

The History, Present and Future of Traditional Markets

With Field Notes from Traditional Market Surveys in Beijing

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1. The Historical Formation of Markets in Beijing

Beijing has a history of nearly one thousand years as a city and became the imperial capital of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. The spatial order of the capital inherited a much older ritual grammar. The well-known principle *zuo zu you she*, meaning ancestral temple on the left and altar of soil and grain on the right, placed the ancestral temple to the east of the palace and the altar of soil and grain to the west. This symmetrical arrangement was associated with the classical prescriptions of *Zhouli: Kaogong Ji* and embodied ideas of reverence for Heaven and ancestors, as well as the political imagination of an integrated family-state order.

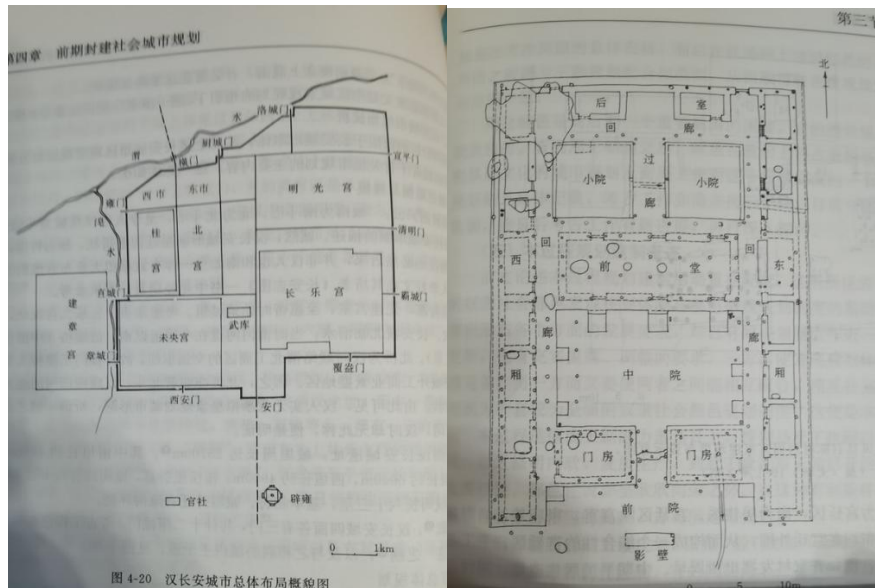


Fig.1 Ancient Chinese city planning. Left: layout of Chang'an in the Han dynasty. Right: plan of a Zhou-dynasty court. He Yeju, *The History of Ancient Chinese City Planning*, China Architecture and Building Press, 2014, pp. 322 and 181.

The planning examples cited in the Chinese notes share one important feature: agricultural, garden or trade-fair spaces were incorporated into the urban fabric, including in or near imperial precincts. This indicates that markets and cultivation were not external to the city. They belonged to the material and ritual order through which urban life was maintained



Fig.2 Left: Temple of Heaven. Right: Temple of Earth.

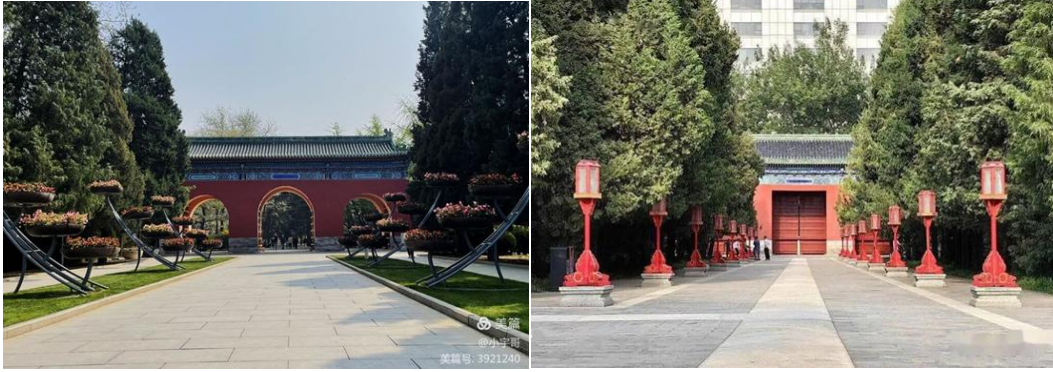


Fig.3 Left: Temple of the Sun. Right: Temple of the Moon.



Fig.4 Left: Altar of Agriculture. Right: five-coloured soil at the Altar of Soil and Grain in Zhongshan Park.



Fig.5 Diagram of ancestral temple on the left and altar of soil and grain on the right.

The layout of old Beijing thus contained both royal ritual sites devoted to the unity of Heaven, Earth and human order and everyday residential forms such as the courtyard house. These arrangements show that political order, domestic life, seasonal rhythm and exchange were interwoven in the city.



Fig.6 Aerial view of Beijing courtyard houses.

2. The Origins of the Traditional Market Fair

The traditional market fair is a widespread social, cultural and economic phenomenon. It was also a key site of material exchange in agrarian civilisation. *The Book of Changes*, in the *Xici* commentary, states that markets were held at midday to bring together the people of the world and to gather the goods of the world so that exchange could take place and everyone could obtain what was needed. This short classical passage vividly describes the early form of the market as a gathering of people, goods and reciprocal needs.

