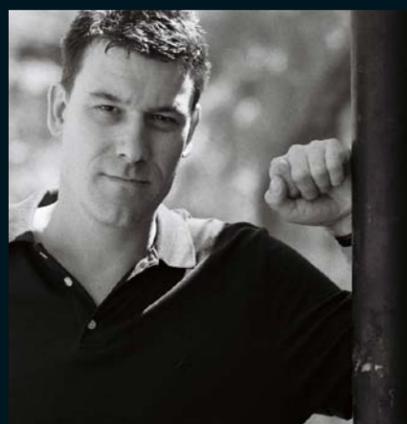




# 15 People

who changed Beijing  
in the past 15 years

Interviews by Sienna Parulis-Cook and  
Sarah Ting-Ting Hou





## The Pioneer: Jim Spear

**What were you doing in 1998?** I was working for Chindex, for Roberta Lipson's company. At that time I was living in a courtyard house that we leased. It was on a little hutong off of Lumicang, between the Second Ring and Chaoyangmen Nan Xiaojie, and Nan Xiaojie really was a "xiaojie" back then. It was so crowded at night that when people got out of work there would be what I called a "foot jam." The house we had was completely dilapidated and the northernmost part of what used to be an old courtyard house. In the *sihutong* we entered from, it was a whole bunch of shacks and broken down houses, and they had never seen anything like our family move in. Everyone came out to watch. We had a moving truck out on the main hutong, and people had to carry everything we had into the house; everyone stared the whole time, but we never had anything stolen in the years we lived there before it was knocked down. **What has changed the most about Beijing in the last 15 years?** It got rich. Beijing got cars, got even more polluted. Huge amounts of building. Lots of people left behind. There are a lot of issues that come from unequal development, but there's some truth to the old saying "a rising tide raises all ships." There's a terrible sameness to poverty everywhere in the world—people are downtrodden and don't have a lot of hope, they accept it as their fate. But the other side of the coin is that people get rich, and there's a terrible sameness to that, too. Beijing starts to look like any other modern city in the world. That's the identity crisis that China is going through: What does it mean to be rich and modern and also Chinese? Does

▲ *After working as a consultant and helping to found ASC Fine Wines in the 1990s, Jim Spear moved to Mutianyu, where he works as an architect and runs The Schoolhouse, among other businesses*

China have to go through everything that the rest of the world did? Is the modern China the CCTV tower that was designed by a foreigner? If you talk about socialism with Chinese characteristics, what's modernity with Chinese characteristics? It's really an open question, and people here have to decide for themselves. There's a lot more foreigners running around. This is the magnet for young people from all over the world. Everybody would like to come here; there are jobs, opportunities, ways to learn and grow and develop as a person. There's hope. 15, 25, 30 years ago, people felt, "well this is the way it is, it'll always be this way." Then somehow people woke up with a tremendous belief in the future, tremendous optimism that things are getting better, will get better and can change. **What are your greatest accomplishments of the last 15 years?** Chucking a corporate career without a safety net and going out with my wife Liang Tang and partners Julie Upton-Wang and her husband Peiming Wang to start a business under the Great Wall, and changing my life entirely. The first thing that I did was rebuild our house, and then one of those magical things that happen in life, people liked my house, and started to ask me to build houses for them. And now I've done more than 30 houses, out at the Great Wall, both renovations and expansions and houses built from scratch for clients from all over the world. And willy-nilly I guess I became an architect without training or without official accreditation. My houses were featured in *Architectural Digest*. There's a monograph coming out later this year. About the time I had people wanting me to build houses for them, the mayor of the village called me down to the village hall, and he changed my life from that one meeting. Here's this American who had a pretty good corporate career and was living quite well, and ran away to this little village, and it turns out this Communist Party secretary of a 400-soul village, a 500-year-old village, could really teach me something. He said, look, in case you hadn't noticed we're having a hard time. The population is aging. The young people are all moving away. We've made some money selling souvenirs at the Great Wall, but the kids don't want to do that. We don't know how we're going to sustain our community until the next generation. We need your help—nobody's ever invested in the village, and we'd like you to start a business in the village. I went and talked about it with Liang and our friends Julie and Peiming,

