

“Old Beijing Dot Net” – Transmitting Traces of the Past

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China’s state-run archives offer some interesting surprises to students of history looking eastward from a European vantage point in 2006. Beijing’s Municipal Archive, for example, is something quite unlike what one might expect if all one knew were the archives of Eastern Europe’s now “former” communist states. Particularly noteworthy is the use of the internet as a tool of interactive communication with a public increasingly interested in history. The archive’s website features links to non-state local history organizations in the work of which members of the archive staff (including its researchers) are involved.

One such organization is the now six year-old *Oldbeijing.net* whose 7,452 registered members have carved out for themselves a flourishing space between the marketplace and the Communist Party’s traditional historiography. The present paper examines *Oldbeijing.net* and the trend it represents in archiving materials and data. It looks at the organization’s attempts to transmit traces of the past by mobilizing members of the public with digital cameras and notebook computers in hand to record and post, on its website, images and texts illustrating everyday life in “our city’s changing and quickly disappearing old neighbourhoods.”

The paper looks at the shifting boundaries between professional curators and a wider Chinese public. In October 2006, there were no less than 48,000 postings accessible on *Oldbeijing.net*, put there by “webizens” (e.g. school teachers, trivia collectors, students of journalism and architecture, pensioners, self-styled “visual documenters,” and former Red Guards seeking to retrace their steps in a world that is no more) who “spontaneously join forces to document the traditions and culture of old Beijing and to encourage the protection and preservation of cultural artefacts.” What does this entail for the future of archiving and the production of history in China? How is this alternative mode of exploring and representing the past impacting on the ability of the communist party state to “control” history? In what sense can it be likened to the people of Beijing “taking” if not history then at least its transmission, “into their own hands”?