The Chinese Text Project records the phrase “日中为市，致天下之民，聚天下之货，交易而退，各得其所” and provides the translation “He caused markets to be held at midday, thus bringing together all the people, and assembling in one place all their wares.” (Source: <https://ctext.org/book-of-changes/xi-ci-xia/zhs>)

Guanzi, in the chapter *Xiao Kuang*, states that merchants should be located in the marketplace. This formulation expresses an early spatial understanding of trade: people gathered around wells and communal spaces, fetched water, washed, met one another, exchanged goods, and gradually formed the *shi jing*, the market-well. What began as a simple site of exchange gradually accumulated cultural meaning and became one of the most enduring symbols of Chinese everyday life, local sociability and popular urban culture.

The Chinese Text Project records the relevant passage in *Guanzi*: “处商必就市井”, rendered in its translation as “Merchants must reside in marketplaces.” (Source: <https://ctext.org/guanzi/xiao-kuang/zhs>)

In early stages, exchange was mainly barter. As agricultural and handicraft production became richer and more differentiated, market fairs expanded in scale and developed more complex operating forms. They often emerged in relation to religious ritual, folk festivals and local celebrations. They also generated associated activities such as folk performance, recreation and seasonal entertainment.

Traditional market fairs varied in opening rhythm. Some operated daily, while others opened every other day or according to locally agreed cycles. In China, many fairs followed the lunar calendar. Their goods were mainly daily necessities, agricultural

produce and subsidiary food products, serving the production and livelihood needs of nearby villages and towns. Their sites were usually chosen in places with convenient transport and moderate flows of people: village and township centres, rural-urban edges, areas near temples, and transport nodes. The spatial reach of a fair depended largely on the distance that ordinary people could travel from their settlements and return within a day.

As compound social spaces with long historical continuity, traditional market fairs performed multiple functions: circulation, regional economy, historical memory, local custom and neighbourhood interaction. Regional differences produced a great variety of market forms. The common Chinese saying that speech differs every ten *li* and customs every hundred *li* captures this diversity. Across time and place, however, traditional market fairs shared a common purpose. They met daily needs related to food, clothing, shelter, transport, leisure, entertainment and medical care, while many traders relied on self-produced and self-sold goods.

Markets sustained the everyday life of ordinary people and helped maintain the gathering and movement of populations between town and countryside. As populations became more concentrated, markets became more prosperous. In turn, they supported the formation of townships and the gradual maturation of urban settlements.

Beijing offers an instructive example. The city served as the capital of the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Its early imperial form was related to the construction of Dadu under the Yuan from 1264 onward. Its overall planning followed classical ideas of capital construction and formed a nested urban structure with the Forbidden City as the core.

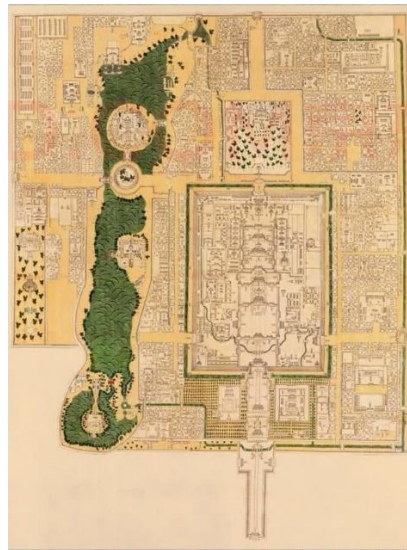


Fig.7 Right: 1669 map of imperial palaces and offices. Left: map of Beiping/Beijing drawn between 1928 and 1933. The blue area corresponds to present-day Qianmen Street.

The Qianmen area gathered many old shops, while vendors moved through hutongs and alleys. Xianyukou Market was known for the freshness and completeness of its daily goods. It served ordinary residents of the capital and also brought the tastes and textures of common urban life close to the imperial city. Hospitable shops, long Beijing-style

street calls and lively trade formed an urban soundscape beneath the imperial city walls. These features expressed old Beijing's etiquette, hospitality and leisurely urban aesthetics, as recorded in the *Qianlong Map of the Capital* and *Dumen Jilüe*.



Fig.8 Beijing market scene in the 1920s. Photograph from the German work *In und um Peking, während der Kriegswirren 1900-1901*, published in 1902.

3. Traditional Markets in Contemporary Beijing

Rural and peri-urban market fairs in Beijing have a long history, with some claiming more than six hundred years of continuity. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the urban spatial structure of Beijing has been repeatedly updated. Urban governance has become more standardised, and new commercial forms such as supermarkets, chain retail and fresh-food e-commerce have expanded. In this context, traditional popular market fairs have declined, transformed and in some places re-emerged in upgraded forms.

3.1 The Decline and Transformation of Traditional Market Fairs

Four main factors help explain this transformation.

First, the circulation system changed during the planned-economy period. After 1949, China implemented state purchase and unified distribution policies for many agricultural and subsidiary products. State-owned commercial companies and supply-and-marketing cooperatives became major channels for distribution and replaced much of the free-exchange function of traditional markets. The spontaneous trading form of rural market fairs was incorporated into a unified state circulation system and gradually lost independent space for development.

Chinese reporting on the withdrawal of the state purchase and unified distribution system notes that national grain coupons and oil coupons were cancelled from 1 April 1993, after which grain and oil commodities were supplied openly. (Source: <https://www.yuqingz.com/m/view.php?aid=51702>)

Second, urban reconstruction and governance requirements reshaped market space. Over the past four decades of rapid urbanisation, many traditional fairs, especially those operating in open air, came into conflict with requirements for sanitation, traffic order and urban appearance. Some were banned, restricted, relocated or transformed. As the city expanded, market fairs once located at rural-urban margins were absorbed into more central urban areas. Their traditional operating forms increasingly conflicted with the visual and regulatory expectations of modern urban governance.

