Why is Beijing called Beijing? The capital that was calculated, not chosen

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This is a line. 7.8 kilometers, from the Bell and Drum Towers in the north to Yongding Gate in the south. It passes through the imperial palace, through the altars and temples of sacrifice, through the busiest districts of a city, with the buildings on either side laid out in symmetry.

This line was built more than 700 years ago, and it is still the spine the city is arranged around. Its length — according to China's National Cultural Heritage Administration, the longest surviving urban axis in the world.

This place has been called many names.

Every name marks a change of master.

The earliest was Ji. In about 1045 BC — the year after King Wu of Zhou overthrew the Shang — the descendants of the Yellow Emperor were enfeoffed here; another account says the descendants of Emperor Yao.

The year before, the year of the conquest itself, Duke Shi of Shao was enfeoffed at Yan, with its capital at Liulihe in today's Fangshan.

The history of Beijing as a city begins the moment Ji was granted.

For the thousand years that followed, this was a frontier.

In Qin and Han times it was called Ji, and also Youzhou

"you" itself carries the sense of somewhere remote.

It was called a "capital" for the first time in 938 AD.

The Khitans took the Sixteen Prefectures and promoted Youzhou to Nanjing, also known as Yanjing. But to be clear: the Khitan capital was at Shangjing,

and Nanjing was only a secondary capital — this is where Beijing's claim to the word "capital"

begins, but it was not yet the seat of a state.

It became a real capital in 1153, when the Jurchen Jin moved their capital here under Prince

Hailing and renamed it Zhongdu. One easily confused point: the year 1153 appears in the histories

under two reign titles, "Tiande 5" and "Zhenyuan 1," because the reign title changed within that

same year. They refer to one event, not two.

From that year, Beijing has been a capital for more than 870 years.

Then came the Yuan and Dadu, named in 1272.

After the Ming was founded it became Beiping — "the north pacified."

Then, in 1403, Beiping was renamed Beijing.

That is where the two characters "Beijing" begin.

What followed: the Qing called it Jingshi.

In 1928 the national capital moved south and the name reverted to Beiping,

which was also made Beiping Special City — the first time Beijing was formally established as a

municipality. Then on 27 September 1949 the First Plenary Session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference resolved

to rename Beiping as Beijing and make it the capital.

Count the name changes. One name has been in use for more than 600 years,

and was taken away for 21 of them.

That is Beijing.

The man who turned Beiping into Beijing was Zhu Di.

He was Zhu Yuanzhang's fourth son.

In Hongwu 3, 1370, he was made Prince of Yan;

only in Hongwu 13, 1381, did he take up residence in Beiping.

Those are two different years, eleven years apart.

Beiping was then the empire's frontier.

Zhu Di lived here for over a decade, garrisoning the border and drilling troops.

Then in 1399 he raised an army and marched south.

It took him more than three years to reach Nanjing,

and in 1402 he took the throne.

As emperor, he did a thing many at court opposed.

He moved the capital from Nanjing to the fief he had been given as a boy.

In 1403 Li Zhigang, minister of rites, petitioned to raise Beiping's status.

The court agreed. Beiping was renamed Beijing, and Beiping Prefecture became Shuntian Prefecture.

This is where the name "Beijing" begins.

Three years later, in 1406, the order to build was issued.

By 1420 the palaces and walls stood.

In the first month of 1421 the capital formally moved.

Eighteen years passed between the renaming and the move.

He moved very slowly, and very steadily.

One thing to add here. Who designed the Forbidden City?

The story most widely told is that Kuai Xiang designed it.

That story has no basis in the official histories.

The histories record Kuai Xiang as an outstanding craftsman and master builder of the Ming who

took part in palace construction; crediting one man with the design of the entire palace city

is a later legend. What actually happened is this: these were people who left no names

behind, and it took them more than a decade to raise this,

brick by brick. This film mentions him only as a legend.

Now a more practical question. What did Beijing live on?

In an agricultural age, this was not a good place for a city.

No large granaries, mountains to the north, cold winters.

Say a few hundred thousand people, a million people.

Where was the grain to come from?

The answer: it came by water, from the south.

And the key to moving grain was water.

Once the Yuan made Dadu its capital, a problem appeared.

The Grand Canal ended in Shandong, so grain barges had to stop at Tongzhou.

From there the grain went into the city overland — a few dozen li,

carried on backs and hauled by cart — and the cost was extremely high.

The man who solved this was Guo Shoujing.

In Zhiyuan 28, 1291, he presented eleven points on water management to Kublai Khan.

His proposal was to draw water from Baifu Spring in Changping,

run it southeast to join the canal, and bring the barges straight into Dadu itself.

Work began in the spring of 1292 and was finished in the autumn of 1293.

Its total length: 164 li, about 82 kilometers.

On 26 August 1293 — written in the History of Yuan as the dingchou day of the seventh month

of Zhiyuan 30 — Kublai Khan named the river the Tonghui River and granted Guo Shoujing 12,500

strings of paper money. The histories also recorded the labour that went into it.

19,129 soldiers. 542 craftsmen. 319 boatmen.

172 convicts whose property had been confiscated.

