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The Heritage of the Temples, a Heritage in Stone

An Overview of Beijing's Religious Epigraphy

MARIANNE BUJARD AND JU XI

Out of the thousands of temples that still existed in Beijing before the 1950s, less than a dozen are nowadays active, the remaining ones having been either abandoned or destroyed. However, the commemorative inscriptions that were carved on stelae for centuries and that still remain on rubbings enable us to understand whole sections of the history of temples and of the religious life of the capital.

The destruction of Old Beijing, brought on by the property frenzy of the last 15 years, has encompassed the temples. Once precious centres of heritage, the temples have been largely obliterated in the course of two separate periods. Immediately following the end of the Empire, some temples were converted into schools in line with the policy of eradicating "superstitious" practices, implemented first as part of the Hundred Days' Reform (1898) and later by the new republican authorities. After the People's Republic was founded, the temples were used not only as schools but also as barracks, factories, warehouses, office space for local administrations, or accommodation for homeless families. By this time, the temples no longer functioned as centres for religious practice, but the surviving buildings could still give tangible expression to the heritage associated with them. Up until the mid 1960s, it was not unusual for spaces containing statues and religious artefacts to be preserved, or even for a monk or a nun to attend them and to perform restricted religious services. During the Cultural Revolution, the clergy was dismantled and its members were vigorously encouraged to adopt lay status: they were sent off to be re-educated and forced to work.⁽¹⁾ The statues and the liturgical objects were destroyed and the commemorative stelae were sometimes broken or bricked up in the walls, and often buried, as in the case of the famous Taoist Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao). Its stelae have since been unearthed and dozens stand today in the courtyard.

The second phase in the obliteration of religious buildings, physically this time, began in the closing decade of the last century, when Beijing was transformed into a vast building-site, and when whole districts of the Old City and the sub-

urbs were urbanised "upwards." While the first phase in the closing down of the temples as religious centres had been the deliberate consequence of anti-religious policy, the second was rather to be understood as "collateral damage" resulting from property development policies in the capital. The religious premises were destroyed in the same property boom that destroyed hundreds of the city's narrow alleyways, the *hutongs*.

In her magisterial work on Beijing's temples, Susan Naquin puts their number, built between 1403 and 1911 in the capital or close to it, at 2,564. To those temples she adds 303 poorly-documented sanctuaries.⁽²⁾ According to estimates made during the Republic, as many as 1,734 still remained in 1930, but the total fell to 1,135 by 1936 and to 783 by 1941.⁽³⁾ The drop in number does not necessarily mean the buildings disappeared; many temples were not destroyed but reclassified by their owners as ordinary properties. Moreover, little district oratories, with no monks or nuns in attendance, were not all registered. Indeed, most of Beijing's temples were quite small. Of the 2,564 temples counted by Susan Naquin, more than 90 percent were three-sided buildings opening onto courtyards, surrounded by a wall and entered via a lodge.⁽⁴⁾ Of the rest, few boasted more than two

1. Re-education was carried out in several monasteries, among them Guangjisi, Dazhongsì, Guanghuasi, and Tongjiaosi (oral testimony collected in the course of the program *The Temples of Peking: Epigraphy and Oral Sources* — *The Social History of an Imperial Capital*. See note 5 below).

2. Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2000, p. 23.

3. *Beijing simiao lishi ziliao*, edited by the Beijing Municipal Archives, Beijing, 1997, p. 3.

4. Naquin *op. cit.*, p. 26

1. Map of Beijing and its temples

The capital's Chenghuang temple in 1930.

to five buildings. The great foundations were rare in Beijing. While researching our project *The Temples of Peking: Epigraphy and Oral Sources – The Social History of an Imperial Capital*,⁽⁵⁾ which is entirely focused on the northern part of Beijing or the Inner City (see map), we counted nearly 1,100 temples for the period between 1750 and 1949.⁽⁶⁾