Third, modern commercial formats displaced older market forms. Since the 1990s, China has moved from shortage to relative abundance, while standardised community food markets, fresh-food supermarkets and chain retail systems have expanded. These forms offer cleaner shopping environments, traceable goods and standardised service. In 2004, the Central No. 1 Document encouraged the development of agricultural-product chains, supermarkets and distribution operations, and encouraged qualified places to transform urban farmers' markets into supermarkets. This policy helped accelerate the wave of market-to-supermarket conversion.

The 2004 Central No. 1 Document explicitly encouraged agricultural-product chain operations, supermarkets and distribution; it also encouraged qualified localities to transform urban farmers' markets into supermarkets and supported leading agricultural enterprises in opening agricultural-product supermarkets in cities. (Source: <https://faolex.fao.org/docs/pdf/chn179354.pdf>)

Fourth, policy orientation and scattered smallholder operation often did not match. In rapid urbanisation, policy tended to favour standardised and regulated commercial carriers. Traditional market fairs, which often rely on dispersed individual stallholders and self-produced goods, have difficulty meeting urban expectations for standardised management, traceability, food safety and logistics. This mismatch has pushed some fairs toward marginalisation, while others have survived through regulation, cultural branding and tourism-oriented upgrading.

At present, Beijing has a resident population of more than twenty million people. Public materials and field observation indicate that dozens of popular market fairs continue to operate in suburban districts, especially in Tongzhou, Changping, Fangshan and Pinggu. There is, however, no unified official count of traditional market fairs in Beijing. Many are periodic, temporary, relocated or seasonal; definitions differ among government departments; and the relevant management responsibilities are spread across market regulation, commerce, urban management, agriculture and rural affairs, transport and township governments.

3.2 Six Representative Traditional Market Fairs in Beijing

The following examples are representative rather than exhaustive. They combine the field materials provided by the research team with publicly available information. Opening schedules should be checked before any visit, because market fairs may change their dates, locations or operating rules.

Representative examples.

Shahe Market Fair, Changping. One of Beijing's largest and most popular open-air comprehensive fairs; the west section mainly sells fresh food, snacks and daily goods, while the east section focuses on pets, birds, flowers, cultural objects and miscellaneous goods. The *Worker's Daily* report states that Shahe occupies about 70,000 square metres, has more than 1,200 merchants, and recorded more than 10,000 visitors and over RMB 6 million in turnover on a market day. (Source: <https://www.worker.cn/c/2026-01-09/8704942.shtml>)

Huoxian Market Fair, Tongzhou. A canal-culture market fair that emerged from local villagers' trade and retains rural product exchange, food, handicraft and folk-cultural functions. *Beijing Daily* reports that Huoxian lies near the Grand Canal, emerged in the 1980s, covers about 102 *mu*, has more than 500 long-term fixed stalls and more than 100 temporary stalls, and opens on lunar dates ending in 2 and 7. (Source: <https://xinwen.bjd.com.cn/content/s698ee72ed5dedd6a22e12f8e.html>)

Yongning Market Fair, Yanqing. A market fair set in the old town of Yongning, known for local mountain products, fire-baked snacks and fresh tofu. Beijing Tourism notes the abundance of local mountain goods at Yongning and identifies fire-baked snacks and local fresh tofu as two special attractions. (Source: <https://www.visitbeijing.com.cn/article/47Ql2K2Kjzc>)

Kaoshanji Market Fair, Pinggu. A long-established fair at the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei interface, associated with cross-regional rural products and seasonal purchasing. China News Service reports that Kaoshanji has a history of about six hundred years, is among the oldest fairs in the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei area, and opens on lunar dates ending in 2 and 7. (Source: <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/sh/2024/02-02/10157251.shtml>)

Dahanji Market Fair, Fangshan. A well-known convenience-oriented market fair in southern Beijing with vegetables, fruit, meat, poultry, seafood, cooked foods, dried goods, flowers and daily necessities. This profile is based primarily on field-compilation materials; additional local-government or market-office verification is recommended before publication.

Guozhuangzi Market Fair, Fengtai. A near-urban market fair with strong public popularity, especially for affordable fresh goods and family-oriented weekend visits. Beijing Tourism states that Guozhuangzi has more than 200 years of history, opens on lunar dates ending in 4 and 9, and is among the closest major fairs to the urban area. (Source: <https://www.visitbeijing.com.cn/article/4Pf09v72rrJ>)

3.3 Fieldwork: Shahe Market Fair and Lujiatan Village Market Fair

The following field notes are based on two survey sites: Shahe Market Fair in Changping District and Lujiatan Village Market Fair in Mentougou District. They record market operation, stallholder composition, household livelihood, consumer sources, consumption patterns and interview cases. The notes preserve many details of speech and bodily practice, because these details are central to understanding the traditional market as a living social space.

3.3.1 Shahe Market Fair, Changping District

Shahe Market Fair is located in Changping District, near residential areas associated with universities, research institutions, technology parks and surrounding agricultural households. It is accessible from central Beijing by subway and direct bus connections. The market is one of the largest open-air market fairs in Beijing. It is divided into eastern and western sections. The western section mainly sells fruit, vegetables, special snacks and daily goods, while the eastern section focuses on pets, birds, flowers, cultural objects and miscellaneous goods. It is a popular site for experiencing Beijing's everyday vitality and purchasing affordable fresh food.

