



Dashilan Street: The Fence Culture of Ancient Beijing

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Abstract. Dashilan is one of the most important commercial blocks in Beijing. Its was named from the luxurious fence gate at the entrance of Hutong. It's a public facility that cooperated with the curfew policy and block governance in ancient Beijing, especially in Ming Dynasty and Qing Dynasty. This article looks for the clues of the fence culture from the palace paintings, maps, old photos and other image materials, which is a tracing exploration of the history of the Dashilan street. It can also provide a new perspective for the renovation and renewal of the traditional blocks.

Keywords: Dashilan · fence · commercial blocks · palace paintings

1 Origin of Dashilan

Dashilan is in the west of Qianmen Street, with a total length of more than 275 m and a width of about 10 m. The traffic here is convenient. Dashilan Street and its west side form a diagonal street, became the best route to connect the inner city and the former capital of Jin dynasty (see Figs 1) [1]. It gradually formed a prosperous business district with business, performance, catering, accommodation, and finance as the pillar industries.

(from: An historical geography of Peiping).

Dashilan was formerly known as the fourth lang fang (the fourth long residential houses). According to the Yongle Canon “Shuntianfu Annals” in the second year of Hongwu’s reign (1369), because of the sparse population, Emperor Yongle decided to build some long residential houses outside inner city to attract immigrants and merchants from other cities, which were the first, second, third and fourth lang fang. According to the records of *Collection of Hutongs in five blocks in the Capital* (1560) written by Jue Zhang in Ming Dynasty, there are “the second hutong, the fourth hutong, Jing er hutong in name of water well, and the northwest of Zhushikou street which means pig market corner” [2]. In the *Complete Map of the Capital* (1750) during Qianlong period, the second hutong has been renamed the second Langfang, the fourth hutong has been renamed Dashilan [3], Jing er hutong has been renamed as Shijing Hutong which means wet well, and the northwest of Zhushikou has been renamed northwest of Zhushikou which means Jewelry market corner. Therefore, the fourth hutong was officially renamed as Dashilan earlier than 1750th.

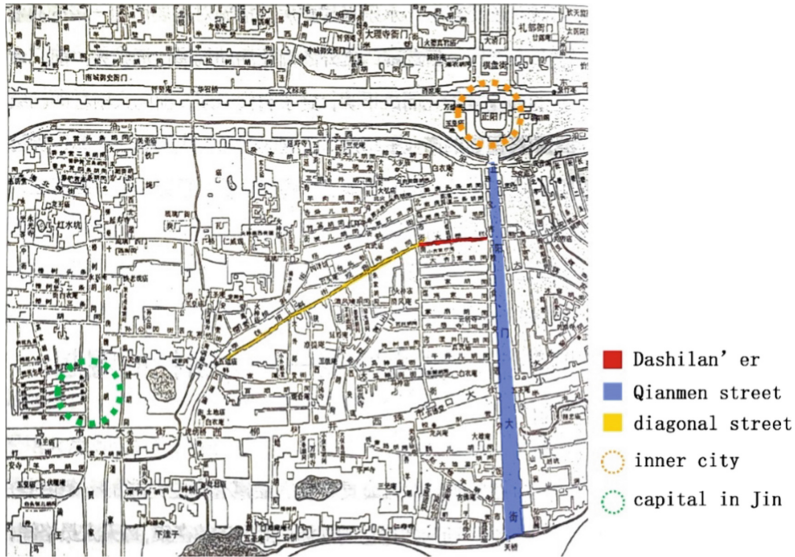


Fig. 1. Location of Dashilan

The local common pronunciation of Dashilan is “dà shí làn er”. According to Mr. Yimin Zhou’s research, the pronunciation is composed of the ancient pronunciation and the dialect. And old Beijingers are used to adding er after nouns [4].

2 Function of Dashilan

Dashilan is named after the fence at the entrance of Hutong. It was originally a facility to coordinate the night curfew policy. The curfew policy originated in the Zhou Dynasty, was improved systematically in the Tang Dynasty, and was gradually abolished from the Song Dynasty. In order to strengthen management, the emperor of Yuan Dynasty re-implemented a strict curfew policy, which was implemented in the Ming and Qing dynasties. For example, according to *Law of the Ming Dynasty*, “the thieves starts from the lax night ban” [5]. In the first year of Emperor Hongzhi of the Ming Dynasty (1488), in order to prevent theft, the imperial court approved the installation of wooden fences at many street entrances in Beijing. The fence is funded by local residents, and soldiers are sent to handle it. Due to the bustling business in Dashilan Hutong, including Zhang Yiyuan Tea House, Tongrentang Lejia Pharmacy, Changshengkui Dried Fruit Store and other time-honored shops, the merchants donate a large sum of money, so the fence was made in a particularly luxurious way, which was famous for “Dashilan”. Unfortunately, during the Yihe Movement in 1900, almost all of the Qianmen blocks were burned down, and Dashilan was also doomed. In 1902, Dashilan was rebuilt with wood and iron bars.

