

From the commencement of large-scale city construction after the Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) formally made Beijing its capital in 1264, the residential quadrangle courtyard (*Si He Yuan*) emerged with the palaces, government office buildings, street blocks and lanes in Beijing. According to the decrees of Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, the residents who moved to Beijing, mainly rich men or high-ranking officials, had the priority to get 8 *mu* of land (or 5,333 m<sup>2</sup>), where they could build the private residence. The traditional residential quadrangle courtyards rose in Beijing.



The main entrance of the quadrangle courtyard.

Aside from the Forbidden City, Imperial gardens, monasteries, temples, dwellings of the royal family and government office buildings, the numerous buildings in old Beijing were the residential houses of the common people and take the form of quadrangle courtyards. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, though the quadrangles in Beijing had experienced many vicissitudes of life, the basic living styles were already formulated; having undergone continuous improvement the unique vernacular dwelling was presented before us.

The mode of quadrangle courtyard was characterized by its solemnity, elegance, reasonable arrangements, as well as peaceful and secluded environment. The ancient romantic charm of the quadrangle in Beijing was contained in its high steps, gate stone, scarlet arch, blue bricks, gray tiles, bargeboard (an often ornamented board that conceals roof timber projecting over gables), high-rising ridge ornaments like horsetails, landscape paintings under the eaves, rubbed brickwork, and ingenious and delicate gardens...

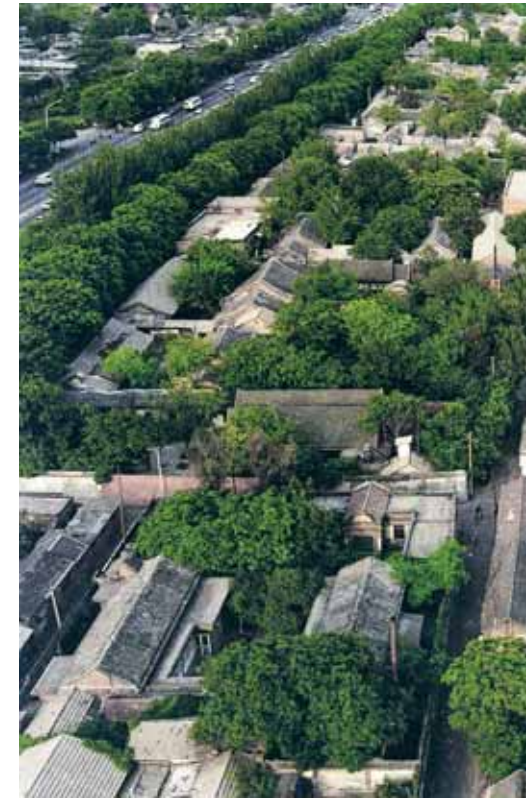


## Imposing Dwellings and Spacious Courtyards

The quadrangle courtyards in Beijing had their internal links with grid arrangement of chessboard-shaped streets. A normal quadrangle courtyard was facing the south in line with land heading from the east to the west.

With symmetrical central axis, the balanced left and right sides of the quadrangle courtyard is closed to the outside, internally centripetal and square-shaped. The scale of the quadrangles varied from each other while their sizes registered large difference, but it did not matter that they were big or small, all of them were composed of basic units.

A courtyard surrounded by houses was the basic unit of a residential quadrangle, which was called “*Yi Jin Si He Yuan*” (the residential quadrangle with one courtyard); while the quadrangle composed of two courtyards were regarded as *Er Jin Si He Yuan*, and three courtyards, *San Jin Si He Yuan* and so forth. The large quadrangles, such as the residence of a royal family, might have seven to nine courtyards. Aside from the main yard situated at the center, there were side yards in the east and west sides; in a word, they were imposing



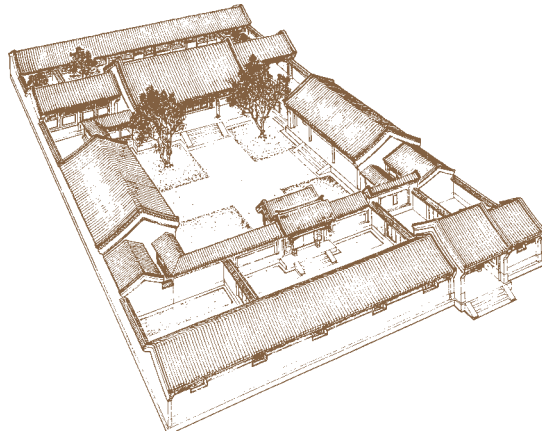
Groups of quadrangle courtyards.



