

A Gateway to the History of Beijing

- Zhengyangmen Museum

By BRIAN SALTER

I must have been there dozens of times; yet it was only recently that I discovered that Zhengyangmen (“Gate of the Zenith Sun”) has a museum inside showing a fascinating perspective of old Beijing, together with a good collection of photographs, some dating back a century or more.

Not familiar with Zhengyangmen? Maybe you know it by its more familiar name of Qianmen (meaning front gate), which is the gate just south of the Forbidden City and Tiananmen Square; though strictly speaking, “Qianmen” consists of the gate – Zhengyangmen – together with its Arrow Tower, or Jianlou.

The main entrance of the gatehouse is aligned with Beijing’s major north-south axis, which includes Yongdingmen Gate to the south, the Mausoleum of Mao Zedong and the Monument to the People’s Heroes in Tiananmen Square, Tiananmen Gate, the Meridian Gate, the imperial throne in the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City, the city’s Drum Tower and Bell Tower, and the entrance to Olympic Park out near the Fourth Ring Road.

Zhengyangmen was the gate through which the emperor passed whenever he went to the Temple of Heaven, in the outer city, to make offerings. In fact the gateway would only be opened when emperors were passing through to give offerings or to carry out imperial inspections. Funeral vehicles were never allowed to pass through Zhengyangmen during the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368-1911).

Zhengyangmen was first built in 1419 and once consisted of the gatehouse proper and an archery tower, which were connected by side walls with side gates, to form a large barbican.

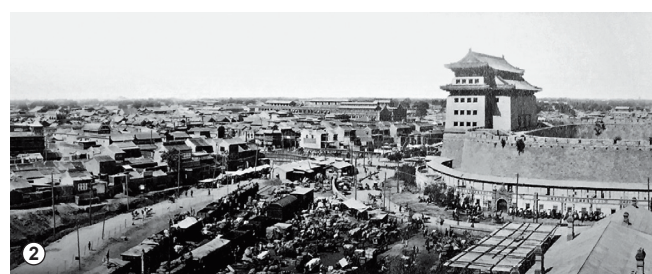
During the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, the gate sustained considerable damage but it was extensively reconstructed in 1914, only to have the Barbican’s side gates torn down the next year.

In 1949, the Zhengyangmen gatehouse was occupied by the Beijing garrison of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), who only vacated it in 1980; but now it has rightly become a popular tourist attraction.

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1. Zhengyangmen early on a Sunday morning, before the crowds gather.
2. The gatehouse and archery tower were once connected by side walls.
3. The People’s Liberation Army marched into the city through the gate in a grand ceremony after Beijing was peacefully liberated in 1949.
4. Before the 1914 rebuilding the barbican incorporated the two towers.
5. Court painter Xu Yang captured the moment in 1751 when Emperor Qianlong passed through Zhengyangmen.
6. The kilometer zero point for highways in China is located just outside the gate, and marked with a plaque on the ground.

Photos courtesy of Brian Salter.





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The Other Eight Gates of the Inner City

• **Deshengmen:** literally “Gate of Virtuous Triumph” – and is homophonous with “achieving victory”; so troops would go through this gate on the way to an expedition.

• **Andingmen:** “Peace and pacification” – was the gate armies would take when returning from the battlefield when the war was over and the country was peaceful. Beijing’s main manure storage fields were located near the Temple of Earth, so most dung carts also accessed this gate.

• **Dongzhimen:** also called “Wood Gate,” because bricks and wood needed by people inside the city were mainly brought through this gate.

• **Chaoyangmen:** also known as “Grain Gate,” was the main route taken for transporting grain.

• **Chongwenmen:** also known as “Tax Gate,” was where a customs station was set up.

• **Xuanwumen:** also called “Prisoner Gate,” was the only gate through which condemned criminals were sent for execution in the Qing dynasty.

• **Fuchengmen:** was used for transporting coal into the city.

• **Xizhimen:** was used for transporting water to the imperial palace in both the Ming and Qing dynasties.



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Unfortunately, “progress” waits for no man, and Zhengyangmen was one of only a handful of gates that survived the demolition of city walls in the late 1960s and ’70s during the building of the Beijing Subway. (Line 2’s Qianmen Station is actually located between the two structures inside the space once surrounded by the barbican).

Museum of Historical Moments

The museum itself covers the history of old Beijing, and contains many notable items in its collection. For instance, there is a very long painting of Emperor Qianlong’s first tour to Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces in 1751. It was painted by court artist Xu Yang and consists of a number of scrolls, each measuring 868.6cm×1988.6cm. The original is actually to be found in the National Museum of China, and this is a copy, but it’s still lovely despite that, and few visitors are any the wiser!

The detail is exquisite and clearly shows the entire barbican with the two towers to north and south.

And if you love old photographs, then you will be impressed with snapshots of what this area was like before the rebuilding started in 1914.

In order to alleviate traffic congestion, the Moon Fortress enclosure was demolished in 1915 and two side gateways were opened in the walls flanking the Gatehouse tower. Roads were paved; a zigzag ascending path was built for the Archery Tower and decorated in the Western style. So this was what it looked like just after the rebuilding in 1915.

Other famous moments in history were captured at the tower, such as on May 27, 1929, when Dr. Sun Yat-sen’s coffin passed through the Gatehouse when it was conveyed to Nanjing for interment.

On July 7, 1937 the Lugou Bridge (or Marco Polo Bridge in outskirts of Beijing) Incident broke out, marking the beginning of Japan’s full-scale invasion of China and the start of China entering the Second World War. On July 28, Japanese forces captured Beijing and entered the Inner City via Zhengyangmen on August 8.

But on January 31, 1949, Beijing was peacefully liberated; and on February 3 the PLA marched into the city through the gate in a grand ceremony.

Today Zhengyangmen still has an important role to play that not even many Beijingers are aware of. The kilometer zero point for highways in China (the point from which all distances are measured) is located just outside the gate, and marked with a plaque in the ground.

Zero Point was approved by the State Council and installed in September 2006. Four ancient Chinese mythical animals – Qinglong (Green Dragon), Baihu (White Tiger), Zhuque (Vermilion bird), and Xuanwu (Black Tortoise) represent East, West, South, and North. The wheel in the center represents the system of highways radiating to all parts of China. 🗺️

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