Field surveys have shown that fewer than 200 still exist today: of these, hardly any have survived complete, being reduced often to a door, a room, or a courtyard. With few exceptions, they have all been converted for other purposes. Among the hundreds of working temples at the start of this century, within the perimeter of the Inner City, only four Buddhist temples still provide premises for religious activities: Guangjiisi,⁽⁷⁾ Baitasi, Guanghuasi, and Tongjiaoisi. To them may be added Yonghegong or the Lama Temple, a centre for Tibetan and Mongol Buddhism, and Lüzugong, a small Taoist temple in the west of the city dedicated to the immortal Lü Dongbin.⁽⁸⁾

Oral testimony

In those areas that have been entirely redeveloped, it is almost impossible to gather testimony on religious practice in the past. Unless some portion of the former residents were re-housed on the same spot, the new residents, coming in from elsewhere, know nothing of the former geography of their new homes. But where older buildings have survived, mainly in northern districts of the Tartar City, fragments of the history of the temples, even those demolished, linger in the memory of former residents. The time laps involved – more than 50 years since the period under examination – directs researchers towards older witnesses, and their stories have to be treated with caution. However, the data they provide – the names of monks or nuns in residence and elements of their lives, the identity of statues, the layout of buildings, the status of the temples, the pattern of life once followed within them, the stelae that once stood there – can often be partly checked against information acquired from censuses carried out between 1928 and 1947.⁽⁹⁾

A recurrent feature of these accounts is the witnesses' propensity to embellish the state of the temples and to describe them as calm, clean, and spacious. We know from the archives, however, that starting in the republican period, many places of worship let out rooms to shopkeepers or as small workshops to help with the upkeep of the buildings and the subsistence of the monks, who could no longer survive on the income from services and gifts from believers.

On the subject of Miaoyuanguan, a former Taoist temple founded during the Ming dynasty in 1451 by a Vietnamese eunuch, we found in the records for 1935 the following exchange between the priest in residence and the inspector from the Bureau of Social Affairs carrying out the census:

Inspector: Have you found the bronze statues?
[which were missing from the inventory]

Priest: I've found them. There are six, large and small.

Inspector: Where did you find them?

Priest: As we let out one of the temple rooms to a paperworks, they store paper there. They had piled up the scrap on the statues.

Inspector: Since you've found them, you must enter them on the inventory.⁽¹⁰⁾

But this idealised picture of the former temples partly reflects a reality: how living conditions in Beijing once were. Before courtyard houses became overcrowded to the point when the courtyard itself disappeared and was filled up with extensions to the original buildings, the *hutongs* offered residents markedly better living conditions than they enjoy today. Housing stock, never properly maintained, has been deteriorating ever more quickly since 1976, when Beijing's citizens, terrified by the Tangshan earthquake, built themselves temporary, open-air shelters that, strengthened and enlarged, became permanent. The temples, idealised or not, occupy special places in people's memories, places so important that many elderly residents, on seeing a tree or a length of fencing, can mentally reconstruct whole buildings. Such memories are fallible, however, when it comes to providing details not merely about the characters of the monks

5. The project *The Temples of Peking: Epigraphy and Oral Sources – The Social History of an Imperial Capital* is a joint undertaking by the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient and the Research Center for Folklore, Ancient Writing and Chinese Characters of the Beijing Normal University. This article is based on data gathered collectively by the participating French and Chinese researchers.

6. This number, though it is not definitive, suggests that the figures given above must be revised upwards.

7. The locations of the temples of the Inner City are marked on the map.

8. The project includes only the sanctuaries of the "Three Chinese Religions": Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism; three mosques and four Christian churches are still active in the Inner City.

9. Such archives are stored in the Beijing Municipal Archives; they are mainly classified under the following headings: J181-15 for the years 1928-29, J2-8- for 1936 and J3- for 1946. Some of the archives may be consulted online: <http://www.bjma.org.cn>.

