

# EYES WIDE SHUT

by George Ding

**O**n my latest visa run, I found myself in the center of Kyoto, wandering the grounds of the old imperial palace. The day before I had visited Kiyomizu-dera, a temple set into the eastern hills and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

As I toured the gardens where countless emperors once held court, I thought how great it must be to live in a city where the past was still present, a city so storied that centuries-old buildings were scattered about like convenience stores.

I wondered, *What would it be like to live in a city like that?*

It wasn't until I got back to the hostel that I realized I already knew the answer.

In Beijing, I work in a narrow hutong just east of the Drum Tower. Sometimes, on the way home, a co-worker drops me off at the Lama Temple so I can take the subway. When I used to live and work in Haidian, I would often ride the bus past the Old Summer Palace.

The more I thought about it, the crazier it seemed, like my life was a historical fanfic. I've ice skated in Houhai, the northern end of the Grand Canal; I've taken cabs past Ming Dynasty walls; I've gotten drunk repeatedly just north of the Temple of the Sun.

It turns out that China is home to 45 UNESCO World Heritage Sites, more than any country except Italy. Beijing alone has six: the Forbidden City, Summer Palace, Temple of Heaven, Ming Tombs, Peking Man Site at Zhoukoudian and the Great Wall.

Only a handful of cities in the world can claim that kind of cultural pedigree.

As a Beijinger, I am obligated to note that Shanghai has no World Heritage Sites and can only gaze longingly at the Classical Gardens of Suzhou in neighboring Jiangsu province to feel culturally good about itself.

I had been to all six places but it wasn't until I checked Wikipedia that I realized they were World Heritage Sites.

I had gone to the Ming Tombs on a company retreat; I had taken a day trip out to Zhoukoudian on a lark; I had frequently *gotten out* of going to the Great Wall when friends were in town. But now, with the knowledge that some bureaucratic organization had given these places its imprimatur, I absurdly cherished those memories more.

I suddenly felt ashamed of the insouciance with which I've treated not only Beijing but every city where I've lived. Because the place was familiar to me, somehow it meant less. I mean, if I lived here, how great could it be?

But taking a step back (and being out of the country) allowed me to remember what I already knew: Beijing is one of the most culturally significant cities in the world.

Now I would never argue for turning a blind eye to all of Beijing's problems – nor would I suggest that UNESCO World Heritage Sites are an objective measure of anything other than Shanghai's cultural bankruptcy – but Beijing is dangerously

close to being remembered for one thing and one thing only: its pollution. And I understand why – it's terrible, it's frustrating, it's dangerous, but most of all, it's easy to see.

What's harder to see is the culture we take for granted, the hundreds of historical monuments that dot the city. Sometimes it's because those monuments are shrouded in a blanket of particulate matter but more often it's because we've become numb to them. Like convenience stores, they have become too familiar.

Other times we're ignorant of the history we're walking past. Every area has its own story, every hutong its own tale. It's humbling to be reminded that almost every place in Beijing used to be something that used to be something else.

So the next time you feel down about the city and still have some time left on your visa, take a step back – try to see Beijing as a tourist would. Discover a new place. Revisit an old place. Try to see the city as you once did. After all, that's what led you here in the first place.

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