The market has operated since 2004. According to market-management information used in the field materials, the western fair opens on Wednesday, Friday and Sunday, while the eastern fair opens on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday, usually from 7:00 to 16:00. Public reporting confirms that Shahe formally began operation in 2004, covers about 70,000 square metres, and has more than 1,200 merchants.

Worker's Daily reported on 9 January 2026 that Shahe Market Fair covers about 70,000 square metres, has accompanied residents for more than twenty years since its formal opening in 2004, has more than 1,200 merchants, receives more than 10,000 visitors on a market day, and can record more than RMB 6 million in daily turnover. (Source: <https://www.workercn.cn/c/2026-01-09/8704942.shtml>)

Field materials from the market office and interviews indicate a scale of about 1,300 operating entities, including fixed and temporary stalls. Ordinary market days often receive more than 10,000 visitors, while weekend peaks may approach 20,000. Daily turnover is reported at about RMB 4-5 million on regular days and more than RMB 6 million at peak. The operating body is the Nanyi Village Economic Cooperative of Shahe Town, which is responsible for daily operation, stall management, maintenance and upgrading. Stall fees are generally affordable, with daily rents reported at roughly RMB 100-300 and no annual rent requirement. Revenue is used for market operation and upgrading.

The market is governed through a mixed mechanism of cooperative self-management and joint supervision by market-regulation, transport and comprehensive-law-enforcement bodies. The field materials state that 207 food-safety test batches were conducted in 2025 and that the pass rate was 99.5 per cent. Because this specific figure is based on market-office and interview materials, it should be verified directly with the market office before formal publication.



Fig.9 Left: north gate of Shahe Market Fair. Right: partial aerial view. Shahe Market Fair, Beijing, 1 April 2026.

Business Composition and Stallholders

The market's categories include fruit and vegetables, fresh foods, meat, poultry, eggs and milk, local snacks, clothing and shoes, flowers, cultural objects, pets and daily goods. Field materials estimate that fruit and fresh produce account for about 35 per cent of stalls, meat, poultry, eggs and milk for about 20 per cent, special snacks for about 20 per cent, clothing and shoes for about 15 per cent, and cultural objects and pets for about 5 per cent each. In 2025, the market reportedly added intangible-cultural-heritage food, cultural-creative market areas and pet interaction zones.

Stallholders are diverse. Around 40 per cent are described as local, about 50 per cent as coming from other provinces, especially Hebei and Shandong, and about 10 per cent as younger entrepreneurs. The annual replacement rate is estimated at 15 per cent, while the renewal rate is 85 per cent. About one fifth of merchants are said to have operated for more than ten years. One benchmark example in the field materials is Master Wang's *luzhu* stall, which has reportedly operated for twenty-one years and records annual sales of about RMB 3.2 million.

The market's advantages are clear. Prices are often reported to be 30-40 per cent lower than in central urban supermarkets. The site has strong everyday vitality, growing online popularity and a notable young customer base. The main challenges are lagging digital management, the lack of an independent rapid-testing room, and facilities requiring upgrading. A 2026 upgrading plan reportedly proposes an investment of RMB 5 million to build a rapid-testing room and introduce stall traceability and visitor-flow monitoring.

Field Findings at Shahe

The most visible feature of Shahe is affordability combined with abundance. The market is sometimes described as Beijing's version of a northeast morning market. In the fruit and vegetable area, tasting is commonly permitted, and products are often sold in piles, bowls or basins. Snacks include egg-and-meat buns, *luzhu*, mutton soup and other foods

from northern and southern China, with many items priced between RMB 5 and 20. The market also sells loose spices, liquor, export-surplus clothing, antiques and bracelets.

The merchant population contains a small number of local farming households who sell their own produce, but most are itinerant market traders who circulate among market fairs in Beijing. Many have fixed stalls at Shahe and show relatively stable operating patterns. Field estimates suggest that a common fruit or snack stall may generate RMB 2,000-3,000 in daily turnover. After deducting stall fees, transport, loss and other costs, a normal fruit or snack stallholder may earn RMB 300-700 in net income per day. Better-performing special-food stalls may earn more than RMB 2,000 in daily net profit.

Consumers come from nearby communities, university students in Shahe Higher Education Park, and many young people and visitors who drive from Haidian, Xicheng, Chaoyang and other urban districts. If consumers purchase only vegetables or snacks, per-capita spending may remain at several dozen yuan. Family bulk purchases commonly reach RMB 100-200 per person.

Case Interview 1: Mr Zhou, Strawberry Stallholder

Interview date: 1 April 2026. Mr Zhou is forty-nine years old. Seven years ago, he moved from Linyi, Shandong, to Changping, Beijing, with his family and rented strawberry greenhouses. The household operates six greenhouses. The family labour force includes Mr Zhou, his wife, his seventy-nine-year-old mother, two sons and the elder son's fiancée. They do not employ outside labour.

Xiaotangshan in Changping is a recognised strawberry production area. The first crop generally ripens in December and reaches the market successively. The picking period usually continues until early May, and in some gardens may extend into late June. Because of good flavour and recognisable taste, the variety is popular with Beijing consumers.