10. Peking Municipal Archives, bundle J2-8-555, p. 35.

The capital's Chenghuang temple in 2007.
© Victoire Surio

in residence or the layout of the rooms, but about the ceremonies that were performed in the temples, and the links that local people had with them, whether organised or not. In just a few cases, someone will state that in such and such a small oratory to the God of Earth, Tudimiao, the local people would go to announce to the God the building of homes and births, while wedding or funeral processions had to pause before the sanctuary.⁽¹¹⁾ For ordinary prayers, an old resident sums up the situation: "Everywhere you could find a place to pray and burn incense on the first and fifteenth days of each month."⁽¹²⁾ Residents can remember several dozen temples where coffins used to be stored, sometimes for months on end, pending a suitable day for burial or while assembling the means to send the deceased home to his place of origin. Also retained in memory are the particularly lively celebrations in some temples; several were located outside our survey area, such as the Donyuemiao in the east or the Pantaogong in the south. In the Inner City, temple fairs of the Guanghuasi, of the Wanping City-god temple (Wanping Chenghuangmiao) and of the Dongzhimennei temple of the God of Medicine (Yaowangmiao, which survives only in its entry portico) have left lasting impressions on people's minds. The temple fairs or *miaohui*, where cultural and commercial activities flourished side by side, punctuated the lives of local people: the city's great temples took turns so that in one or another, every day of the month, citizens could combine their shopping with their devotions.

Several factors contribute to the amnesia affecting Beijing's citizens where their *routine* religious practices were concerned. On the one hand, being made up of everyday acts, such practices are not particularly memorable, and it is hard to persuade interviewees to pinpoint these acts in their memories and describe them. On the other hand, right from the end of the Empire, the religious life of the capital, like life in general for Beijing's people, entered upon a period of continuous upheaval: the ephemeral power of the warlords was succeeded by the new Nanking government; there followed the Japanese occupation, the Second World War and the Revolution. Religious observance was then banned for several decades, and often harshly repressed; this probably encouraged people to suppress their memories of it. The result is that the oral history of the temples, aside from notable events, is today focused on their disappearance.

The heritage of the stones

Yet, if the spaces occupied by the temples are still so prominent in the memories of Beijing's older residents even while

religious observance has been wiped from their recollections, it is undoubtedly because the temples were the dwelling-places not only of the gods but also of human beings. Worshipers were eager to decorate and maintain them in order to win the favours of the gods. The inscriptions that generations of believers have had carved into the stelae, the stone slabs standing in the temple courtyards, are evidence that the temples were primarily places for social intercourse, whether as modest sanctuaries where the locals would ask the monks in residence to treat an illness or answer a prayer, or as more important foundations where individuals from all levels of society could socialise during feasts and fairs.

Now that most of the stelae have disappeared, their inscriptions survive only in the form of rubbings from 221 temples, which is less than a quarter of the 1,100 temples that we have so far inventoried within the area of the Inner City. Clearly, rubbings were not taken of all the stelae, while many small temples had no stelae at all. In our collection of 541 rubbings of inscriptions,⁽¹³⁾ the oldest was composed in 1284 by the Mongol Emperor Kubilay, naming the monks in Chongguosi, later called Huguosi, in the north-west of the Tartar City, and endowing the temple with land and outbuildings.⁽¹⁴⁾ The most recent, dating from 1943, commemorates the restoration of the former temple of the God of Earth of the Capital by a Buddhist monk of the Pure Land school.⁽¹⁵⁾ This epigraphic documentation, extending across nearly 700 years, constitutes a mine of information not just for retracing the history of the temples, but also for acquainting us with the individuals and communities of believers who built them and ceaselessly repaired them through the centuries.

On the pediment of one stela, on both front and back is carved in sigillary script expressions in four characters, such as *wanguliufang* ("May his name be eternally fragrant" - the

11. Interview conducted in Ganmiang *hutong*, 1 May 2005 (researchers: Ju Xi and Marianne Bujard).

12. Account recorded in the courtyard of the mosque of Douban *hutong*, 3 May 2007 (researchers: Victoire Surio and Du Xueying).

13. For Beijing and its outskirts, the index of rubbings archived at the Bibliothèque nationale lists 2,097 rubbings of stelae linked to the foundation or rebuilding of temples. We may add 172 rubbings taken from stelae devoted to the temples of guilds and associations, see *Beijing tushuguan zang Beijing shike tapian mulu*, Xu Ziqiang ed., Beijing, Shumu wenxian, 1994. For reproductions of the rubbings see *Beijing tushuguan cang Zhongguo lidai shike tapian huibian* (further *BJTP*), Beijing tushuguan jinshizu ed., Zhengzhou, Zhongguo guji, 1990-1991 or online: <http://res2.nlc.gov.cn:9080/ros/index.htm>.

