

# The Vanishing Haidian

By Gao Yongquan, as told to Wang Jian

Translation by Madeleine Ross and Fang Li

Wang Jian is a Beijing-based water resources expert. He contributed the following interview with Gao Yongquan, who recalls growing up in Beijing's Haidian district in the 1950s and 1960s.

Gao Yongquan, age 57, Han Chinese, driver:

People of our age can't avoid talking about water when Haidian<sup>1</sup> is mentioned. I was born in 1949, the year New China was born. Since I was young, I've lived in the area near Yiheyuan (Summer Palace) and Dayouzhuang (Abundance Village). Between 1958 and 1968, I was at school there and I remember it was like a solitary boat in a marsh— with the Western Hills, the sunsets and water everywhere. It was absolutely beautiful.

I spent my childhood in a siheyuan (a typical Beijing courtyard house) north of the Qingyanfang (Marble Boat) in the Summer Palace because my father was a chef in the Tingliguan (Listening to the Orioles) Imperial

<sup>1</sup> The name Haidian means abundant water ("Hai" means sea-like lake and "dian" means pond). Water and wetlands were once found everywhere in Haidian district and in different forms, such as rivers, lakes, ponds, and springs. Before the 1960s, the rivers in Haidian used to flow freely and the water was so clear you could see the river bottoms. Since the 1970s, rapid population growth and economic development has depleted the groundwater and dried up famous springs, including Yuquan (Jade Spring) and Wanquan (Thousands Spring). Natural rivers, such as Beichanghe (North Long River) and Jinhe (Gold River) have dried up completely. Polluted wastewater continues to be dumped into these rivers, killing most aquatic life.

Restaurant. The first thing I saw when I woke up was Kunming Lake. I used to walk to school along the famous Long Corridor at the edge of the lake, a huge body of water. The Summer Palace swimming pool didn't open until June, but I was very naughty and would already be paddling with other children there as early as May. I almost got into serious trouble from my teacher for that.

I remember a well, just outside our house, that had belonged to the Imperial Family. The winding mechanism was very unusual—it had gears and cogs. It was terrific and I used to think it was great fun to see it pumping out the water every day with a whooshing sound. I asked where it came from—they said England or Germany, I can't recall, but anyhow, it was something foreigners had presented to the Empress Dowager Cixi.<sup>2</sup>

In 1960, my father was transferred to Zhongshan Park<sup>3</sup> so our whole family moved

<sup>2</sup> Empress Dowager Cixi ruled over China for nearly five decades from 1861 to her death in 1908.

<sup>3</sup> Located northwest of Tiananmen Square, the area was originally reserved for Emperor Yong Le's use in the 15th century. There he ordered the building of an altar to the god of grain which he visited in the springtime to ensure a good harvest and in the autumn for thanksgiving. The altar grounds became a public park in 1914 and was later renamed in memory of China's first revolutionary leader, Sun Zhongshan (also known as Sun Yat-Sen).



to Dayouzhuang (Abundance Village), just north of the Summer Palace. I remember when it was extremely hot I would race over to play at the place where water came out of Yuquanshan (Jade Spring Hill). There was a gully that ran between the spring and the Summer Palace, where the water was so clear you could see the bottom and so cold that

*wheat in summer; soy beans...all that scenery...can you see it anywhere now?*

I was pretty naughty when I was young. As soon as I finished my homework, I couldn't wait to join my friends and go to the fields nearby to catch frogs or dragonflies. Life was quite hard then. We used to go and pick up any water chestnuts or lotus roots left by the

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everybody who swam in it would shiver. Some old people said that spring pumped out 13 tons of water a second. I don't know if that was true or not, but the water in Kunming Lake came from that spring.

farmers after harvesting. That was a time when there was no concept of environmental conservation. Catching a fish, killing a few frogs or birds was just a way to put food on the table.

At that time, the villages of Xiyuan<sup>4</sup> and Xiaojiahe in Northwest Beijing got their water from water pumps like the one I described. Every family had to have two buckets and a big (earthenware) vat for storing household water. It was the children's job to go to the pump for water every day. The quality of the water in Xiyuan was very good and particularly sweet. People used to say, “Jade Spring Hill water—the Emperor's drink!” So the people who lived there were very proud of that water.

When late autumn arrived, we would go to the rice fields to catch loaches<sup>5</sup>—piles and piles of loaches! At that time there was a lot of water and lots of fish. Farmers planted Jingxidao (or western Beijing rice) as a tribute to the Imperial Family. The rice was delicious because of the Jade Spring water. Not only was it sweet it was very cool, which meant the rice took longer to ripen. How could the rice not have been delicious?

*Beyond my village (Dayouzhong) there was water everywhere—in front of the CCP Party School, around the International Relations Institute and Xiyuan. With the Western Hills in the distance and water close by, there were all sorts of distractions on the way to and from school: reeds, water chestnuts and water lilies; all kinds of water birds, little fish, frogs, toads as well as prawns; golden*

In 1963, I wrote an exam and got into the high school attached to Beijing University. To get there and back I loved to walk along the river. I had a sort of map in my mind of where there were springs, where there were rivers, where there was water, and where it was fun to play. I would start off at the International Relations Institute and walk to 101 High School, then on to Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace), and further on to Huangzhuang Village. All along the way there were lots of springs gurgling up water. Women liked to wash clothes there.