Mr Zhou's stall displayed strawberries at different prices. Large strawberries sold at RMB 13 per *jin*, smaller ones at RMB 10 per *jin*, and smaller or less attractive berries at RMB 10 per box. Buyers came continuously. He said that most customers were repeat customers. In his words, it was useless for him to say the berries were good; only when customers had eaten them and found them good could they truly be considered good. At the market, he said, cheating was impossible because one act of deception would end the relationship. The market could earn more than his home region, but the money was difficult. Every night, the family picked fresh berries in the greenhouse and placed them one by one into boxes. His index finger and thumb were damaged from the work. At around four in the morning he brought the fruit to the market. The drive from his home to the market took a little more than half an hour.

The field visit then continued to his greenhouse and home. Following the address provided by Mr Zhou, the researchers drove about fifty minutes to a courtyard 200 metres west of the Taolin Bridge in Xingshou Town, Changping. By that time it was about one o'clock in the afternoon. Mr Zhou's wife and mother were eating lunch but received the visitors warmly. His wife explained that the annual income of RMB 200,000 did not include the rent for six greenhouses. Each greenhouse cost RMB 8,500 per year, so the

total annual rent exceeded RMB 50,000. Strawberry seedlings are replaced once a year. After harvest, the soil must be turned, requiring machine rental. The actual net income may be around RMB 100,000. Only July and August are relatively free months, during which the couple do temporary work nearby in Changping and together earn about RMB 10,000.

The household spends little on daily life. It keeps about twenty chickens, sometimes selling surplus eggs, and grows vegetables in a home garden. The younger son is in primary school and is cared for by the elder brother, who returns from Tongzhou every weekend to help with the six greenhouses. The elder son was to become engaged to his girlfriend on 17 April. According to local custom, the family needed to provide a bride gift of about RMB 150,000 and renovate the house in their home village. The total expenditure might reach RMB 400,000-500,000. While recounting these pressures, Mrs Zhou remained joyful and satisfied. She said that in their home village, they could not earn such an income no matter how hard they worked; they were content. When asked about future expenses for the second son, she replied that there were still some years ahead and that while she and her husband could still work, they would save more so that the children would not suffer later. The conversation lasted nearly half an hour, and the researcher left because Mrs Zhou had not yet finished lunch.



Fig.10 Four photographs of Mr Zhou's stall, strawberry greenhouse and home. 1 April 2026.

Case Interview 2: The Liquor Seller from Tieling

Interview date: 1 April 2026. The liquor seller is in his forties and comes from Tieling, Liaoning. He has sold liquor and vinegar at Shahe for more than ten years and is a stable stallholder. His daily stall fee is RMB 255, and his monthly stall rent is about RMB 3,000.

He and his wife operate the stall together. They rent housing near Changping Town for more than RMB 1,000 per month. They have two children, one in high school and the other more than three years old, both cared for by grandparents in their home region.

The conversation began with a direct question: why would anyone buy liquor here when fake liquor is so common and nobody knows whether it is genuine? The question did not offend him. He replied that he had sold liquor here for more than ten years. If he had sold fake liquor even once, he could not have stayed. He described the liquor as northeast-style grain spirit. Most buyers were repeat customers or came through acquaintance recommendation. The liquor, he said, was affordable and reliable in quality.

The liquor was stored in jars and measured with a traditional dipper. Prices ranged from RMB 14 per 500 millilitres to RMB 85 for the most expensive variety. He explained the taste of each type in detail. Customers continued to arrive. Many bought large five-*jin* bottles. After measuring the correct amount, he filled the remaining space in the bottle. An old customer who bought five *jin* said that he came every ten days and that the spirit was pure grain liquor, pleasant to drink and did not cause discomfort. The researcher bought a bottle of fragrant-type aged liquor for RMB 80. Later, those who tasted it remarked that it did have the flavour of old-style sorghum liquor.

The seller explained that the stall was one terminal of a larger family-based production chain. In his home region, some relatives grew the grain, some processed and distilled the liquor, and others transported it to Beijing. Sales at the market formed the final link. His annual income was about RMB 100,000.



Fig.11 The liquor seller from Tieling. 22 March 2026.

Case Interview 3: A Young Couple Running a Tofu Stall

Interview date: 22 March 2026. This stable stall at Shahe sells tofu products and has operated for more than ten years. It is run by a young couple around thirty years old and represents the third generation of a family business. The couple come from Qiqihar,

Heilongjiang. Their soybeans come from black-soil farmland, and the tofu-making method is said to be ancestral. The equipment and craft are now rooted in Beijing. The couple came to Beijing with their parents more than ten years ago and later settled into Shahe Market Fair.

On market days, they usually enter the market around five or six in the morning, set up the stall, and begin receiving customers at seven. Because tofu is a staple item for home tables, customers are frequent, and the stall often sells out by noon. During the interview, the couple were busy. The husband repeatedly took new products from the car, and the new items sold quickly.

When asked whether the work was tiring, the husband replied that if money could be earned, it did not feel tiring. The couple had one young daughter. When asked whether, under current policy, they might have two more children, the wife answered while working that they would not. One child was enough because the work was too hard. She said that after coming to Beijing for years, she had gone almost nowhere. When the researcher suggested that they were still young and should go out more often and enjoy life, she replied that this was how city people think. By noon, when the interview ended, the stall was close to sold out.



Fig.11 Young tofu seller from Heilongjiang. 22 March 2026.