14. *BJTP*, # 337 (1284), vol. 48, pp. 88-89 (# followed by the inventory number, the date of the erection of the stela, the numbers of the volume and the pages where the rubbings taken from the inscription are reproduced).

15. *BJTP*, # 2976 (1943), vol. 100, pp. 36-37. Tongjiaosi houses three more recent stelae (1948 et 1953), but they have not been reproduced.

most common), or similar formulas such as *wanguchangchun* (“May his spring last eternally”) or *yongchuibuxiu* (“Left to posterity for ever”). And the text of an inscription generally ends with a wish that the stone should preserve “forever” or “for future generations” the memory of the facts inscribed upon it. Thus, on a stela from 1451 originally erected in Miaoyuanguan (mentioned above) is written: “The reason that I have again composed an inscription recounting the building of this temple and the dimensions of the site is to enlighten the generations to come.”⁽¹⁶⁾ Similarly, at the end of a stela confirming a gift of land to a small Buddhist sanctuary, one can read, “[To establish this contract] I have placed on this stone an inscription that will last a thousand years, spread its fragrance across a hundred generations and remain for posterity.”⁽¹⁷⁾

The function of these fine stones planted in the temples is thus to commemorate an event and to preserve its memory for ever. But what is being commemorated and what are the facts that are being passed on to posterity?

In the great majority of cases, those who commissioned the stela intended to celebrate the restoration of the sanctuary or one of its rooms. The standard expression for describing the condition of the buildings was, “The roof leaks, the buildings are collapsing,” and once the renovation is complete, “The temple is like new.” The exaggerated descriptions of the buildings’ state of disrepair are intended only to exalt the worshippers who have rescued the buildings from ruin, and cannot necessarily serve as a reliable record of their condition. The inscriptions linger over descriptions of the renovated buildings, the re-gilded statues. The dates when the work was begun and completed are usually recorded to the exact day. The names of the most generous donors are sometimes recorded on the fronts of the stelae – they had “opened wide their purses” and showed “admirable piety.” The names of other contributors are mentioned on the backs in lists sometimes extending to several hundred names.

Other events, too, were deemed worthy of record: gifts from emperors such as collections of sacred texts or lands, or the award of an honorary title to a monk. In Guangfuguan, a Taoist foundation of the Ming Period near Houhai – today the site of a restaurant – a Taoist master received from the sovereign in 1465 a heading in 18 characters followed by the title of “perfect man” (*zhenren*).⁽¹⁸⁾ Publicising the patronage of an emperor by setting up a stela raised the prestige of the sanctuary. The slabs also commemorate the founding of an association of worshippers who, in collaboration with the resident monks, committed themselves to celebrating the anniversary of the temple divinity: in Fatongsi, east of the

Drum Tower, the faithful commemorated the pilgrimage that had brought them to Zhuozhou (Hebei) in honouring Bixia Yuanjun, the great female divinity of northern China.⁽¹⁹⁾ A ceremony to give thanks for a special favour is also worthy of being remembered in stone: in a temple in Guandi, to the west of Dongzhimen, an inscription celebrates the generosity of a benefactor who paid for the sanctuary to be entirely rebuilt, newly furnished, and equipped.⁽²⁰⁾ Some stelae record the rules governing an association or a professional guild connected with a temple: in Zhenwumiao, in Xisibei-dajie, a stela lists the obligations of the guild of pork meat brokers towards the God of Wealth.⁽²¹⁾ There are other inscriptions defining the ownership of temples, for example by forbidding any change of a “public” temple belonging to the clergy (*shifang congling*) to a hereditary temple (*zisunmiao*), the transfer of which from master to disciple would deprive the monastic community of its rights.⁽²²⁾ The inscriptions can also serve as contracts registering the purchase of land, or a gift of land by an individual; for example, in the 1808 stela that we quoted above, a Manchurian repaid a debt to the temple priest in the form of two pieces of land near Beijing. The inscription notes the location of the land, its inalienable transfer of ownership, and the names of witnesses guaranteeing the transaction.⁽²³⁾ Other inscriptions, recording repairs, lay down the exact dimensions of the temples’ land and outbuildings with the obvious aim of protecting their ownership.⁽²⁴⁾ Often the stela records what is known of the sanctuary’s history and seeks to emphasize its age or the illustrious characters of those who were connected with it in the past; it records the names of distinguished monks who lived in the temple or administered it, or the connections maintained by the temple with a well-known monastery.⁽²⁵⁾ Lastly, the stela may reproduce a *sutra* (or scripture) or a verse of the *sutra*, sometimes accompanied by the carved image of a divinity. Thus, the stela is not only commemorative but also serves, like a statue, as an object of devotion. Clearly, these different categories are not watertight. The