and we decided we would start a little studio art glass shop. People come to the Great Wall, and if you want them to stop and stay longer and spend more money, and stay around the community for awhile, maybe that's something to do, to produce the souvenirs on site instead of having factory-made items. That led to a restaurant, then lodgings. We ended up being probably the largest employers in our township of 10,000 people. **What impact would you like to have on Beijing?** I didn't start off wanting to have an influence on Beijing, and I'm not sure that I think of it that way even today. There's a historian at Yale, Jonathan Spence, and he wrote a book called *To Change China*, and it's a series of vignettes of foreigners since the Jesuits came in the Ming dynasty, coming here with the aim of changing China. And every last one of them went crazy or ended up getting changed by China. And so you see that to this very day. There are a lot of people who come here and thought they had answers for China, and I certainly don't put myself in that boat. But as a person, I think that continuing to become more aware of how communities are built and sustained and how we can inhabit the planet without destroying it, in one small way, in our little corner of the Great Wall. It's so far from perfect, but a lot of times perfect is the enemy of the good enough. I think it's important to work at the grassroots level and just to do little things, and those little things adding up. **What are your hopes for the next 15 years?** I hope 15 years from now I'm still alive! And that I keep learning every day. I hope that China continues to build a future for all of its people and is engaged with the world and in fact showing the world how to develop. There's a lot of the rest of the world that hasn't broken out of the poverty trap, so there's something that's going right here. Look at poverty alleviation, almost all of it's right here in China in the last 20 years. I'm a tremendous optimist. There's a great deal of hope in spite of what you see in the headlines. We can get it right, and China can get it right. I'd like to be around in order to be able to observe that process in my own little corner and make a contribution. People used to laugh at me 20-30 years ago. I would say, Beijing is beautiful. "What do you mean? It's dirty, it's grungy, it's grimy! When they build something, the day it opens it looks 30 years old." I said that Beijing could be the Paris of the Orient and I still think that. Beijing is turning beautiful, and it takes money and sustained attention.

## The Artist: Huang Rui

**What were you doing in 1998?** I was still in Japan. I am a career artist, so my life depends on creating art, taking part in exhibitions, events, being a part of the art market. **What has changed the most about Beijing in the last 15 years?** I'm an artist, so if you ask about change I have to talk about the city's situation and the changes and activities of the art world together. I think in the past 15 years, Beijing has changed so quickly; it's not the Beijing I knew when I was little. That's in terms of the city's construction. Another thing is before the Olympics and after the Olympics, the government's attitude to contemporary art has totally changed. Before hosting the Olympics, the government thought that contemporary art was too political, too rebellious. To have independent thinking seemed to be opposing the government, so the government was watching out for it. It distanced itself from and rejected, or even oppressed, art. But between the start of preparations for the Olympics until 798 was accepted and allowed to exist—that was in 2006—they realized that contemporary art could be part of China's

economy, its modernization could be part of the global economy. So they began to change the policies, adjust contemporary art to become part of popular culture. But this created a big divide. There are some artists who are still really independent, who want to maintain their own view. It has been divided by the market. **What are your greatest accomplishments of the last 15 years?** Because I'm an artist, I can't answer the same way as a politician or a successful entrepreneur about my biggest accomplishment. Actually, I believe that the influence that artists and other creative people have on society is indirect. From 2002, I started protecting 798, the idea of 798, and protecting the architecture and turning industrial architecture into an art district. It's a global platform, it's a place that develops contemporary art, and it's also part of the city's culture, an events stage. But I haven't stopped doing my own art. My art is introspective; I think the artworks I create do more to show my reality, show

my own thinking. This thinking is a basis, it comes from within, it's an essence, but it's all part of the flow, within the context of creation. My works are constantly, indirectly influencing young artists and society. **What impact would you like to have on Beijing?** I personally think Beijing is a great city. Beijing has a lot of outstanding people. Some of their names have been passed down, but these are few and far between. Some are forgotten in history, or because of other reasons like politics, their names are intentionally erased. Beijing will probably be like this in the future, too, because the city will continue to grow. There will always be some active personalities—cultural people, artists—with their own unique perspective, who bring forward a real creative voice. They portray Beijing as a city with a vivid past and not just a seat of political power. [Beijing] does not merely represent the idea of imperial power or the center of "Great China" thought. **What are your hopes for the next 15 years?** The thing is, China has a very traditional social structure. People are very conservative, feudal, influenced by Confucian thought to make a stable cultural structure. I can't make any prophecies, I can only tell you what my own hopes are. I obviously hope Beijing can be more free, have more creativity, and on a fully expanded international city stage, have more international communication, but fully support local artists and support what they do.

◀ *Beijing artist Huang Rui is known for his contribution to Chinese contemporary art, and for developing 798 as an art zone*

