

The Influence of Politics in Different Chinese Dynasties on the Central Axis of Beijing

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Abstract: The Beijing central axis is an iconic feature of the city's urban layout, stretching from the Drum Tower in the north to the Forbidden City in the south. It has played an essential role in shaping Beijing's urban landscape and reflects the city's political, cultural, and social history. This academic essay centers on the impact of political factors on the development and design of the central axis in Beijing and its advantages and drawbacks for the city, utilizing a cohesive narrative of dynastic transitions. Since the Yuan dynasty established Beijing as the capital, urban layout focused on symmetry and set the groundwork for the central axis construction in later dynasties. As imperial power grew stronger during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the central axis development continued, particularly with the construction and expansion of the Forbidden City, demonstrating the significant impact of political factors on urban planning. This influence persisted into the modern era with Beijing remaining the political and cultural centre of China. The contemporary planning of the central axis has prioritised the integration of historical and cultural preservation with modern development, exemplifying the harmony between the past and present.

Keywords: politics, central axis, Beijing, Chinese dynasties

1. Introduction

The layout of a city is often inextricably linked to all aspects of its development, and whether it is spontaneous or artificially planned, it must have its unique spatial pattern to follow. Generally speaking, a city's planning and development are influenced by various factors such as ecological and environmental, economic and industrial, demographic and social, historical and cultural, technological and informational. The axis was often used by the rulers or those in power to demonstrate a sense of solemn ritual or supreme authority, and as a result, the axis abounds in capitals around the world.

In traditional cities, especially those with a strong religious or political dimension, the axis is often the soul of the spatial pattern. For example, as the capital of the empire at the time, Rome's city-building, which began to culminate under Augustus, was of great symbolic importance, and the political and religious culture that influenced it gradually led to a rectangular form of axially symmetrical city layout; to show off the wealth of the papal state to pilgrims, the Pope built wide avenues and magnificent squares in the city. Standing on St Peter's Basilica at the western end of the square and looking east, one can still imagine the immense glory felt by the Pope as he faced the people [1]. Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, also has a central axis, which starts at

the Lincoln Memorial in the west and runs four kilometers to Capitol Hill in the east. At the center of this axis is a beautiful rectangular lawn flanked by museums and galleries, the Washington Obelisk and various war memorials. The view from the top of the Obelisk is a magnificent sight, with a solemn axis and a neatly organized lawn [2].

Beijing, as the political and cultural hub of the People's Republic of China, is renowned for its status as a prominent international city and an ancient capital with a rich historical heritage.

The construction of ancient Beijing, with the palace at its center and a city axis extending 7.8 kilometers from the Yongding Gate to the Bell Tower, is regarded as one of its most noteworthy accomplishments due to its centripetal pattern. This urban central axis is the longest of its kind in the world. Liang Sicheng, a Chinese architect, praised this central axis, stating that "Beijing's splendor and orderliness emerge from the creation of this central axis. The majesty of the landscape lies in the scale of this north-south extension, which extends to the end" [3].

Beijing is extremely typical as a case study of the factors influencing urban planning development. This essay focuses on the political influences on the construction and planning of Beijing's central axis and its strengths and weaknesses for the city, based on the logical thread of dynastic change.

2. Background

Beijing is situated on the alluvial plain of the Yong-ding River, and it is surrounded by the Inner Mongolia Plateau to the north, the Loess Plateau to the west, the Bohai Sea to the east, and the Great North China Plain to the south [4]. This geographic location makes Beijing an intersection point for nomadic, hunting, and agrarian cultural areas, which is a key factor that has historically attracted the attention of regime rulers, both in ancient and modern times, and led them to choose the city as their capital.