Case Interview 4: Fruit Stallholders from Laishui, Hebei

This stall was operated by a father and son from Laishui, Hebei, selling mainly apples. Buyers came continuously and purchased in substantial quantities. The apples were from Hebei and were acquired directly from the family's home region. The son sold freshly squeezed juice, mainly orange and watermelon juice. A large cup was RMB 15 and a small cup RMB 10. The watermelons came from Xinjiang, and the oranges from Hubei, through long-term suppliers. During peak fruit seasons, the family came to market fairs to sell.

The father appeared weathered. The son was in his twenties and had graduated from university but had not found suitable work, so he helped his father. His words suggested

reluctance. He said only that they were earning hard money and that he had not yet found another way forward. The weather was not yet hot, so few people bought freshly squeezed juice. The researcher bought three small cups of watermelon juice, and he expressed thanks.



Fig.12 Fruit stallholder and three cups of fresh juice.

Case Interview 5: An Accidental Encounter with Colleagues from the Academy System

Date and time: 11:00 a.m., 22 March 2026. While looking for a high point in the parking area to photograph an overview of the market, the researcher noticed two people sitting beside a Land Rover and went over to speak with them. They were a married couple in their forties. The husband worked in administration, and the wife was a community nurse. In conversation, it emerged that both belonged to the Chinese Academy system. They lived on Shuangqing Road in Haidian, more than ten kilometres from the market, and came once a week to buy about a week's supply of vegetables and fruit.

They came after breakfast, placed the purchases in the car trunk, took out their own stools, and began to prepare the vegetables. The wife explained that they could prepare the vegetables while basking in the sun. In one trip, they bought food, prepared it, saved time after returning home, improved physical and mental health through sunshine, and gained a rare period of time alone as a couple. They had two children, one in high school and one in primary school, both growing rapidly and needing better nutrition. Goods at Shahe were about one third cheaper than in supermarkets. The wife showed a large box of small strawberries that cost only RMB 10 and said she would make strawberry jam so that the children could spread it on bread in the morning, saving time and money.

After saying goodbye, the researcher and the couple added each other on WeChat. That evening, the wife sent a photograph showing that the strawberry jam had already been made. A few days later, she sent another photograph and said that she planned to plant vegetables in her own courtyard, inviting the researcher to visit and take home fresh vegetables grown by the family.



Fig.13 Left: the couple preparing vegetables while basking in the sun. Right: WeChat image of homemade strawberry jam.

3.3.2 Lujiatan Village Market Fair, Mentougou District

Fieldwork date: 25 April 2026. Lujiatan Village Market Fair is located on the main street of Lujiatan Village, Tanzhesi Town, Mentougou District. It is a traditional rural market fair in western Beijing, surrounded by mountains and marked by strong local vitality. Its goods mainly include meat, eggs and poultry, while flowers, plants, folk clothing, daily goods and handmade articles are also sold. Prices are accessible, and local farmers participate directly.

The market opens on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from about 7:00 to 13:00. It can be reached by taking the S1 subway line to Jin'anqiao Station and then transferring to bus 931. The field notes indicate that local government has introduced a market-chief system for stall registration and supervision. Daily stall fees are around RMB 50, and long-term stallholders may pay about RMB 600 per month. The visible market area appeared to be less than 10,000 square metres, with more than one hundred stalls.

Lujiatan is in the mountainous area of Beijing. The surrounding area once contained more than twenty villages. Around 2000, with new-rural-construction and village-merger policies, most villagers moved into newly built apartment buildings. Today only six villages remain near the mountain foot, with a total population of more than 10,000. A particularly important finding is that village-level authorities encourage farming households to sell their own vegetables, fruit, eggs and poultry in the market and do not charge stall fees for self-produced and self-sold goods.

An official Mentougou district report from Tanzhesi Town confirms that Lujiatan Market Fair is a recognised governance site by noting a leadership inspection of environmental and traffic order at Lujiatan Market Fair. (Source: <https://www.bjmtg.gov.cn/mtg11J207/ywdt/202412/7a00a72f92814748b88fbef96c3ca6be.shtml>)



Fig.14 Entrance to Lujiatan Village Market Fair. 25 April 2026.

Case Interview 6: The “Hongyan” Strawberry Seller from Zhangjiakou

At the market entrance, the first stall displayed Hongyan strawberries. The name immediately evoked the phrase *hongyan zhiji*, or intimate friend. The seller invited the researcher to taste the fruit and said that the strawberries came from Zhangjiakou, where the soil was good and the flavour was strong. The researcher noted that Beijing consumers recognise Hongyan strawberries and that the flavour was indeed good. The seller’s business appeared strong, and most of the goods had already been sold.

The name Hongyan was not only a brand but also a container of local knowledge. The seller explained that Zhangjiakou has good land, sunshine and climate. It produces Hongyan strawberries and is also important in Chinese wine-grape cultivation. The encounter showed how a simple market transaction can carry ecological, regional and cultural information.



Fig.15 The Hongyan strawberry seller from Zhangjiakou. 25 April 2026.

Case Interview 7: The Liu Family Selling Hejian Flatbread with Meat

This stall sold Hejian-style flatbread with meat. From a distance, it was clear that business was good. Customers queued in an orderly line, and several cyclists were already eating nearby. The researcher stayed here the longest, perhaps because the fragrance of the flatbread and meat was especially compelling.

The stall was operated by a family of three: husband, wife and son. All were constantly busy. The husband specialised in preparing the flatbread. He took the dough, kneaded it, rolled it and cooked it with impressive skill. The wife faced the customers and rapidly assembled braised meat, seasoning and flatbread into a completed serving. She was clearly highly experienced. Their son served customers at the tables nearby. Although not as fast as his parents, he was already able to work independently.

