

# Beijing Legends

Jin Shoushen



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Translated by Gladys Yang



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Beijing Legends

Jin Shoushen (1906-1968) was born into a Manchu family which had lived for generations in Beijing. After graduating from Beijing University, where he studied literature, he taught in different colleges in Beijing. He made a careful study of the city's history, topography and customs, and also became an expert on phonology and traditional Chinese medicine. Over the years he compiled comprehensive records of anecdotes and legends about the capital, which he published in magazines and in book form. He was known as an authority on Beijing.

In his later years he was a member of the Beijing Federation of Literary and Art Circles and the Beijing Drama Research Institute.

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## Preface

THESE folk-tales are translated from *Beijing Legends*, compiled by Jin Shoushen, a Manchu gentleman whose family lived for many generations in Beijing. Based on the tales told him by people from many walks of life in the capital, they were first published in 1957 by the Beijing Publishing House. What they lack in literary polish is made up for by the genuine folk flavour with which they carry us back to the building of Beijing as the Ming capital in 1421. They deal with the city's layout, some of its chief monuments, place names and different legends, and give us fascinating glimpses of the life of rulers as well as ordinary people.

Nezha, a legendary hero in the first tale of "The Eight-Armed Nezha City" in this collection, plays a prominent part in these tales and has a special place in Chinese legend; but his pedigree can be traced back to India. An Indian Buddhist legend describes a young god Nalakuvara or Nalakubala, who was the third son of the Heavenly King Vaisravana, one of the twenty devas. During the Ming Dynasty, this boy's name was transliterated as Nezha, first in Wu Cheng'en's *Pilgrimage to the West* and then in *The Canonization of the Gods*; and his father became Li Jing, an early Tang general who won renown by defeating the Eastern Turks. Because

Li Jing helped to build up the Tang Dynasty he became a guardian god.

*The Canonization of the Gods* attributed great ability to Nezha, who was said to have killed the son of the Dragon King. In revenge, the Dragon King tried to flood the country. In order to clear his father of blame, Nezha disembowelled himself and cut off all his flesh which he derived from his parents; but after his death his divine teacher made him a new body out of a lotus flower, and he became a god. *The Pilgrimage to the West* presents him as one of the gods who defended Heaven and fought with the Monkey King. Because of his supernatural powers and his defiance of the Dragon King, Nezha was a well-loved figure and the people of Beijing were proud to claim his patronage.

Unfortunately many of the temples and pagodas described in these tales have now fallen into ruins. China had such a wealth of old relics, and such limited funds for their upkeep, that they were not carefully treasured. Thus the capital's city wall and most ornamental archways were pulled down after Liberation to facilitate traffic and, for a lover of history, the face of old Beijing is sadly changed. All the more reason then, to preserve these legends describing its past; and it is heartening to see that today the People's Government is taking steps to restore old monuments.

Half a million years ago, in the days of Beijing Man, this area was largely under water. This old folk memory seems to be embodied in the name Bitter Sea Waste. Beijing knows

climatic extremes, a blazing summer and a freezing winter. Its people were never accustomed to the softer ways of living in the south, for drought, high winds and sandstorms constantly threatened the city. Hence the many stories of wicked dragons — the lords controlling water — who are presented as trying to take over Beijing.

Emperors, their advisers and ministers figure in some of these stories, seen from the viewpoint of the man in the street as a grasping, tyrannical, incompetent lot. They have no idea, for instance, how to design the corner towers of the Forbidden City: the plan for these is copied from a pedlar's cricket cage. And so, as in most folk stories of other lands, the real heroes are the resourceful working people who retain their self-respect and sense of humour through natural calamities, man-made disasters and countless political changes.

*Gladys Yang*



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## The Eight-Armed Nezha City

**E**VERYONE calls Beijing the Eight-armed Nezha City.\* They say only eight-armed Nezha could have subdued the vicious dragons in Bitter Sea Waste. Well, how did Beijing come to be built as an Eight-armed Nezha City? There's a folk-tale about this.

The Emperor decided to build a northern capital, Beijing,\*\* and entrusted this task to the Minister of Works. That threw the minister into a panic. He promptly petitioned the throne: "Beijing was originally known as the Bitter Sea Waste, and the dragons there are too vicious for your humble subject to overcome. I beg Your Majesty to send some military advisers instead!"

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\* Nezha, a mythical boy with supernatural powers, killed the son of the Dragon King. Later he disembowelled himself and cut the flesh from his bones; but his spirit took the form of a lotus, and he continued to battle with and overcome many evil spirits.

\*\* The inner city of Beijing was built in 1267 in the Yuan Dynasty. In 1368, when the Ming Dynasty was established, the north wall was pulled down and rebuilt five *li* to the south. In 1419, the south wall was pulled down and rebuilt more than a *li* farther south, forming the inner city as we know it today. The outer city wall was built in 1553.