In 1264 AD, Kublai Khan ordered the construction of Dadu as the new capital, which was the beginning of Beijing becoming the capital [5]. The city of Dadu was constructed around the Drum Tower, which is located north of the current urban area, and the Yuan dynasty rammed earth wall still exists and is now set up as the Yuan Dadu City Wall Ruins Park (Figure 1). Since the construction of Yuan Dadu, a straight urban axis running north-south has always been visible, regardless of the subsequent changes to the structure of the huge capital city. The overall size of the city today is square-shaped with six rings of concentric coaxial distribution. The traditional Beijing city was laid out in a chessboard style, with almost all residential streets running south and north.



Figure 1: Modern commemorative statues in the park.

In ancient China, as a feudal monarchist period, all aspects of the society were geared towards achieving the supreme authority of the emperor and facilitating the administration of the state by imperial power, with political factors dominating all developments. In this case, Beijing, as the political center of China, has been the most heavily influenced by political factors in the planning and layout of the city since Kublai established the capital (Yuan dynasty).

3. Evolution of Central Axis Layout of Beijing

3.1. Yuan Dynasty: The Settlement of the Capital and the Prototype of the Central Axis

Although the Yuan dynasty introduced foreign cultures into ancient China and increased the military and economic power of the country at the time, it still maintained the traditional Chinese culture in terms of architecture [4]. The construction of Beijing at that time followed the principles of traditional Chinese construction planning. Moreover, Kublai Khan also brought in the famous Persian architect Isa ibn Muhammad to design the city plan to make the capital of this new city grander and more planned. According to Isa's plan, Yuan Dadu was divided into two cities, north and south (Figure 2), with walls surrounding the city. The centre of Yuan Dadu, used by the Mongol rulers, was planned in the south of the city, consisting of palaces and some imperial palaces in an area of six by five kilometers. The residential areas occupied mainly the northern part, the urban space provided for the common people who lived and lived without political rights. The center of the city was laid out in a north-south direction, which set the basic direction of the later central axis of Beijing. Beijing already had an overall square outer contour, with internal streets arranged in an orthogonal pattern, reflecting the typical layout of an early Chinese capital city with palaces.

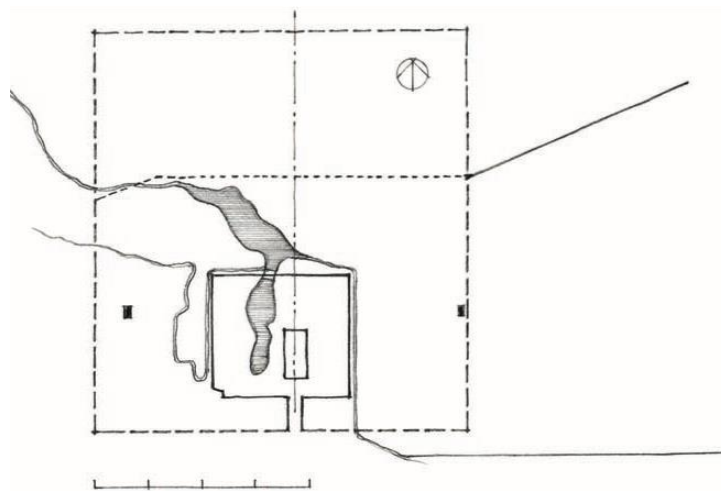


Figure 2: Plan of Yuan Dadu, Beijing [4].

It is notable, however, that the planning of Beijing during the Yuan dynasty did not emphasize the importance of the central axis as it did during the later Ming and Qing dynasties. Although Isa considered the layout of the north-south central axis, a series of important palaces and tombs were not laid out along the north-south central axis as they were during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Thus, although the Yuan dynasty planning of Beijing laid the foundation for the later formation of the central axis, it did not directly influence the construction and formation of the central axis.

Overall, the establishment of the capital of Beijing during the Yuan dynasty was a very important historical event that laid the foundation for the subsequent urban planning and development of the city. However, under the influence of such political factors, the city's planning during the Yuan

dynasty only resulted in a relatively complete square outer contour and played a preliminary role in forming the central axis.