16. *BJTP*, # 539 (1451), vol. 51, p. 173.

17. *BJTP*, # 466 (1808), vol. 78, p. 34.

18. *BJTP*, # 508 (1465), vol. 52, p. 45.

19. *BJTP*, # 608 (1703), vol. 66, pp. 28-29.

20. *BJTP*, # 200 (1833), vol. 80, p. 48.

21. *BJTP*, # 1091 (1849), vol. 81, pp. 181-182.

22. *BJTP*, # 518 (1673), vol. 63, p. 35, erected in Youshengsi to the west of Drum Tower.

23. *BJTP*, # 466, in the Wanfu’an located to the west of the Bell Tower.

24. *BJTP*, # 8420 (undated), vol. 60, p. 185, for Huguosi.

25. *BJTP*, # 278 (1778), vol. 74, p. 19, praise for a monk of Fahuasi, north of Wangfujing.

Rubbing⁽²⁶⁾ of the Baochansi stela, carved in 1592. Above the text, we can see the Buddha's footprints.

commemoration of repairs to buildings invites the author to recall the history of the temple and of its divinity, to praise the monk who administers it or an ascetic who lives there, and ends by dwelling on the truth of a particular *sutra* before repeating the entire text in verse. Such inscriptions may well have also been commissioned by an association of believers that financed the building works.

While the text carved on the stelae may vary, they all serve as contracts of commitment, both for the gods toward humankind and for humans toward each other. They are intended to draw local divinities' attention to the circumstances governing the restoration of the sanctuary and the identity of the donors, so that the gods will respond by extending their favours to the faithful. When it is the emperor himself who has bestowed a name upon the temple or has richly endowed it with land, honorary titles, or collections of sacred texts, the gods' indebtedness is all the more manifest, and the temple offers increased protection to the worshippers. On the other hand, when humankind neglects the sanctuaries and leaves them abandoned, the divinity may reveal him or herself to encourage the faithful to carry out repairs. An appearance of this kind was recorded in 1651 in the Temple of Our Lady of the Bell Foundry (Zhuzhong Niangniangmiao) west of the Bell Tower: "While the temple precincts were letting in water and falling into ruin without anyone repairing them, the deity made a fortunate appearance to offer assistance; and all the faithful in the district were moved by it."⁽²⁷⁾ The temple was immediately repaired. Carved into a fine-grained stone, sculpted with propitious motifs around the edges and along the top, the stela is a tangible record of the alliance that humankind has struck with the gods and perpetuates the memory of its successive renewals.

But the stela is also a contract struck between human beings. When it specifies the temple's dimensions, registers a gift or a purchase of land, its legal value is evident; it is the same with inscriptions fixing the rules of a guild or an association, like that of the eunuchs: in agreement with the monks of Xinglongsi, north-west of the Forbidden City, they established in 1761 a retirement fund to insure their old age and to settle in the temple.⁽²⁸⁾ The temple was pillaged by the expeditionary corps sent against the Boxers in 1900, and was subsequently restored several times; it gave shelter to eunuchs up until 1965.⁽²⁹⁾ When a stela commemorates a restoration, the contractual value is directed more towards the gods, but it applies to human beings as well. All those whose names are inscribed, starting with the most generous donors, may expect to enjoy increased prestige within the

community of the faithful. The gift confers rights, such as that of standing out from the crowd.

