

Historical Landscape Preservation along Beijing Central Axis: A Case Study of Yongdingmen Gate Reconstruction

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Abstract

This paper examines the reconstruction of Yongdingmen Gate as an aspect of restoring the historical landscape of the Beijing Central Axis, a 7.8-kilometer-long urban axis that has shaped Beijing's cityscape for over 700 years. The reconstruction of Yongdingmen Gate along the Central Axis, demolished in the 1950s, is a key initiative to restore the continuity of the Central Axis and preserve its historical integrity. This study explores the justification behind the reconstruction, focusing on how it aims to revive the historical landscape and ensure the Central Axis's coherence as a cultural and spatial entity. The research addresses the challenges and debates surrounding the reconstruction, including its alignment with UNESCO World Heritage criteria and its role in conveying China's historical and cultural narratives. The paper concludes with reflections on the implications of this reconstruction for urban planning and heritage conservation and suggests future research directions to enhance understanding and practices in these fields.

Keywords: Beijing Central Axis, Yongdingmen Gate reconstruction, historical landscape restoration, world cultural heritage

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The traditional central axis of Beijing runs through the old city, stretching 7.8 kilometers from Yongdingmen Gate in the south to the Bell and Drum Towers in the north (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Location of Beijing, China

Source: Author's Modification Based on <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>

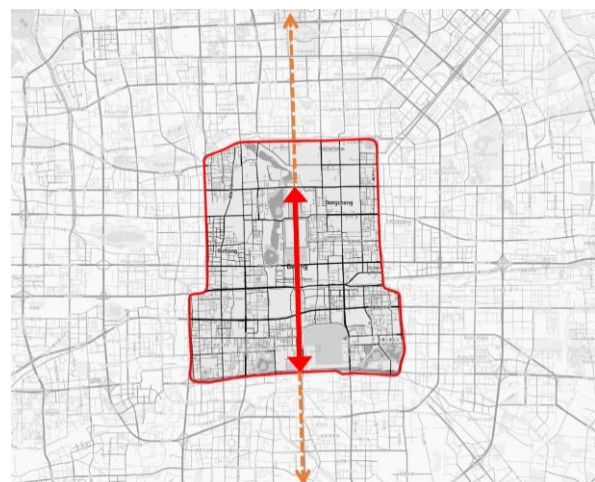


Figure 2. Location of Central Axis in Beijing

Source: Author's Modification Based on <https://www.openstreetmap.org/>

Established in the 13th century and completed in the 16th century, forming a “凸” shape (Figure 2) for more than 700 years of development and refinement, it is the best-preserved example of a traditional Chinese capital's central axis which features various historical structures, including royal palaces, ceremonial buildings, administrative facilities, and ancient roads remains.

There are already three world heritages exist along the central axis – These include the Imperial Palaces of the Ming and Qing Dynasties in Beijing and Shenyang, registered in 1987) and (Temple of Heaven: an Imperial Sacrificial Altar in Beijing, Registered in 1998), as well as the Grand Canal (the Old City of Beijing Section of Tonghui River: the Chengqing Upper Watergate (the Wanning Bridge), 2014). This fragmented distribution focuses on the preservation of individual structures. However, when the various historical sites along the central axis are combined, they not only display the architecture but also tell the story of the transmission of Chinese civilization, the formation of the diverse and unified Chinese nation, and the traditional aesthetic concept of “centrality” in Chinese culture. Based on this concept, the China National Cultural Heritage Administration decided to nominate the “Central Axis of Beijing” as a World Cultural Heritage site. In the “Beijing City Master Plan (2016-2035)” approved in 2017, it is clearly mentioned that “promote the bidding for the Beijing central axis and other projects, combined the work to strengthen the comprehensive improvement of individual areas, preserve the characteristics of the historical landscape of the central axis, guarantee it to be a representative area that embodies the cultural self-confidence of the national capital”.

Beijing City Master Plan emphasises that the Central Axis guides the overall spatial layout of Beijing's old city through its spatial order. The restoration of the traditional historical landscape along the Central Axis contributes to enhancing its spatial order (Wang, 2022). However, some nodal buildings along the Central Axis have been demolished during the city's development, disrupting the integrity and continuity of the axis's landscape. Consequently, the Chinese government decided to reconstruct Yongdingmen Gate based on the archaeological excavations of its foundation relics.