3 The Figure of Dashilan

This area has a history at least of 600 years, before the camera was invented, we can trace its figure by some palace paintings. In the painting of *Kangxi's South tour*, we can see some image of fences at the entrance of hutong on Qian men Street. *Kangxi's South tour* is a palace painting recording the grand occasion of Kangxi's second south tour, and its twelfth drawing depicts the scene from the Yongding Gate to the Hall of Supreme Harmony. The picture is magnificent and rich in details, reflecting the urban appearance of the commercial area of Qianmen Street in the early Qing Dynasty [6]. Of particular note is the precision of measurement.

At present, it is known as the earliest map with details of this area is the *Complete Map of the Capital* which was finished in 1750, and the *Kangxi's South tour* was finished in 1693. Although there was 57 years passed away, many shops could be renovated, however, the public space was difficult to change. Then the shape of the street and hutong were difficult to change significantly, Therefore, if we observe the urban texture from the perspective of street space, it still has certain referential value[7]. As can be seen from the following Fig. 2, six fences are distributed in turn from left to right (from south to north) in *Kangxi's South tour*, and these six fences are respectively the intersection of west Zhushikou Street, Shijing Hutong, Zhangshan Hutong, Dashilan, second Langfang hutong, and Xiheyuan Street [2]. Until 1916, these hutongs are still obvious that in the *Map of Inner and Outer Cities* finished by the Mapping Department of the official Office.

(from: Map of inner and outer cities; Complete Map of the Capital; The image of the central axis of Beijing in the Qing Dynasty in the Kangxi South Tour).

Among the six hutongs in the *Kangxi's South tour*, west Zhushikou is the main road of the city, so its fence gate is also the broadest and tallest. Secondly, Dashilan Hutong are wide, so its gate is also relatively wide. The rest hutongs such like Shijing, Zhangshan or Second Langfang are narrow, then their gates are simple and narrow. There is a large area of open space along the Xiheyuan, which blocks the fence gate is unconventional. Here we have the first figure of Dashilan.

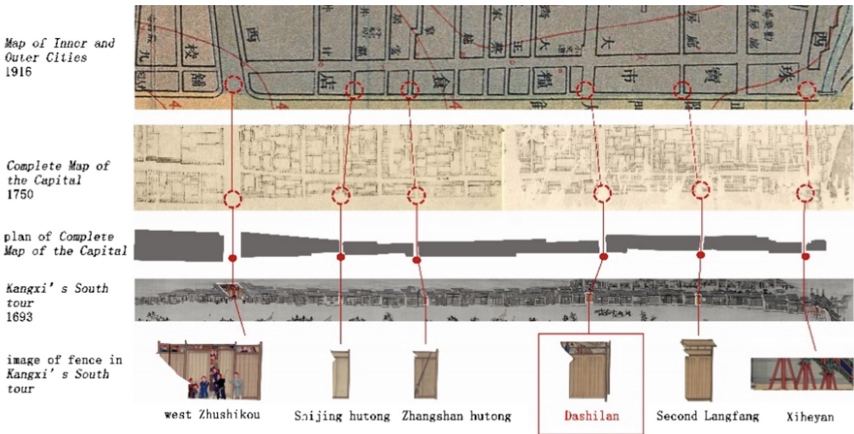


Fig. 2. Figure of fence in Qianmen street

This kind of fence gate not only the facilitate of curfew control, but also a role of isolation and control while the emperor tour route. As can be seen from the following Fig. 3, according to the *Kangxi's South tour*, the narrow fence can use two wooden doors, while the wide hutong fence can use four wooden doors, of which the middle two can be opened. The fence door here has no gaps; thus, the sight cannot penetrate. In another painting *Qianlong's South tour*, the gate of the alley was changed into a wooden railing, which can be seen through [8]. There is also another form in *Five Stars in a line with the Sun and the Moon together*, one fence equipped with iron spikes, which shows more warnings [9]. The style of fence door can be summarized into the following 4 types, Dashilan in period of emperor Kangxi should be type C.