The very solidity of the material chosen for inscribing a record of events is enough to persuade us that carved messages in stone are addressed to future generations, and as previously mentioned, there are numerous standard expressions that underline this function. Here again, with the future in mind, the contractual value is never absent: a hereditary temple's priests in residence might refer to an inscription to validate their rights if the deed of ownership were to be lost. Thus, the eunuchs attached to the staff of the Chonghua Palace in the north-west of the Forbidden City reasserted their ownership rights over two small temples nearby with a restoration stela erected in 1907.⁽³⁰⁾ Two of the donors were still owners in 1937. In addition, the stelae, being made to last, guaranteed the legitimacy and prestige

26. *BJTP*, # 367 (1592), vol. 58, p. 28.

27. *BJTP*, # 597 (1651), vol. 61, p. 45.

28. *BJTP*, # 674 (1761), vol. 71, p. 195; the association was still active in 1895, see *BJTP*, # 678, vol. 87, p. 115.

29. Interview recorded in the temple courtyard, 3rd November 2007 (researchers Victoire Surio et Liu Yaoye).

30. *BJTP*, # 657, vol. 89, p. 122, in the temple of the God of Fire behind the Coal Hill.

Pediment of the foundation stela of the Qingxuguan, carved in 1454. It lies abandoned in the middle of a vegetable garden not far from the Bell Tower.

© Patrice Fava

of those who commissioned them. When an association of believers can use stelae to support claims of continuous activity over decades in one particular sanctuary, it is well placed to claim the right to continue worshipping there. That was the case with a benevolent association active for nearly 30 years, between 1752 and 1779, in the great temple of the God of Medicine at the northern edge of the city (Bei Yaowangmiao). Indeed, the recurrence of donors' names from one stela to another shows how stable was the staffing of that association.⁽³¹⁾

Who composed the inscriptions?

Not all inscriptions are signed, but when they are, the writer's identity is often such as to increase the value of the epigraph and of the facts being commemorated. Half of the 541 recorded inscriptions are signed, and the writers may be divided into three main groups: emperors, scholars, and monks.

More than a quarter of the signed inscriptions are authored by emperors. Their stelae celebrate foundations, ceremonies of thanksgiving to a particular divinity, either in a temple maintained by the imperial administration or in a sanctuary open to the public that the emperor wishes to honour by some particular attention. The inscriptions that publicise the donation of lands or sacred texts, as well as those conferring honorary titles upon heroes or monks, are usually composed by the emperor himself. They provide us with information about the patronage accorded by the monarch to the temples of Beijing. Even so, in order to understand the extent of this patronage, especially where the Manchu Dynasty is concerned, the data supplied from epigraphy has to be supplemented with material from the imperial archives, for it does not convey the *regularity* of the subsidies paid out by the court to several dozen temples.

The scholars, especially those of the Hanlin Academy of the Imperial College and also of the Ministry of Rites or other administrations, are the authors of more than half of the signed stelae of the Inner City (155 out of 278). They composed the inscriptions either for cults they sponsored or for which they performed official sacrifices, or on invitation from communities of believers, monks, or eunuchs to compose inscriptions for temples with which they did not necessarily have direct contact. However, before we can speak of a simple commission, we must examine each particular case. Sometimes the writer discloses his link with the temple: his friendship with a monk, or a stay as a paying guest in a tem-

ple room converted into an inn. But we find two almost identical inscriptions devoted to the same temple by two celebrated erudites⁽³²⁾ with 27 years' gap between them: it suggests that the officials, too, were responding to commissions, and composed their inscriptions along established lines, as is frequently attested by the formulaic style of the texts.

Monks also composed inscriptions, but these amount to less than one tenth of the total. Usually they are the work of the manager of the temple (*zhuchi*) who allocates transfers of ownership or repairs. Senior monks also composed inscriptions, either when they were personally linked to a particular religious establishment or when this establishment was dependent on a monastery where they lived.

A stone set up in front of a temple is an expensive artefact intended to be read, or at least displayed and seen, and the stela's value increases when its text is composed by a member of the elite. The sanctuary where it stands acquires in its turn more prestige, while in believers' eyes the effectiveness of the gods is enhanced.