3.2. Ming Dynasty: The Establishment of the Forbidden City and the Formation of the Central Axis

It was not until Zhu Yuanzhang's army defeated the Mongols that the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) replaced the Yuan dynasty and returned the rule of China to the Han Chinese. However, the Ming rulers' desire for imperial power became even stronger, so in order to better assert their power and status, Zhu Di (1403-24), the third Ming emperor, built the Forbidden City on the site of the Yuan Dadu in order to further consolidate the Ming dynasty's dominance and expand its influence [4]. Since then, Beijing has had a symmetrical urban layout with the Forbidden City at its center and a north-south central axis (Figure 3).

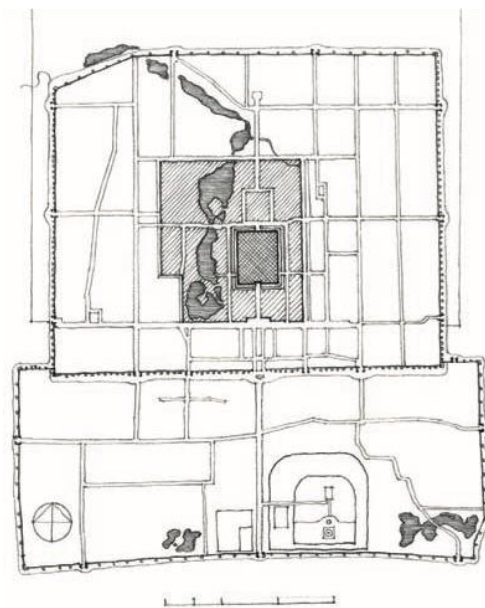


Figure 3: Beijing city outlay in 15th century [1].

In terms of the political factors that influenced the overall layout of Beijing during the Ming dynasty, the north-south central axis can be seen as the political embodiment of the imperial power at the center of traditional Chinese. For example, the central axis of Beijing is represented by the bluestone slabs covering the central avenue of the Forbidden City (Figure 4). These slabs, measuring approximately two meters square, have served as a direct embodiment of the central axis for many years. In ancient times, only the emperor was permitted to walk along this path, while officials were confined to the sidelines [6]. The central axis is further highlighted by the presence of a throne, placed with great precision in the middle of the axis, upon which ancient emperors sat to rule the country (Figure 5). The Confucian tradition of “an emperor's location always facing south” is also evident in the placement of the throne. This tradition, combined with the central axis of the Forbidden City, serves to emphasize the supreme authority of the ancient Chinese emperors and the Confucian culture of “Central Values” [7].



Figure 4: Direct embodiment of the central axis.



Figure 5: The Throne placed in the middle.

The Forbidden City is the most typical complex of buildings built along this central axis influenced by political factors and remains one of the most famous symbols of the Chinese imperial family. It is known as one of the five great palaces of the world, was a small, independent city within the ancient city of Beijing, and was the center of supreme power in China for more than five centuries. In order to meet the political purpose of the administrative work carried out in the Forbidden City, the palace has a series of halls along the north-south axis, each serving a different purpose. For example, the Hall of Taihe was where the emperor held ceremonies, and the Hall of Baohe was where the imperial examinations were held to select talents for the country. On the other hand, the Forbidden City, as a palace for the imperial family only, also reflects the political influences on the planning and layout of Beijing at the time. The most typical example is reflected in the design of the Qianqing Palace, the emperor's bed-chamber. The layout of the Forbidden City is located at the center of the whole of Beijing, and the emperor's residence is located at the center of the whole of the Forbidden City, which is a reflection of absolute authority in traditional Chinese cultural thought.

The central axis was formed during the Ming dynasty with the construction of the Forbidden City and auxiliary palaces. In addition to the Forbidden City and auxiliary palaces, the Ming dynasty also built a series of important tombs and ceremonial buildings along the central axis, such as the Temple of Heaven, the Temple of Earth and the Yuanmingyuan, creating a convergence of important buildings along the central axis [8]. Under the influence of political factors, the central axis also became a symbol of imperial power and culture during the Ming dynasty. The construction of the Forbidden City reinforced not only the imperial status of the Ming dynasty but also a symbol of the 'unity of heaven and man' in traditional Chinese culture, influencing Chinese art, architecture and cultural heritage.

