memory of a Hutong.