The donors

Epigraphie throws light on the identity of the faithful who maintained the temples, either with personal contributions or as members of associations acting on behalf of a particular sanctuary. Donors' names, usually listed on the back of the stela, belong to several categories of individuals, and their diversity shows that the temples were responding to the needs of all levels of society: the imperial families, the eunuchs, the officials of a particular administration, the monks, the tradespeople and artisans, sometimes named individually and sometimes grouped within a guild, and associations of believers dedicated to the upkeep of a temple or to organising a pilgrimage. Many such associations were composed mainly of women. On the ethnic side, during the Qing Dynasty, Manchurian and Mongolian donors were included among the Han.

We should make particular mention of the eunuchs who founded and maintained several hundred temples in and around Beijing (140 foundations and 294 subsidised temples).⁽³³⁾ In the Inner City they are mentioned as donors in

31. *BJTP*, # 494 (1752), vol. 70, pp. 176-177; *BJTP*, # 545 (1779), vol. 74, pp. 33-34.

32. These are the two stelae mentioned in the preceding footnote.

33. Susan Naquin, *op. cit.* p. 80.

Rubbing of the Agongci stela,
carved in 1850.

93 inscriptions relating to 55 temples. It was above all during the Ming Dynasty, when they were at the height of their power, that their patronage is most evident: 62 Ming stelae record their various donations, as against only 26 for the Manchu period, during which their influence was sharply reduced at the emperors' wish. Out of these 26 inscriptions, 17 are more recent than the mid-nineteenth century, indicating a recovery of eunuch participation in the maintenance of the temples. Several inscriptions surviving from this period relate the joint purchase by eunuchs of a temple where they planned to settle in retirement. During the Ming Dynasty, it was common for eunuchs to convert their private residences into temples. They would appoint priests there, and after leaving the service of the court they would retire there. That was the case with Qingxuguan, of which nothing remains but the foundation stela. Dating back to 1454, it lies abandoned in the middle of a vegetable garden not far from the Bell Tower.⁽³⁴⁾

In our collection, it was only after 1750 that tradespeople were explicitly mentioned as donors. In some cases, their shops were located near the temples they were supporting; in others, they were based across the capital, or indeed in another city. One of the earliest stelae to mention the names of businesses in the donors' list dates from 1753, with more than 30 shops listed.⁽³⁵⁾ It was erected in Wushengmiao, in Xijiekou, and was followed by three other stelae all bearing the names of businesses.⁽³⁶⁾ Several of these recur on more than one stela. This remarkable continuity shows that the groupings of believers were not ephemeral phenomena, and lacked in neither stability or endurance.

We have counted 68 stelae recording the names of about 60 associations. As far as it is possible to determine, some were short-term – formed to repair a temple or celebrate a divinity – and some were lasting. The latter sometimes brought together men who performed identical administrative functions, such as the investigating censors (*jiancha yushi*) who sacrificed every year to their own God of Earth in a temple of Guandi south of the Forbidden City.⁽³⁷⁾ Others were composed of members of an administration, such as the staff of the Bureau of Appointments (*Wenxuansi*) who made their sacrifices in the Xugongci⁽³⁸⁾ inside the Ministry of Personnel. There were similar associations of officials or eunuchs who managed the grain stores, the armouries, the powder magazines, the stables, and the textile mills. Twenty-two guilds were involved in the upkeep of temples, representing carpenters, joiners, water-carriers, moneychangers, sellers of fresh fruit and dried fruit, second-hand clothes dealers, silk merchants, and storytellers. Most brought together

individuals within a district and living near a market – or, in the case of the water-carriers, near a well. Lastly, we identified 28 associations, each attached to one cult, whose members had nothing in common but the wish to commit themselves to the service of a particular divinity. One such was the Association of the Penitents of the City God temple located south-west of the city,⁽³⁹⁾ who walked at the head of the god's procession to preach virtue; another association was that of the believers, all of them women, who celebrated the cult of Our Lady of the Nine Summits (*Jiuding Niangniangmiao*) in the temple dedicated to her.⁽⁴⁰⁾

34. *BJTP*, # 550 (1454), vol. 51, p. 190.

35. *BJTP*, # 372 (1753), vol. 71, p. 19.

36. *BJTP*, # 374 (1774), vol. 71, pp. 19-20; *BJTP*, #371 (1794), vol. 76, pp. 85-86 ; *BJTP*, #370 (1821), vol. 79, pp. 8-9.