1.2 Previous Research

Existing domestic research on Yongdingmen Gate can be categorized into four primary domains. The first domain focuses on the historical development and architectural forms of the Yongdingmen Gate. Wang Fei (2018) specifically examined the symbolic significance of Yongdingmen Gate's architecture throughout history, while An Yifei (2021) applied LiDAR technology to conduct a protective architectural study of the gate's tower. Additionally, Liu Wenfeng (2021) provided a comprehensive review of the historical background of Yongdingmen Gate, compiling significant details about its past. The second domain explores the necessity of reconstructing Yongdingmen Gate from the perspective of urban landscape. In their respective works, Ai Jun (2023) and Wang ShuJiao (2018) both emphasized the role of Yongdingmen Gate in shaping the urban landscape, highlighting its importance in historical and spatial contexts. The third domain focuses on archaeological findings supporting the reconstruction of the gate. Zhao Xing (2024) conducted a detailed study on the authenticity of the stone-paved road remains located to the north of Yongdingmen Gate, providing key evidence for reconstruction efforts. Similarly, the Beijing Archaeological Research Institute (also known as the Beijing Institute of Cultural Heritage) published an archaeological report in 2023 that summarized the findings related to Yongdingmen's historical remains. The final domain involves policy analysis and its implications for the Central Axis. Wang Ming Zhen (2003) conducted a thorough review of preservation policies, analyzing their relevance to Yongdingmen Gate and its place within the larger framework of the Central Axis. These four domains collectively contribute to the understanding and ongoing discussions surrounding the significance, preservation, and potential reconstruction of Yongdingmen Gate.

However, while these four domains offer a comprehensive understanding within the domestic context, there is still a need to expand the discussion by comparing the case of Yongdingmen Gate with global trends in cultural heritage management, Murillo Camacho (2023) underscores the growing focus on maintaining architectural integrity while ensuring that heritage remains connected to its cultural origins and its position within the changing urban environment. Winter (2007) explores how a modern conservation approach has developed in Asia by combining specialized knowledge with traditional, localized methods. Guha-Thakurta (2004) using the example of India's historical reconstruction, warns against the “fabrication, invention, and imagination” of heritage driven by ideological motives. Winter also points out that Western conservation experts often lack awareness of the socio-cultural complexities faced in Asia. For example, the stupas at the archaeological site of Pagan in Myanmar have been subject to extensive restoration since the early 1990s, a process that has been widely criticized by preservationists and art historians in the West (Stadtner, 2005). In Cambodia, the Archaeological Survey of India has provoked significant controversy within the global conservation community due to its extensive reconstruction efforts on the partially damaged Ta Prohm temple at Angkor. This large-scale restoration has raised concerns and

sparked debates regarding its preservation methods (Winter, 2007). These cases mentioned above highlight critical issues such as balancing architectural integrity with cultural authenticity, integrating modern techniques with traditional practices, and navigating socio-cultural complexities. These global experiences provide important insights into the challenges and opportunities that the Yongdingmen Gate project embodies.

1.3 Research Aims and Objectives

This study aims to analyze why the Chinese government insists on the necessity of reconstructing Yongdingmen Gate to restore the historical landscape, despite widespread skepticism about such “reconstruction” both domestically and internationally. It also explores the reasons and justifications for the partial restoration of Yongdingmen Gate. Finally, the study seeks to explain the new significance and value generated by the reconstruction of Yongdingmen Gate.

2. Research Method

2.1 Literature Study

In the literature review, both historical and architectural background of Yongdingmen Gate will be clarified in case to figure out the reason why the government would like to partly rebuild the Yongdingmen Gate after demolishing it as well as the rehabilitation activity impact on the city’s historic landscape. Additionally, both international and domestic controversies over the building’s reconstruction are reviewed through literature review.

2.2 Site Survey

The writer visited Yongdingmen Gate during the master’s degree program (2022-2024) aiming to figure out some potential threats that may hinder when approved as a World Cultural Heritage site as well as the connection between Yongdingmen Gate and its surrounding environment. Additionally, the author trying to explain the visual finding about the Chinese nation’s adherence to and application of the concept of “中” during the site survey.

3. Historical Background of Yongdingmen Gate

Since the Ming Dynasty, Beijing’s city gates developed a distinctive urban layout over two centuries of modifications. The Qing Dynasty maintained this configuration, preserving the orientation and shape of the walls and gates (Xie, 2005). These structures divided the city into inner and outer sections with distinct functions. The inner city, containing nine gates and the imperial city, housed political authorities (Wang, 2018). The outer city, with seven gates, created a total of sixteen gates, as illustrated in figure 3 and described in the accompanying table.