The husband said that the family came from Hejian County, Hebei, and had been in Beijing for more than twenty years, always relying mainly on Hejian flatbread. Their home was in Fangshan, about fifty kilometres from Lujiatan. Business had risen and fallen, but it remained better than rural livelihood in their home area. They had bought a house and a car and raised a son and a daughter. Their daughter was in university and needed support. Their son would also need to marry decently in the future. The researcher observed that ordinary people's lives may have been like this for centuries.

The family returned home to Fangshan in the afternoon for a proper meal. Then they began stewing meat, sorting vegetables, preparing ingredients, moving and checking equipment. Every day, all preparation was completed at about two in the morning. They arrived at the market after six to prepare the stall and begin serving customers. The wife's body remained bent at roughly a thirty-five-degree angle during the final assembly process. Long-term work in this posture would likely damage her back. The researcher suggested raising the price by RMB 2 per serving. The husband replied that customers were familiar people. If the price rose, they would say the family lacked fairness, and fewer people would come. The family was simply earning physical-labour money. The researcher bought three servings for RMB 38. The food was fragrant in the hand, but the feeling was complex.



Fig.16 The Liu family preparing and selling Hejian flatbread with meat. Photograph by Fangliang Wan, 25 April 2026.

Case Interview 8: The Goat-Milk Woman

The goat-milk seller was a seventy-year-old woman from a nearby village. She kept five goats and had her own vegetable garden. She advised the researcher to buy two bottles of goat milk, freshly milked that morning, and two bundles of chives at RMB 5 per bundle. She said the vegetables were grown without pesticide or chemical fertiliser and that goat manure was used to improve soil fertility. On a normal day, she could sell RMB 40-50 worth of goods. Unsold items would be taken home for the family or given to neighbours.

Her husband drove her to the market in a small three-wheeled vehicle each morning and picked her up at noon. She said that the village committee was good because it encouraged villagers to bring their own products to the market and did not charge stall fees. She also said that the family did not lack money for daily life, but staying at home watching television or visiting neighbours felt meaningless. Idleness, she said, would damage the body. She appeared gentle, self-reliant and typical of a generation that had spent its life working hard. At parting, the researcher said that earning a little money while also enjoying leisure was good enough.



Fig.17 Conversation with the goat-milk woman. Photograph by Fangliang Wan, morning of 25 April 2026.

Case Interview 9: The Young Meat Seller from Baoding

The meat stall was run by a young couple from Baoding. Most of the meat had already been sold, and there were few customers at that moment, so the researcher began a conversation. When asked whether selling meat earned money, the young man replied that nobody would do it if it did not. He then explained that he had previously sold cars, but that business no longer earned money, so he had to inherit his parents' line of work and begin selling meat. His parents continued to sell meat at another market fair.

He and his wife were both from Baoding. His parents had bought them a 120-square-metre apartment in Baoding, but they now rented in Fangshan and rarely returned to the new home. Asked how he met his wife, he said that her grandmother introduced them. The researcher observed that the grandmother had good judgement, as the young woman seemed diligent, plain, gentle and generous in business. He explained that the grandmother was a well-known matchmaker locally and that arranged introductions remained common there because families knew one another well.

The researcher asked the young woman whether the groom's family had given a bride gift. She said yes, RMB 188,000, which was normal in their area. There were also the five gold items, such as necklace, bracelet and earrings. At the time these cost a little over RMB 20,000, but with higher gold prices today they might cost RMB 80,000. Asked whether the bride gift went to her natal family or to herself, she said it went to her family but that it did not matter, because they were now able to earn money themselves.

The young man said he was an only child and that his parents had already created good conditions for them. His parents were not yet fifty. When asked whether they had children and how many they planned to have, the husband and wife almost answered together: one or two would be enough.

The young woman conducted business flexibly and gently. When customers paid, she often rounded down the price. The young man said they were all familiar customers. There were four meat stalls in the market, so while competition was not fierce, customers preferred sellers who were generous. At that moment, a man called out and asked him to save a piece of meat for later pickup. The young man pointed to this as evidence: customers were regulars; familiarity, trust and reassurance mattered. The pork was fresh and cheap, about RMB 8-10 per *jin*. A fixed slaughterhouse delivered fresh meat every morning.

The researcher noted that the price was about half that of the central city. The young man explained that supermarket pork in the city was cut into different parts for sale, while his stall sold large pieces. In his view, the flavour of the meat was better than supermarket meat because the pork came from pigs raised for half a year rather than very young pigs. Later, the research team ordered braised pork at a nearby farmhouse restaurant and found that the flavour and texture did differ from supermarket pork.



Fig.18 Conversation with the young meat seller. Photograph by Fangliang Wan, morning of 25 April 2026.

3.4 Governance, Quality Assurance and Market Typology

There is currently no unified official total for Beijing’s traditional market fairs. This absence is understandable. First, many fairs are dynamic and temporary. They open according to lunar cycles, operate in open-air or partly temporary spaces, and may be suspended, relocated or regulated according to traffic, safety, sanitation or urban-management requirements. Second, definitions are difficult to standardise. The term “market fair” may include planned rural markets, spontaneous roadside markets, cultural-creative markets and seasonal fairs. Third, management responsibilities are dispersed among several departments. Fourth, policy attention often focuses on standardised governance, convenient community retail and market upgrading rather than on counting traditional market fairs as a distinct statistical category.