The Emperor saw reason in this. Beijing could only be built by a genius with knowledge of heaven and earth, who knew the ways of both the spirits above and the devils below. So he asked his advisers, “Which of you can go and build a northern capital for me?”

His advisers eyed each other, not daring to utter a word, until finally someone really had to answer and Chief Adviser Liu Bowen volunteered, “I’ll go!”

At once Deputy Adviser Yao Guangxiao volunteered, “And so will I.”

The Emperor was pleased, sure that these two outstanding advisers had the ability to overcome dragons and tigers. He forthwith sent them off to build Beijing.

Liu Bowen and Yao Guangxiao took the imperial edict and travelled to the Waste where Beijing now stands. After putting up in a hostel, they went out every day to survey the terrain and figure out how to build the city in such a way that the dragons could not make trouble. However, Chief Adviser Liu and Deputy Adviser Yao had nothing but contempt for each other.

“Deputy Adviser Yao,” proposed Liu, “let’s live apart, you in the west city, I in the east. Each of us must think up a plan, then in ten days’ time we’ll meet and, sitting back to back, draw our plans for the city. Then we’ll compare the two to see if they tally.”

Yao Guangxiao knew perfectly well that Liu Bowen hoped to shine and hog all the credit.

“Very well,” he said with a grim smile. “You’re right, chief adviser, that’s what we should do.”

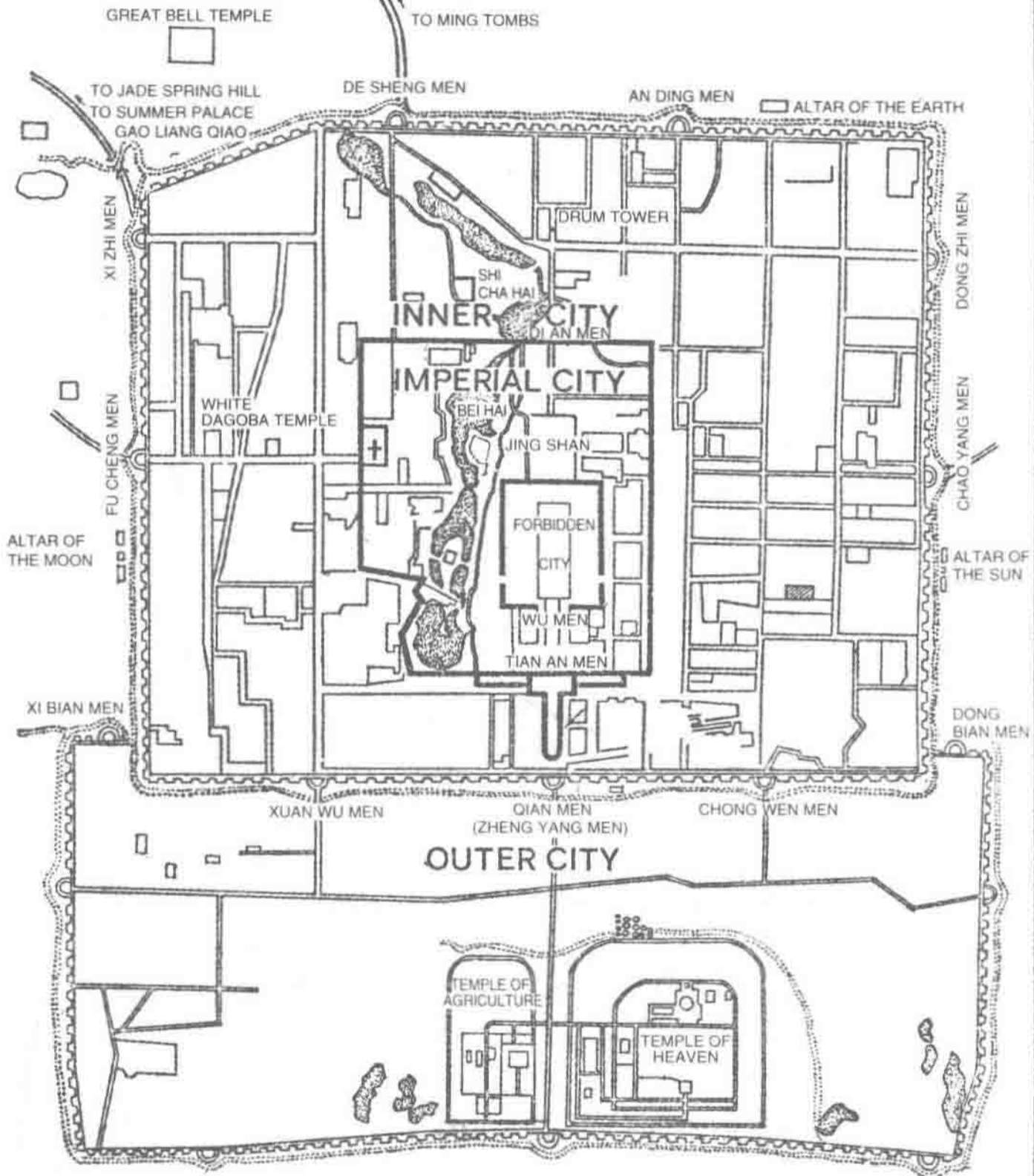
So the two advisers split up. For the first couple of days, although the two of them were staying apart and neither went out to survey the terrain, both heard a voice saying, “Just copy me and you’ll do fine.” The voice sounded like a child’s, and the words were clearly repeated time and again. Who could the speaker be? There was no one to be seen. “Just copy me” — what did that mean? Neither adviser could make head or tail of this.