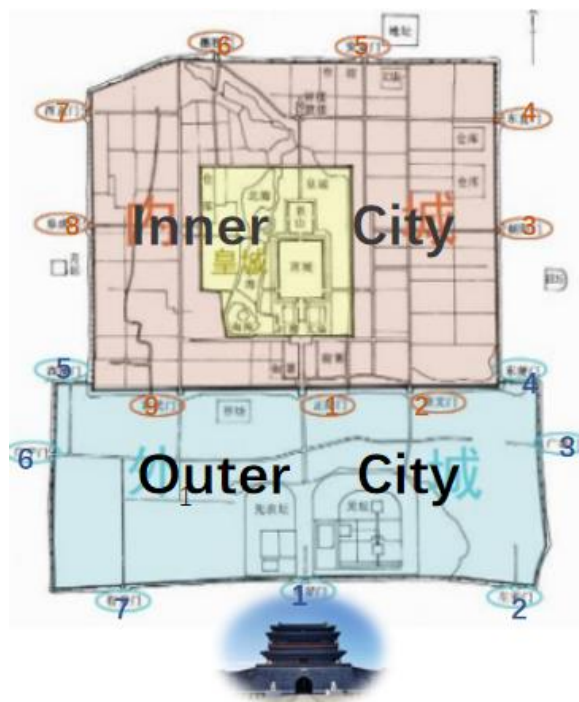


Figure 1. Distribution of Beijing City Gates

Source: Wang, F. (2018).

Table 1. Distribution and functions of Beijing City Gates

Location	Direction	No	Name	Existing Condition	Function
Inner City	South	1	Zhengyang	Castle and Archery tower remain	For Emperor’s exclusive use
		2	Chongwen	Demolished	Transport of wine
		3	Xuanwu	Demolished	Transport of corpses
	East	4	Dongzhi	Demolished	Transport building materials
		5	Chaoyang	Demolished	Transporting grain
	West	6	Xizhi	Demolished	Transporting water
		7	Fucheng	Demolished	Transporting coal
	North	8	Desheng	Demolished	For army
		9	Anding	Demolished	For Emperor’s blessing
Outer City	South	1	Yongding	Reconstruction of the Gatehouse only	Travelling in the Southern Suburbs
		2	Youan	Demolished	Security check.
		3	Zuoan	Demolished	Transporting liquor.
	East	4	Guangan	Demolished	Entering the capital.
	West	5	Guangqu	Demolished	For relegation of officials
	North	6	Dongbian	Demolished	Transport
		7	Xibian	Demolished	Transport

Note. Data from Zhang Xiande, “Beijing City Walls and Gates in the Ming and Qing Dynasties”.

Yongdingmen Gate, situated at the southern end among these gates, was initially constructed in 1553, though only the Gatehouse was completed due to financial constraints. The Wengcheng was added in 1564. In 1766, the Gatehouse was reconstructed, an arrow tower was added, and the structure’s scale was expanded. As shown in figure 4 and figure 5.



Figure 2. Yongdingmen Gatehouse+Platform

Source: Wang, F. (2018).



Figure 3. Hypothetical plan (Wengcheng)

Source: Wang, F. (2018).

Between 1950 and 1951, the Wengcheng was demolished, followed by the demolition of both the Arrow Tower and the Gatehouse in 1957 to accommodate public traffic. As shown in figure 6 and figure 7.



Figure 4. Yongdingmen Gate Wengcheng Dismantled in 1950

Source: http://yunhe.china.com.cn/202010/23/content_41334798



Figure 5. Yongdingmen Gate East and West Walls Train Passage in 1953

Source: http://yunhe.china.com.cn/202010/23/content_41334798

In 1999, a proposal to rebuild the Yongdingmen Gate in case to improve the cultural relics of the Beijing central axis triggered a discussion on the necessity of reconstruction Yongdingmen Gate. However, the Gatehouse rebuilt program had been launched in 2005. The whole process of reconstruction began with the excavation of the foundation remains of Yongdingmen Gate in 2003. According to the Report on the Archaeological Excavation, the site on the south side was damaged due to being partially occupied by the river. After discussion, it was finally decided to reroute the moat so that the original site of the Yongdingmen Gatehouse could be partially rebuilt. Although only the Gatehouse had been rebuilt due to insufficient space. It still be seen as: “a historical landmark, exhibiting the traditional forms and architectural techniques applied in constructing city gate towers in ancient China, for marking the site of the original Gate which strictly follows the Principles for the Conservation of Cultural Heritage Sites in China”.(Beijing Central Axis Official Site).

