

Stefano Cammelli
Piazza San Domenico, 2
40124 BOLOGNA – ITALY
TEL. +39051 – 233.716
stefanocammelli@viaggidicultura.com

STEFANO CAMMELLI

THE HISTORY OF PEKING
and how it became the capital of China

Preface

This book is an investigation into the historical identity and image of Beijing. Peking being the capital of China, it comes as no surprise that the history of the city should play a central part in a large number of books on the country. However, none of these has ever convincingly answered the probably banal but inevitable question: when was Peking founded? Conventional wisdom has it that Emperor Yongle founded the city in the early 15th century on the spot chosen by the Mongols for their capital Dadu, the city Marco Polo saw. This answer avoids the issue and just begs another question: why not say straightforwardly that it was founded by the Mongols in the 13th century?

As if playing with Russian dolls, the historian, and his reader, will discover that even this is not quite the whole truth. There was already a town standing where the Mongols founded their capital, so why not include it in the history of Peking? Looking further into the matter, it soon becomes clear that Peking conceals what others would have celebrated. Its history is deliberately confused and full of gaps, and these are all the more significant as this question is in fact not glossed over in historical accounts of China's dynasties. So this silence is not due to a lack of sources, but to something else.

Why? This investigation started out as an attempt to reconstruct Peking's past by following up these blind spots, gaps and oversights, but the puzzle burgeoned out to include another, more complex but also more fascinating topic: the problem of Peking's self-image. That is, what image did the Chinese have of their capital, or what was the image the city had to match up to? This raises complex and far-reaching questions concerning the history of China, including the rivalry between Peking and Nanking, for instance. Or the less overt competition with the ancient capital, present-day Xi'an.

So it is that poring over plans of Peking known to archaeologists, but often ignored by historians, and delving into the part played by the city in the chronicles of the dynasties, but which rarely figure in specialized scholarship, Peking gradually emerged not just as a city but as a capital emblematic of an ideological problem within Chinese culture, involving the very idea of the State, Government and Ruler. Nor is this all. The history of Peking, a profoundly northern, highly decentralized city with respect to the rest of the country, is also the history of the peoples living beyond the frontier of the Great Wall. Non-Chinese peoples, such as Koreans, Turks, Qidans, Jurchens, Mongols and Manchurians (Manchus). Today, many of these peoples have either moved, or have been absorbed into modern China, adding to its many ethnic components. It was not always so, and neither were relations always friendly; quite the opposite. More often than not there was friction between the groups. Westerners visiting Peking at the end of the 19th century speak of “the Tartar city” and “the Chinese city” as two separate entities, claiming that the division was introduced in 1644 by those who had just arrived, the Manchus. Inevitably, this meant a city divided between peoples. But the ruling Manchus were not Tartars, so why this choice of name? And what does the expression divided city mean? How should one gauge a division that seems to be based on an ethnic distinction?

Like Rome and the Vatican, Peking is not just a city, but the sum of the symbols and values that have fused there. This mixture of Chinese and Central Asian elements is hard to interpret and the task is made all the more difficult by tricks worthy of halls of mirrors, falsehoods proclaimed and truths hidden. As in an Agatha Christie murder mystery, the truth, the great chimera of the historian, may exist, but it has to be arrived at by using evidence which inevitably seems inconclusive or doctored. Untangling this web of deliberate silence and half-truths will get us closer to the heart of Peking.

It also takes us to the heart of China and its complex approach to history, an age-old philosophy of history with Peking as symbol, protagonist and victim. So it is that even years of study, a vast array of books read and repeated crosschecking have failed to provide a final answer. What it has furnished is one possible, though hardly unequivocal, interpretation.

The reader will have no trouble in realizing from the wealth of notes that some authors have inspired me more than others and the present book is largely based on their work, and I have greatly appreciated their guidance: Frederick Mote (Princeton), Susan Naquin (Princeton), Morris Rossabi (Columbia University, New York) and Nancy Steinhardt (Penn University, Philadelphia). I am also indebted for several ideas to the increasingly varied and fruitful sinological research carried out in Italy. I have benefited greatly from the brilliant insights of Wu Hung (Chicago), Jessica Rawson (Oxford), Arthur Waldron (Philadelphia) and the renowned James Cahill: all

authors who have no direct interest in the topic of Peking as a capital, but whose works have enabled me to get a grasp of the world of the Chinese literati and of the intricate and extremely subtle game of quotations, references, omissions and silences. The works of Lao She, a Chinese novelist who died during the Cultural Revolution, disclosed to me a Peking that was ironic, proud, quiet and infinitely delicate.

And now to my heartfelt thanks. My learned colleague, Maurizio Paolillo has succeeded in the tricky task of checking dynastic sources and shoring up the shakier sections of my enquiry or those most needing firm support. I have marked the text with the initials M.P. where his contribution is especially extensive, as in some important notes. My thanks also go to Nicoletta Celli for her flood of ideas and suggestions which never failed to fire my imagination. I cherish the hope that the three of us might join forces on a project one day.

He Hui Juan, Liu Gaowei, Li Xiao Hong and many other Chinese friends were my invaluable companions on my long trips to China, which reached a ridiculous rate during the two years it took me to draft the text.

Massimo Ambrosetti, Giovanni Curatola, Giorgio Cusatelli and Maurizio Harari have shared my thoughts and they have been tough critics when necessary, pinpointing inconsistencies or highlighting important points not made forcibly enough.

Adriana D'Orlando, Viviana Jemolo, Ursula Schoenhuber, Mirella Molle Simeoni and Maria Teresa Marietti Alemanni have been indispensable in suggesting the tone the book should adopt in order not to drift too far from the simple style of writing essential if desired to be read.

However, like the Chinese literati of old, I too am duly grateful to people who share no responsibility for this fruit of my labours, but from whom I have tried to learn something of the historian's craft. To my erstwhile teachers, Franco della Peruta, Carlo Ginzburg and Claudio Giovannini go my heartfelt thanks.

Thanks, too, to Michael Richard Giraschi, for his irreplaceable help over all these years.

My children, Sebastiano, Maddalena, Marianna and Alessandro have had to put up with a father whose mind was on something larger than himself and which for long periods claimed him totally. I dedicate this book to them with the promise to make up at least some of the time lost.

I also dedicate the book to the memory of my father, Sergio, who loved China and often travelled there in the Fifties and Sixties – the years when the Chinese people raised themselves up through endless effort and at terrible cost, overcoming the folly, starvation and despair which was the legacy of the militarist and colonialist project imposed by European and Japanese imperialism.

Bologna and Peking, September 2001 / November 2003.