37. *BJTP*, #117 (1664), vol. 62, p. 37.

38. *BJTP*, # 7 (1773), vol. 73, p. 106.

39. *BJTP*, # 1211 (1792), vol. 76, p. 20.

40. *BJTP*, # 496 (1756), vol. 71, p. 93-94. Niangniangmiao, the temple in question, was seated next to that of the God of Medicine at the northern edge of the city.

Conclusion

This brief survey of commemorative inscriptions relating to Beijing's temples serves to emphasise that all categories of Beijing's population, from top to bottom of the social scale, at one time established more or less close relationships with the city's religious foundations. While the temples remained primarily places of prayer for the faithful and of retreat for the clergy who supervised the worship of the divinities or offered their services to the citizens, they were also at the centre of regular or occasional meetings of numerous associations of individuals brought together by residential proximity, profession, geographic origin, or merely by their devotion to a protective divinity. The living memory of this intense social activity is on the brink of extinction; while the believers thought they could preserve it in the solidity of stone, the carved stelae they commissioned have been to a large extent destroyed. By luck, in the first decades of the last century, far-sighted scholars had several series of rubbings made. Thanks to them, the study of the inscriptions is still possible and offers researchers many discoveries, as you will notice by reading, in conclusion, the 1850 inscription⁽⁴¹⁾ to the Agongci, the sanctuary of Mr. A, that once stood inside the entrance to the prison of the Ministry of Justice. •

• Translated by Philip Liddell

Glossary

Bixia yuanjun	碧霞元君
jiancha yushi	監察御史
Jiuding niangniangmiao	九頂娘娘廟
shifang congling	十方叢林
wanguchangchun	萬古長春
wanguliufang	萬古流芳
Wenxuansi	文選司
yongchubuxiu	永垂不朽
zhenren	真人
zhuchi	住持
zisunmiao	子孫廟

In the fifth month of the year, during the summer of 1847, about 60 people convicted of misappropriation of funds from the public purse were sent to prison. With several others, I was sent to the northern prison. At the west corner of the entrance gate, facing east, was a temple dedicated to the late Prison Governor, a man known only as Mr. A. Occupying no more than a single bay, the courtyard was not large. On the northern side were growing some tall bamboo, interspersed with pines and elms; the trunks and the thick foliage formed a vault that hid the sky. Even if you went in there at midday you felt chilled to the bone. The face of A's statue was painted in blue and green; his eyes flashed, but by virtue of his charitable and amenable manner he inspired no fear. Escorted by four devilish-looking assistants, he was preceded by a groom leading his horse. According to the jailer, the temple had been built long before, and no one knew to which god it had originally been dedicated.

When A was the prison governor, on the last day of the year, he sought to match the gesture by the Emperor Tang Taizong (627-649) by freeing the prisoners. When all of the prisoners had returned to the prison as they had agreed with the governor, one of them who lived outside the city walls was delayed because his mother had fallen ill. He found the gates of the city shut: he could not enter until the next morning. Before midnight, the governor had already committed suicide by swallowing poison, and the prisoner likewise killed himself by throwing himself from the top of the steps. The following day, when the jailer went into the temple, the statue of the god had taken on the likeness of the governor in every feature. Thenceforward, the temple acquired the name of A's Sanctuary; and the figure of the groom was painted in the image of the delayed prisoner.

As we were waiting to be sentenced lying flat on our bellies, we prayed silently to A in the hope that perhaps he might come to our rescue. If we did, in the event, escape death, it was thanks to the thousand blessings he showered upon us. We placed our faith in him, and our reward was great! Crying tears of emotion we have composed this account. A's first name was Shitu; he was a Manchurian of the Bordered White Banner. Extraordinary phenomena often occur in the prison: in the middle of the night one may hear the sound of a horse's hooves, as though someone was on guard patrol; but when one tries to see him he disappears as though by magic!

In the second month of the spring of the year 1850, Wen Pu, Qi Shen, Yi Chong, Wen Hou, Tekeshenbu, and Ling Shou all came to know these facts; Xi Chun composed and traced the calligraphy of this inscription.

41. BJTP, #114 (1850), vol. 81, p. 188.