There is a brave suppose, in consideration of the rename Dashilan, its image must be luxurious, maybe there was a version memorable after period of Kangxi. Unfortunately, there was no image record before ruined.

(from: *The image of the central axis of Beijing in the Qing Dynasty in the Kangxi South Tour; Qianlong's South tour; Five Stars in a line with the Sun and Moon; Centennial image of Beijing central axis*).

In a photo taken in 1923 in Fig. 4, it can be seen that the fence of the Dashilan is very close to style B in Fig. 3, but the door has been replaced with iron bars [10]. After 1902's rebuilt, the iron railings and iron signs which written the three characters "Dashilan" show the influence of the Art Nouveau movement in France.

(from: *Centennial image of Beijing central axis*, Author's self-photography).

In general, we could find some figures of Dashilan at different times, As can be seen from the following Fig. 5, there is a major trend that the fence is getting bigger and

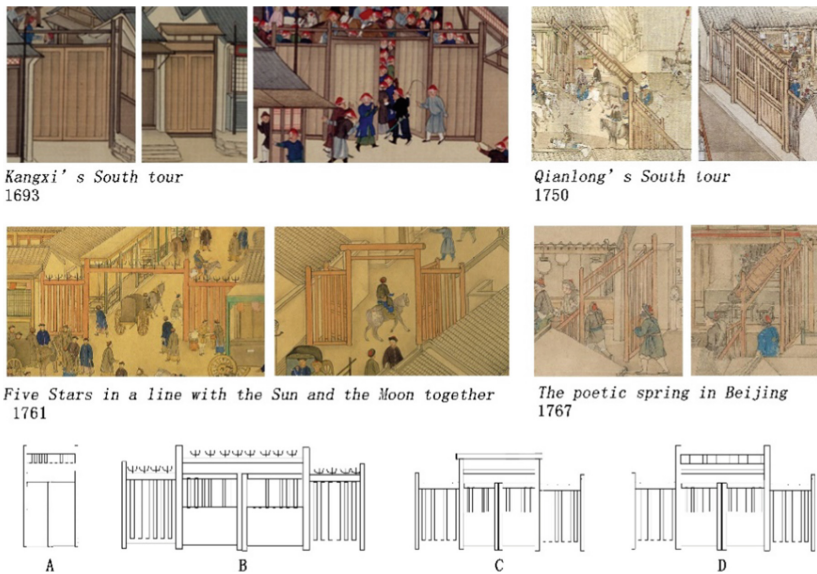


Fig. 3. Figures of fence in several palace paintings



Fig. 4. Photos of Dashilan

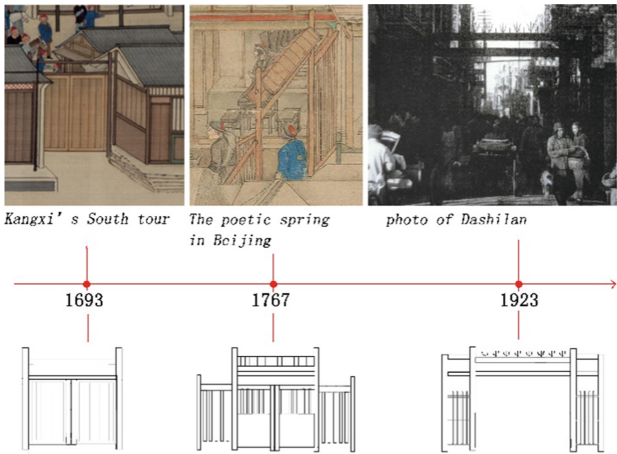


Fig. 5. Figures of Dashilan at different times

bigger, at the same time, the sight becomes more and more transparent. Nowadays the fence has been removed, only a name left which is telling the old story of the fence.

4 Conclusion

In the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Fence Gate of Beijing was a block separation for the purpose of security. In modern times, with the development of the urban economy, the fence gate has disappeared, leaving only the place name of Dashilan can trace back to the past. However, somewhere still need to be warning isolation, for example, in an area of old city block or in a shopping mall which themed with ancient architecture, even in the post-Covid-19 period it is interesting to use the fence element [11]. Our exploration of the historical image of Dashilan can also provide a new perspective for the renovation and renewal of traditional streets.

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