4. Spatial Meaning of Yongdingmen Gate

Yongdingmen Gate is the largest of the outer city gates in Beijing, It fulfils multiple functions, including protecting the city from invasion, transportation and carrying out essential administrative tasks shown in figure 8.

In Yongdingmen Gate’s defence system, the Gatehouse was the weakest point, linking internal and external traffic. To strengthen it, a wall called “Wengcheng” and a surrounding ditch were built. And additional archery towers to raise the overall specifications of the gate during Qing dynasty. Thus the Gatehouse, “Wengcheng” and the surrounding ditch and archery tower made the defence barrier of the city. Despite the advent of artillery reducing its defensive role, Yongdingmen Gate has greatly influenced the city’s development. The Gatehouse, with heavy foot traffic and bustling trade, served to conduct security checks and collect taxes from merchants entering the capital. It was also the passage through which the emperor travelled to the outer city for sacrifices. (Figure 9)



Figure 6. Social Functions of Yongdingmen Gate

Source: http://yunhe.china.com.cn/202010/23/content_4133479



Figure 7. The Kangxi Emperor’s Southern Inspection Tour, Scroll One: Leaving Yongdingmen Yang Jin, 1691-1693

At the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, there is no need for military function and the area around Yongdingmen Gate lacked proper land use planning thus facing the problem that led to chaotic development that couldn’t meet the demands of urban transportation after industrial reforms. Therefore, over the past 50 years of urban planning, Yongdingmen Gate has undergone a process of complete demolition followed by partial reconstruction specifically the Gatehouse, of its landscape significance and political symbolism. With the partial reconstruction of the Gatehouse, it has made Yongdingmen Gate once again become a crucial part of Beijing’s central axis, reinforcing the integrity and continuity of the axis.

Its presence significantly contributes to enhancing the continuity and logical flow of the axis running from north to south. By reinforcing the spatial alignment and visual harmony, it strengthens the overall cohesion and unity of the central axis, The reconstruction of Yongdingmen Gate has also influenced the urban space in the surrounding area. As part of the central axis, it has brought more historical ambience to the region and has become a key reference point for urban renewal in the vicinity. Moreover, the reconstruction has further highlighted the spatial significance of this area, making it not only a site of historical preservation but also an exploration of the integration of historical and modern urban spaces. Some scholars argue that the surrounding space of Yongdingmen Gate has a single function and does not meet the recreational and leisure needs of the residents (Chen, 2014). However, through this process, Yongdingmen Gate, along with other parts of the central axis, forms an organic whole, reflecting the respect and continuity of historical spaces in Beijing’s urban planning.

5. Policies and Controversies over Yongdingmen Gate Rebuilt

In 1999, 42 years after Yongdingmen Gate was completely demolished, a proposal to reconstruct the Yongdingmen Gate in case to improve the cultural relics of the Beijing central axis triggered a discussion on the necessity of rebuilding the gate. Some people thought that the reconstructed Yongdingmen Gate was not the original cultural relics and violated the Venice Charter of the Reconstruction of cultural relics, the evidence is introduced to China around 1980, the Western concept of authenticity, translated as “Yuan Zhen” in Chinese heritage conservation, combines “Yuan” (original appearance) and “Zhen” (real), signifying “original features plus subsequent evolution” (Xu, 2001). But architects represented by Luo Zhewen, an expert in the restoration of Chinese ancient buildings, argued that the Venice Charter was based on the regulations for stone buildings in Western countries and did not apply to Asian wooden buildings as a reason of different philosophical ideologies between East and West.

In that context, an industry consensus so-called “Consensus on the Theory and Practice of Protection and Maintenance of Cultural Relics and Ancient Buildings with Chinese Characteristics - Qufu Declaration”, was published in 2005 and signed by a number of experts in the field of conservation and restoration of ancient buildings in China. The document states: “Restoration of ancient buildings, as long as it follows the original shape, level, materials, structure, and craftsmanship, should still be considered to have scientific, artistic, and historical value.” Although this principle was originally intended to apply specifically to the restoration of buildings, the content of this 2005 document indeed had a positive impact on the attitude towards reconstruction within the field of architectural preservation (Cui, 2017). In practice, the Chinese Cultural Heritage Administration places greater emphasis on the “historical evidence” and “necessity” of the proposals when approving “reconstruction” projects. Ultimately, to enhance the continuity of the central axis, the decision was made to reconstruct Yongdingmen at its original location based on the sufficiently comprehensive records and drawings preserved during the demolition.