Overall, the construction of the central axis during the Ming dynasty was a landmark in the urban planning and cultural development of Beijing, particularly with the construction of the Forbidden City and a series of important buildings along the central axis, making the entire city more expansive and spacious in its layout. At the same time, the central axis became a symbol of Ming imperial power and culture, reflecting the influence of the growing imperial power as a political factor on the construction of the central axis and the city of Beijing.

3.3. Qing Dynasty: The Strengthening of Imperial Power and the Expansion of the Central Axis

In 1649 when the Qing Dynasty replaced the Ming Dynasty as the new ruler, the burnt-out Forbidden City was rebuilt (Figure 6) on the site of the original Ming capital. Beijing was thus divided into two

cities, the inner and outer. The Manchu Qing rulers representing political status occupied the inner city, and the ordinary Han Chinese people had to move around only in the outer city.

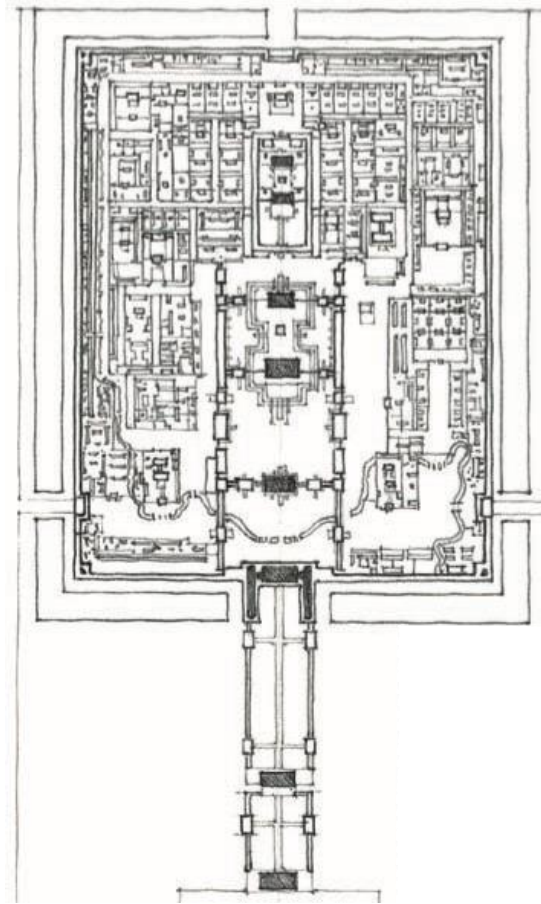


Figure 6: The The Qing Dynasty rebuilt and expanded the Forbidden City [1].

In contrast to the designs of the Ming dynasty, the Qing dynasty planned and laid out the central axis differently. The Qing emperors added many palaces, temples and ceremonial buildings to the central axis. By the mid-18th century, the Qing rulers had built over 40 new palaces and gardens in the original Forbidden City and the royal use territories to its north-west, including a range of buildings such as the Chengde Summer Palace, the Summer Palace and the Confucius Temple, which were dedicated to the rulers for touring or use. Meanwhile, the Qing dynasty also added many pleasure gardens, landscapes and water facilities along the central axis, such as Chang'an Street and Shichahai.

Under the influence of political factors, the central axis during the Qing Dynasty also became a symbol of imperial power. The Qing emperors built many palaces, temples and ceremonial buildings along the central axis in a more grandiose manner to reinforce the position of imperial power. At the same time, the Qing emperors also used the landscape and water facilities along the central axis to demonstrate the royal family's authority and wisdom and enhance their prestige. In addition, the Qing dynasty built many gardens and courtyards along the central axis to embody the traditional Chinese culture of 'the relationship between landscape and water'.

As imperial power increased in the Qing dynasty, the central axis was further planned and transformed from the original planning and layout of the Ming dynasty, making the buildings along the axis even more magnificent.