Quality assurance has nevertheless become increasingly important. Measurement supervision includes inspections and verification of electronic scales, as well as action against manipulated scales. Food-safety monitoring includes “you point, we inspect” services in which regulators collect consumer concerns and conduct targeted tests. Access management includes registration of food vendors, verification of purchase channels and inspection of health certificates for relevant workers.

The Beijing Municipal Administration for Market Regulation reported in 2025 that it was carrying out “you point, we inspect in rural areas” activities to gather public demand and conduct targeted food testing in rural consumption sites. (Source: https://scjgj.beijing.gov.cn/zwx/scjgdt/202507/t20250724_4158073.html)

Beijing has established a citywide register of electronic scales. A 2025 report states that 88,000 electronic scales were in use across the city, that 212 food-concentrated trading markets had installed 416 public verification scales, and that such scales would be promoted in community food markets. (Source: <https://m.bjnews.com.cn/detail/1740740084129558.html>)

Beijing's agricultural-product and food-retail system can be understood as layered. First are primary wholesale markets, especially Xinfadi, which serves as a large-scale node in the capital's agricultural-product supply. Second are regional comprehensive markets serving large residential areas. Third are community food markets that emphasise neighbourhood convenience. Fourth are traditional open-air market fairs, represented by Shahe, which combine livelihood provision, rural-urban exchange, tourism, cultural memory and social encounter.

Xinfadi's official company profile states that the market was founded on 16 May 1988 and that it supplies more than 80 per cent of Beijing's agricultural products. It reports 2024 transaction volume of 15.8 million tonnes and transaction value of RMB 130.6 billion. (Source: <https://www.xinfadi.com.cn/companyProfile.html>)

The overall tendency is toward digitalisation, diversification of business forms, a younger consumer and operator profile, cultural branding, and more standardised governance. Electronic payment, traceability, food-safety testing, cultural-creative stalls, live-streaming, short-video popularity and festival programming increasingly shape the way traditional market fairs survive in contemporary Beijing.

3.5 Supplementary Data Compiled by Zhao Jun

The following data were compiled by Zhao Jun from public materials and market-related sources. They are useful as a working basis, but some figures should be verified directly with market offices or local authorities before formal publication.

Large traditional open-air market fairs in Beijing that are roughly comparable in scale to Shahe include Hancunhe Market Fair, Yongning Market Fair, Huoxian Market Fair, Yongledian Market Fair, Zhangjiawan Market Fair, Yuhe Xingmao Market Fair and Longjiazhuang Market Fair. Together with Shahe, Taihu and Kaoshanji, the ten fairs listed in the working data contain 5,397 households or stalls.

Working estimates for annual turnover.

Shahe Market Fair. The estimate assumes 156 opening days. If the reported level of RMB 6 million per market day is used, annual turnover would be RMB 936 million. The RMB 6 million figure is supported as a reported single-day turnover level by *Worker's Daily*. Treat the annual figure as an estimate, not an audited total. (Source: <https://www.worker.cn/c/2026-01-09/8704942.shtml>)

Taihu Market Fair. The estimate assumes 135 opening days and RMB 500,000 per day, producing an annual estimate of RMB 67.5 million. This figure comes from source materials supplied by Zhao Jun; direct official verification is recommended.

Kaoshanji Market Fair. The working annual estimate is RMB 70 million. China News Service verifies historical and opening-schedule information for Kaoshanji but does not verify this annual revenue figure. (Source: <https://www.chinanews.com.cn/sh/2024/02-02/10157251.shtml>)

Zhangjiawan Market Fair. The estimate assumes 70 opening days and about RMB 200,000 per day, producing an annual estimate of RMB 14 million. Beijing Tourism verifies that Zhangjiawan opens on lunar dates ending in 3 and 8. (Source: <https://www.visitbeijing.com.cn/article/4GCSHpWz0oO>)

The four market fairs above have a combined working estimate of RMB 1.0875 billion in annual turnover for 2025. Beijing's official 2025 GDP was RMB 52,073.4 billion. On this basis, the combined turnover of the four fairs would equal about 0.021 per cent of Beijing's GDP. This figure should not be used to reduce the value of market fairs to GDP contribution. Its significance lies precisely in the contrast between small measurable economic weight and large social, livelihood and cultural value.

The Beijing municipal government portal reported that Beijing's 2025 GDP reached RMB 52,073.4 billion and grew by 5.4 per cent at constant prices. (Source: https://www.beijing.gov.cn/gongkai/shuju/sjjd/202601/t20260122_4455105.html)

Employment can also be estimated. If the ten fairs contain 5,397 stalls or households and each stall is estimated to involve 2.5 workers, including stallholder, family helper and temporary labour, the ten fairs support approximately 13,493 jobs. This is a working estimate based on an industry-middle-value assumption and should be clearly labelled as such.

National smallholder agriculture remains structurally important in China. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs reported, on the basis of the 2016 agricultural census, that small-scale farmers account for more than 98 per cent of China's agricultural operating entities. This supports the broader argument that low-threshold market channels remain relevant to small-producer livelihoods. (Source: https://english.moa.gov.cn/news_522/202411/t20241127_301396.html)

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Fig.19 Wan Fangliang and I met at the Yuquan Road campus of the University of Chinese Academy of Sciences before taking a car to the Lujiatan Village market fair in Mentougou. Although we belong to two different generations, we are alumni of the same university. 36 years ago, I studied here as a graduate student.

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