6. Conclusion

The Central Axis of Beijing originates from the Yuan Dynasty, during which the city was known as “Dayidu” in Mongolian and “Khanbaliq” in Turkic, both meaning “the residence of the ruler.” At that time, the Central Axis spanned 3.7 kilometers. Through further developments during the Ming and Qing dynasties, its length extended to 7.8 kilometers.

Throughout the 700-year history of Beijing as a capital city, various ethnic groups have established their regimes here, continuously facilitating the exchange and integration of Chinese civilization. However, the planning of national capitals across all ethnic groups is profoundly influenced by a fundamental principle: the country should be established at the center of the world, with the royal palace located at the center of the country. Consequently, the Forbidden City, which was constructed along Beijing’s Central Axis, houses a series of royal palaces surrounded and safeguarded by both the inner and outer cities to underscore the emperor’s authority. With the palace serving as the nucleus of national decision-making, this axis organizes the city’s spatial structure, aligning major palaces, temples, and government buildings to facilitate governance and reinforce the societal hierarchy. Within the framework of this planning ideology, the Beijing Central Axis could be served as the best representation of the unity of Chinese civilization, embodied in its formation passed down through generations.

Positioned as a symbolic axis witnessing the continuity of Chinese civilization, the Central Axis is a conceptual construct that cannot be directly observed. To convey its significance to the world—representing the continuity and unity of Chinese civilization through cultural characteristics—a process of restoring the historical landscape along this axis is imperative. Thus, the reconstruction of representative architecture such as Yongdingmen Gate becomes essential in this endeavor. In analyzing the case of Yongdingmen Gate reconstruction, the primary objective is to restore the historical landscape, vividly conveying history to aid people’s understanding and experience of past cultures. This consideration takes precedence over assessing the architectural value of Yongdingmen Gate itself or ensuring strict adherence to internationally recognized reconstruction standards. Despite the stringent standards and controversies surrounding reconstruction both internationally and domestically, the Chinese government allocates substantial resources and manpower to such projects.

Fortunately, after the reconstruction project, the Chinese government openly acknowledges its status as a reconstructed structure and emphasizes the archaeological investigations conducted on its foundations. This approach aligns with international standards regarding material authenticity requirements, ensuring its role as a historical representation. Such an approach not only preserves the integrity of the Central Axis landscape but also adheres to the standards outlined in the World Heritage protection framework. This practice has also been recognized by the UNESCO World Heritage Committee. The “Beijing Central Axis: A Building Ensemble Exhibiting the Ideal Order of the Chinese Capital,” based on criteria iii—its significant contribution to global urban planning history and influence on the construction of capitals in East and Southeast Asia and criteria

iv—preservation of a relatively intact ensemble of buildings, representing a unique type of urban history, originating and developing from the Chinese imperial period—was listed as a World Heritage Site at the 46th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee.

In the final results of the UNESCO nomination, the issue of “reconstruction” has not been disregarded. The description of the Beijing Central Axis heritage project notes that, although some elements within the heritage boundaries, such as historical buildings, have undergone demolition, reconstruction, and renovation, certain areas of the heritage have already been and will continue to be restored and renovated. While the functions of historical buildings have changed and been repurposed for public use, the overall function of the axis has been preserved, remaining as the core of the capital. This indicates that the Beijing Central Axis, as a cultural heritage project, revisits the planning and construction achievements of old Beijing from the perspective of “axis” as a specific modern urban planning approach. The planning and construction of old Beijing is an objective material entity, while the composition of the Central Axis serves more as a clue, illustrating how Chinese cultural thoughts have guided urban planning and influenced people’s lives.

The preservation of the Beijing Central Axis requires both respects for its profound historical and cultural value and adaptation to the needs of modern urban functionality. This balancing act has led planners to implement various protective and improvement measures to ensure that the Central Axis continues to be relevant and functional throughout the modernization process. As a World Cultural Heritage site, the ongoing development of the Central Axis not only depends on effectively narrating “China’s story” but also on maintaining consistent planning principles and employing diverse methods and technologies. These measures are significant not only for the Chinese nation but also offer valuable lessons for global urban planning practices. The author’s future research will focus on analyzing axis design cases from other cities, comparing and drawing lessons to identify planning strategies and methods suited to different cultural contexts. This will provide further insights into the sustained development of the Central Axis and global urban planning.

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