3.4. The People's Republic of China: Heritage and Modernization

During the People's Republic of China, political factors led the government to undertake a series of renovations and plans for the central axis to showcase the cultural and political image of the new China, as well as to consolidate the status and authority of the new government. Firstly, the central government repaired and protected the historical buildings along the central axis, including historical sites such as the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven, the Summer Palace and the Confucius Temple. Secondly, the new government began to build many new modern buildings and public facilities along the central axis, such as the Great Hall of the People, the National Museum, the National Library of China and Zhongshan Park. These new buildings and public facilities reflect each other and the historical buildings, creating an aesthetic blend of the past and the present, as well as reflecting the achievements of the modernization and technological development of the new China.

In addition, the government of the People's Republic of China has used public facilities along the central axis to strengthen its dominance and influence. For example, the Great Hall of the People became an important administrative and political venue for the central government, the National Museum became a showcase for Chinese history and culture, and Zhongshan Park became one of the key symbols of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The construction of these public facilities has made the central axis an important symbol of Chinese culture and politics, further strengthening the status and influence of the government.

Overall, the construction of the central axis under the People's Republic of China inherited its historical heritage and incorporated modern elements, while also using the public facilities along the axis to consolidate the government's position and influence. These changes have profoundly impacted the expansion of Beijing's central axis, making it a meeting point between traditional Chinese culture and modern civilization and one of the most important windows for presenting China's political and cultural image.

4. The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Central Axis

As the core of the entire urban layout, the central axis of Beijing was gradually developed into the present pattern by political factors, and it has obvious advantages and disadvantages.

Firstly, the central axis, as a major street, divides Beijing city into a symmetrical circular distribution centred on the central axis, which has become a fundamental element in urban planning and provides an orderly structure for the road network of the entire city. In addition, the layout of the central axis divides the city of Beijing into clearly defined areas, making the relationship between the various places within the city clearer and making it easier for people to find their bearings and direction within the city. At the same time, the construction of the central axis contributed to the city's development, providing a space for successive emperors to display their political strength and cultural charisma, attracting an influx of commerce and residents, and making Beijing a prosperous metropolis.

Over time, the layout of the central axis has some drawbacks in modern society. Firstly, the construction and planning of the central axis were done under the social conditions of ancient China. As the city developed and its population grew, the traffic pressure on the central axis increased, with road congestion and traffic bottlenecks. In addition, the layout of the central axis imposes certain constraints on the planning and construction of the city. The whole city needs to be planned in harmony with the central axis, which may make urban development take priority over, or even be constrained by, the existing central axis plan [9].

In addition, the historical and cultural value of the central axis cannot be ignored. As a symbol and landmark of the city, the existence of the central axis has given the city a deeper historical and cultural connotation, attracting a large number of tourists and cultural enthusiasts to visit and study it, making an important contribution to the city's development and cultural exchange.

The central axis, as the core of the entire urban layout, has greatly advanced the construction and planning of the city in the ancient feudal period of Beijing, but it has also brought certain problems to modern urban development.

5. Conclusion

The construction and transformation of the central axis in Beijing are closely related to dynastic replacement and political factors in Chinese history, reflecting the political and cultural characteristics and needs of different periods. During the Yuan dynasty, when Beijing was chosen as the capital city, architectural planning focused on symmetry and layout. Although awareness of the central axis was not very strong, the foundation was laid for the central axis of the Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, as imperial power grew stronger, the construction of the central axis continued to be refined and developed, particularly with the construction and expansion of the Forbidden City, once again demonstrating the crucial influence of political factors on urban planning. Beijing remains China's capital in the modern era of the People's Republic of China. Its political and cultural center has been further strengthened, with the central axis emphasizing the combination of historical and cultural preservation and modern development. The central axis, as a representative of ancient Chinese urban planning, has had a profound and lasting impact on the overall urban layout of Beijing, making it a massive and well-laid international city.

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