On the third day they both went out to survey the terrain again. Wherever Adviser Liu went he saw a child in a red jacket and short pants walking ahead of him. When Liu speeded up, so did the child; when he slowed down, so did the child. At first he paid no special attention to this, but then he started wondering about it. He deliberately stood still. Ah! How extraordinary! So did the child. Liu couldn’t for the life of him think what the boy was up to.

How about Deputy Adviser Yao? He saw a child like that too, and couldn’t for the life of him think what the boy was up to.

Back in their different hostels, again both advisers heard a voice in their ears. “Just copy me and you’ll do fine.” Liu in the east city and Yao in the west city wondered: Can this child in the red jacket and short pants be Nezha? Doesn’t seem like him. Nezha was supposed to have eight arms. Liu in the east city and Yao in the west city came to the same decision: If I

# SKELETON MAP OF BEIJING



meet that boy tomorrow, I'll have a good look at him.

The next day, the fourth day after they had reached their agreement, Liu Bowen went out after breakfast for a stroll with an attendant. Why take an attendant today? So that the attendant could help him see if it was Nezha. Yao Guangxiao in the west city had the same idea. Both men had heard the same voice, seen the same child, and today they saw him again. Still wearing a red jacket and short pants, but not the same jacket as the previous day: this one was more like a cape with a lotus-leaf edge, and from the two shoulders dangled soft silken fringes which rustled in the wind like arms. At the sight of them Liu suspected that this must be Eight-armed Nezha. He hurried forward to catch hold of the child and have a closer look; but the faster he chased him the faster the child ran away, repeating, "Just copy me and you'll do fine!" Then he made off and vanished completely.

When Liu's attendant saw him chasing down the road, he did not know what was up. He called after him, "Commander! Commander! Why are you running?"

Liu stopped to ask him, "Did you see a child in a red jacket and short pants?"

"Not I," said the attendant. "All this time I've been following you I haven't seen a soul."

Then Liu Bowen knew for sure that it was Nezha.

As for Yao Guangxiao, exactly the same thing had happened to him.

The two commanders went back to their hostels. Liu



Zheng Yang Men

thought: “Copy me” must mean draw a plan of a city like Eight-armed Nezha, so as to keep down the dragons in Bitter Sea Waste. Fine! Let’s see how you handle this, Yao Guangxiao. If you can’t produce such a plan, you’re not fit to be imperial adviser! Yao in the west city was thinking at the same time: Now we’ll soon see you lose your title “Chief Adviser”!

On the ninth day Liu sent word to Yao: “At noon tomorrow, in the centre of the city, we’ll draw our plans back to back. Please be there on time.” And Yao agreed to this.

At noon on the tenth day, in a big empty square in the centre of the town, two tables and two chairs were set out, the



chairs back to back, and the two advisers arrived.

Liu asked, "Which way do you want to face, deputy adviser?"

Yao answered, "You live in the east city, chief adviser, so you should sit facing east. Your younger brother will sit facing west."

When they had taken their seats, attendants supplied them with paper, brushes, ink and inkstones. They picked up the brushes and stroke by stroke drew their plans. Just before sunset both finished their plans of the city, and each picked up the other's to examine it. Then both of them burst out laughing, because their plans were identical, each being an Eight-armed Nezha City.

Yao Guangxiao asked the chief adviser to explain his Eight-armed Nezha City.

Liu said, "This gate in the centre due south is Zheng Yang Men, Nezha's head. A head should have two ears, and those are the gates to its east and west. The two wells inside Zheng Yang Men are his eyes. On the east side, the Chong Wen Men, Dong Bian Men, Chao Yang Men and Dong Zhi Men are four of Nezha's arms. On the west side of the Zheng Yang Men, the Xuan Wu Men, Xi Bian Men, Fu Cheng Men and Xi Zhi Men are Nezha's other four arms. The An Ding Men and De Sheng Men in the north are his feet."

Yao Guangxiao nodded, saying, "Yes, of course. But does Nezha have only eight arms, no heart, liver, spleen, lungs or kidneys?"