<sup>4</sup> In Chinese, ‘Xi’ means west and ‘Yuan’ means wetland or woodland in general. Yuan can also refer to a royal garden reserved for hunting and other recreational pursuits by royal family members.

<sup>5</sup> A loach is a type of eel-like fish once found in the rice fields of old Haidian.



Near the International Relations Institute, there was a bowl-sized spring that gurgled up water all day long. In summer, when we were covered in sweat and dying of thirst from playing hard, we used to crouch down to drink from it. That was when we really enjoyed the taste of the water and really knew what people meant when they said the water was sweet! Crossing the road and going 200 metres further east from that spring, there was another one, and a little further on, another. Turning south along the outside wall of the Summer Palace there was another spring. Ahead, a little further on, there was another,

stream<sup>6</sup> and spotted a five-kilo fish swimming towards me! You couldn't believe how thrilled I was! I lost my school bag catching that fish, without even realizing what had happened. So what does Haidian mean? At that time, you could really feel its meaning.

In 1968, I was sent down to the Yunnan countryside.<sup>7</sup> When I came back to Beijing 11 years later, I noticed a big change—for the worse. Xiyuan was still called Xiyuan but it had lost all the things that had earned it its name. What I missed most was the water—there was less and less of it. The water in Qinglongqiao (Black Dragon Bridge) River

*“If we have to breathe filthy air and be covered by something like the lid of a huge grey pot all day long without seeing even a scrap of blue sky or white cloud, I'd rather not have development.”*

and yet another where you turned off at the bridge next to the present day Yimuyuan mall. If you went along the road near the Xiyuan Hospital and Liulangzhuang Village, there were two more springs outside the east gate of the Central Government Offices. At the north wall of the Summer Palace, a little river flowed. It wasn't wide or deep, but it ran all the way along the side of the CCP Party School, the International Relations Institute, Xiyuan and stopped at Yuanmingyuan (Old Summer Palace).

On my first day at high school it was raining. When I left home, the water on the street was deep enough to cover my feet. I waded along and my pants and shirt got soaking wet with splashes like a little motor boat makes. Having great fun, I noticed a big crowd gathered where the water flowed out of the Summer Palace. I walked closer and found that people were catching fish. I didn't dare go over as I was just a small kid. Instead I walked in the

had changed colour. Some of the springs I remembered from my childhood had stopped flowing, some had totally dried out. A well had been drilled in the village and a water tower was built to provide running water to each household. As a result, all the old water pumps had disappeared.

When I was young, there were rice fields everywhere producing the famous Jingxidao

6 The big fish caught by Gao in 1963 was escaping from the lake at the back of the Summer Palace. The river that used to flow into the Summer Palace grounds has since been filled in and is now a road.

7 “Sent down to the countryside” refers to Chairman Mao Zedong’s “Down to the Countryside Movement” or the “Up the mountains and down to the villages” campaign in the late 1960s and 1970s. Gao was one of tens of millions of urban high school children who were declared over-privileged and sent to remote mountainous or rural areas for re-education by farmers.



rice. Even local people could eat the rice that was meant for emperors. But nowadays, we have lost our water and of course the rice too. The water we drink now tastes totally different. When you boil it, a film of alkaline scum floats to the surface. You can imagine its taste. As for washing clothes, a little bit of soap in the past would produce mountains of bubbles, and quite often we didn't even need any soap. Today, no matter how much soap you use, there are no bubbles at all.

When I was in Yunnan, the places I especially liked to visit were Cangshan Mountain and Erhai Lake. Now that I think about it, I'm beginning to understand why. It's because the scenery there was so similar to old Haidian. That was a time when we were close to nature: streams ran nearby, little birds flew overhead, the sky was blue, the clouds were white, and there were the most unforgettable bodies of water...

Now, when I set off from Wanliu for work with my co-workers, the scenery has changed completely. You can't even see a trace of the rivers and springs any more. In the old days, there was water all the way along! Now what can you see? Less and less water. In the past we even had more rain. We used to be surrounded by rivers, streams, gullies and brooks—some with names and some without. In those days there weren't nearly so many people and the city itself was not in such a mess either! Look at it now, yourself! There are so many new buildings springing up that if you weren't around for a couple of years you wouldn't recognize the place. There are now millions of cars on the road; each car the equivalent of a furnace. Yes, we are getting richer, but we're getting further and further away from nature. Are we doing the right thing by building the city at this pace and on this scale? Few people seem to know the correct answer. As for me, I feel nervous the moment I hear the word "development." Whatever happens, we shouldn't be using up all of our water or all of our trees! If we have to breathe filthy air and

be covered by something like the lid of a huge grey pot all day long without seeing even a scrap of blue sky or white cloud, I'd rather not have development. What do you think?

How big should Beijing be? I don't really know the answer. I can't see the advantage of such crazy development in an area like Haidian, which isn't all that big. I'm all for the refinement and style inherited from our ancestors. We should leave the next generation with something genuine. Forget about those useless flashy slogans. We can still enjoy the mountains and gardens we have inherited from the past. Is a city full of high buildings but without mountains, water, trees, birds or scenery good to live in? Let's keep some nature alive.

Here, try some of these ganlan (olives) that my wife just brought back from Yunnan. The suanjiao (wild beans) also taste nice. These are what you could call a gift of nature. My wife and I have decided that in a few years we'll go back to Yunnan to live.

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