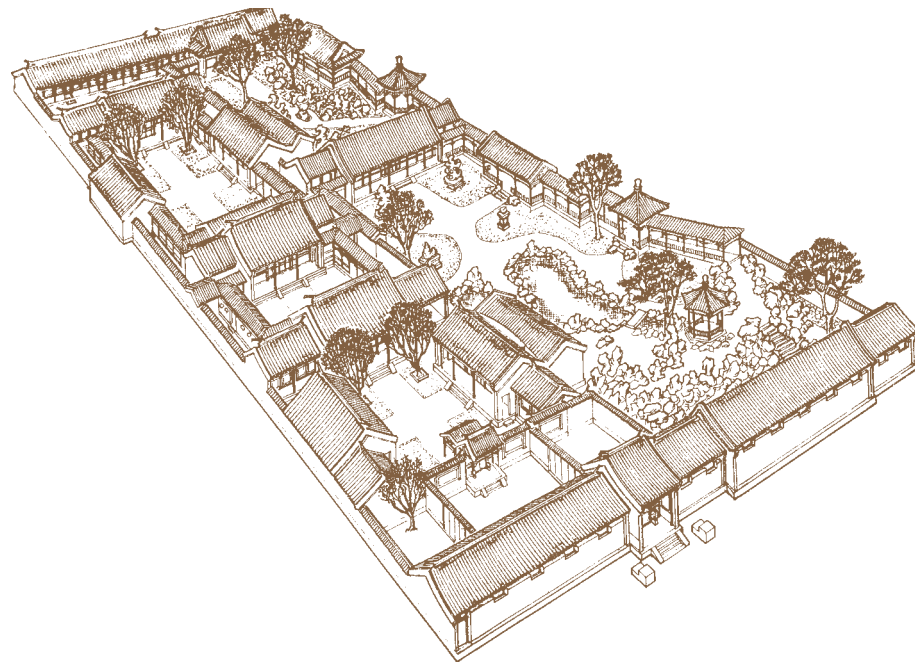
dwelling and spacious courtyards.

The arrangement of the quadrangle courtyard in Beijing was relatively fixed. Generally speaking, the quadrangle consists of the principal rooms, the aisles, the wing rooms, the back cabinet house, and the inverted rooms.

Due to the influence of the sunshine, the houses facing the sun in a quadrangle courtyard are the best, therefore the north-



A bird's-eye view of the middle-sized quadrangle courtyard.



A bird's-eye view of the large-sized quadrangle courtyard with a garden.



A view of the principal rooms, the east and west wing rooms and the courtyard from the floral-pendant gate.

ern rooms were usually chosen as the principal rooms while the wing rooms were situated on the east and west sides of the quadrangle. The principal rooms were most important dwellings. Because the memorial tablets of the ancestors and the hall were in the central part of the principal rooms, the principle rooms occupied the highest position in the whole residence. The space, depth and height of the principal rooms were larger or longer than other rooms. The principal rooms were composed of three rooms, in the central was the hall storing the memorial tablets of their ancestors, and on the eastern side stood the living room of grandparents, while on its west wing situated the living room of father and mother. The rooms on the left side were larger than the one on the right. This was resulting from the traditional conception of the left being more superior. In the quadrangle, aside from the hall on the central axis, the eastern house was regarded as the secondly good rooms.

The rooms situated in front of the principal rooms and expanded



the space of yard were called wing rooms. Wing rooms were usually composed of three rooms where the younger generations lived.

At two sides of the principal rooms usually stood the aisles. Just like the principal rooms, the aisles were usually facing the south. The only difference is their spaces are smaller. In other words, their back walls are parallel to the principal rooms while their front walls were shrunk from the principal rooms. Because they are narrow in depth, the height of them is lower too. If the principal rooms are likened to a human face, then, the aisles are its two ears. There may stand one aisle on each side of the principal rooms, which was called “three rooms in the open and five rooms in secret.” In other words, at initial glance, we can see three rooms, but as a matter of fact, the principal rooms were composed of 5 rooms. Of course, there may also stand two aisles on each side of the principal rooms, which was called “three rooms in the open and 7 rooms in secret.” Just in front of the aisles was the northern gable of the eastern wing rooms or west wing rooms. The east and west sides of the small space between the aisles and the gables of wing rooms were separated by courtyard walls and the verandas,

which formed a small yard before the aisles. The unpaved ground in the two yards was called “open-air ground,” where flowers and trees were planted by the landlords. In the meantime the aisles were the studies of a number of scholars



The aisle, the small yard and the veranda.

because they had a very good reading environment with direct sunshine and a small space that could be kept secret.

The aisles were usually linked to the secondary rooms of the principal rooms. The principal rooms and aisles had independent gables. But, after the founding of the Republic of China (1912–1949), the structure of the quadrangle inclined to simplification, for instance, two gables had combined into one.

The principal rooms and wing rooms were linked by the fold-arm veranda, which was an attached open structure that might be the corridor, or a place where people may have a rest or appreciate the delightful scenery.

The house at the back of the principal rooms was called “back cabinet house,” which were composed of the many rooms. The back cabinet house was located at the back place of the courtyard and were mainly living rooms for girls or maidservants, and could keep secrets very well. The girls were placed under rigid supervision of their parents because they had to pass through the principal rooms where their parents lived if they desired to go out. The back cabinet house was secondly to the wing rooms in terms of its grade, therefore, it was smaller than the wing rooms. If the back of a quadrangle courtyard was facing the street, a house on the northwest corner could serve as the backdoor. The wall of the courtyard adjacent to the street usually had no window at all, sometimes only had high small windows; the passer-by could not see anything inside of the rooms.

The back cabinet houses were situated in the north end of the courtyard while the opposite rooms in the southern end were called “inverted rooms.” Those inverted rooms were arranged in the following order: the room on the east end was given to private school; the second room counting from the east was the gate; the room just in the opposite of the *chui hua men* (floral-pendant gate) was the living room of male servants; the rooms next to servant room and in the opposite of three principal rooms were guest rooms, which