2.85 million man-days in all. Once the river was open,

grain barges could sail straight into Jishuitan, inside Dadu — the place we now call Shichahai.

Jishuitan was now the northernmost grain port of the Grand Canal.

In the middle and late Yuan, grain landed here at a peak of two to three

million dan a year. So there is one line to end this act with.

The foundation of a capital was laid with grain carried in from a thousand kilometers away.

This system ran for centuries. But it came at a price.

Every li of the canal had someone pulling on it.

Under the grain-transport system, the grain did not carry itself:

boats on the canal were hauled by men, and the water level was controlled by locks.

The cost of building the city weighed just as heavily.

Timber, brick, stone, labour — requisitioned from every part of the country,

and many of those people left no names behind.

There was another cost, too, and it was the water itself.

Once Baifu Spring was diverted, the waterway silted up again and again over the centuries,

and was repaired again and again.

In recent times the Tonghui River ceased entirely to function as a grain route.

Beijing today is a city short of water, and the water it does have comes from

far away. The arrangement that once fed a capital ended up changing the waterways of the

whole region. In the modern era another dispute appeared.

Should the old city be protected, and to what extent?

Should the people living inside it be moved out?

That dispute is not new. What is clear is the recent legislation.

On 1 October 2022, the Regulations on the Protection of the Cultural Heritage of the Beijing Central Axis

took effect. After the Central Axis was inscribed, the Regulations on the Protection of the Beijing

Central Axis as World Cultural Heritage were promulgated and took effect on 30 May 2025.

And the Regulations of Beijing Municipality on the Protection of the Great Wall were adopted on

28 November 2025, to take effect on 1 March 2026.

Three separate instruments, three separate years, all of them within the last four years.

What must be protected will be protected.

That is the direction that has been set.

As to how, and how to balance protection against use,

opinions have always differed. This film lists the existing regulations and the facts as they stand.

It does not sit in judgment.

We are not the ones who decide where that line falls,

and we are not going to pretend otherwise.

On 27 July 2024, at 11:15 in the morning, at the 46th session of the World Heritage Committee

in New Delhi, India, the Beijing Central Axis was inscribed on the World Heritage List

all its elements at once. It is made up of fifteen component sites.

Counting from north to south: the Bell and Drum Towers,

Wanning Bridge, Jingshan, the Forbidden City, Duanmen, Tiananmen, the Outer Golden Water Bridges,

the Imperial Ancestral Temple, the Altar of Land and Grain,

Tiananmen Square and its buildings, Zhengyangmen, the surviving road remains of the southern Central Axis,

the Temple of Heaven, the Altar of the First Farmer,

and Yongding Gate. They fall into five categories: ancient imperial palace and garden architecture;

ancient imperial sacrificial architecture; ancient urban management facilities; state ceremonial and public buildings;

and surviving central road remains. This arrangement embodies the ideal capital paradigm recorded in the Kaogongji.

That is the World Heritage Centre's formulation, not ours.

The heritage area covers 589 hectares, with a buffer zone of 4,542 hectares.

The line was begun in the Yuan, took shape in the Ming,

and is now more than seven centuries old.

Beijing today has eight World Cultural Heritage sites.

Zhoukoudian, where the Peking Man was found.

The Great Wall. The Forbidden City.

The Summer Palace. The Temple of Heaven.

The Ming Tombs. The Grand Canal.

And the Beijing Central Axis, inscribed in 2024.

That is the highest count of any city in the world.

The city also has 135 Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level,

likewise the highest of any city in the country, along with 14 UNESCO intangible cultural heritage

items. And beyond all these listings, there is one thing in Beijing that has not been

inscribed. The courtyards in the hutongs and the siheyuan where people still live.

Below the Bell and Drum Towers, people are out walking in the morning.

Beside the Altar of the First Farmer, children run past on their way home from school.

In the old neighborhoods, laundry hangs between the courtyard walls,

bicycles lean against the gateposts, and the smell of cooking comes through the doorway.

Nothing about any of it is on a list, and nothing about it is trying to

be. All of it is the reason the rest of it was worth protecting.

A capital seven centuries old, in the end, comes back down to this everyday life.

Look back at this city. It was put here not because this was the best place

to grow grain, and not because it was the richest.

It was put here because it is in the north,

where it could hold the steppe and the Central Plains at the same time.

To keep it alive, grain from the south was loaded onto boats and carried more than

a thousand kilometers north along the water, to come ashore at Jishuitan.

The city did not grow where the food was.

It moved the food to where the city was.

So there is the argument this film has been making.

A city cannot feed itself. Every wall, every gate, every courtyard along that line,

stood on grain that came from somewhere else.

The waterway that joined the south to the north is the Grand Canal.

It was inscribed as World Cultural Heritage in 2014, and that inscription includes the Tonghui River section

in Beijing. Beijing's stretch is only its tail end.

The real starting point, the busiest part, is in the south.

Next time, we follow the canal south, to Yangzhou.

The measurements they took are still accurate today.

Seven-point-eight kilometers. One hundred and sixty-four li.

A date in August 1293. They had no instruments to check their work against,

and no way to know that anyone would ever look.

Whatever they used to set that line, the line held.

The full transcript for this film, the bibliography, and further reading are at sylogs.com.

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