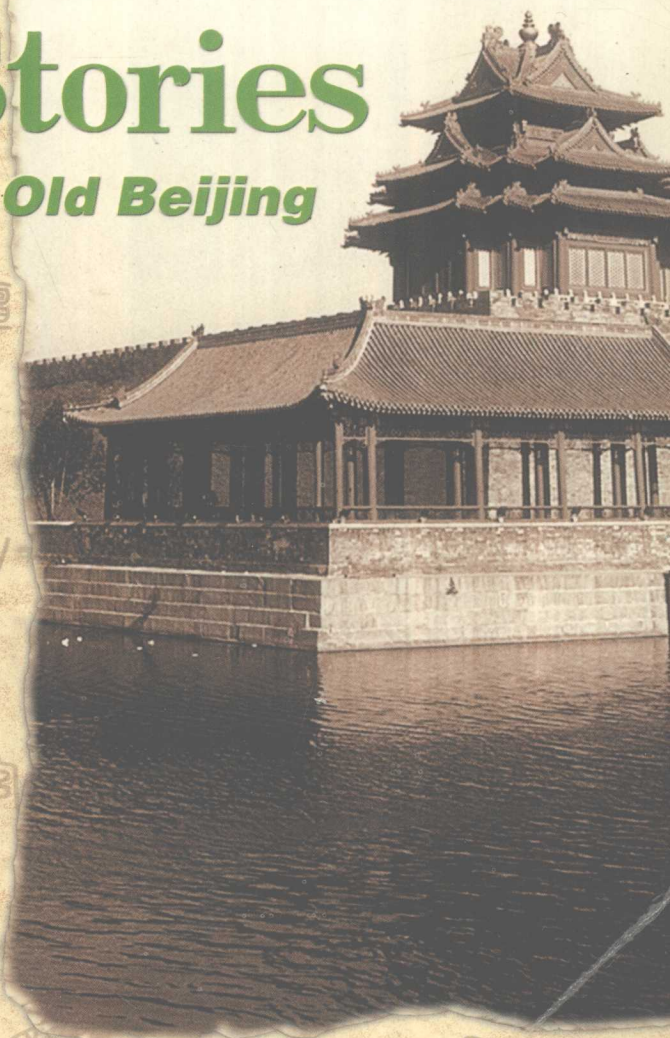


Sights with Stories

in Old Beijing



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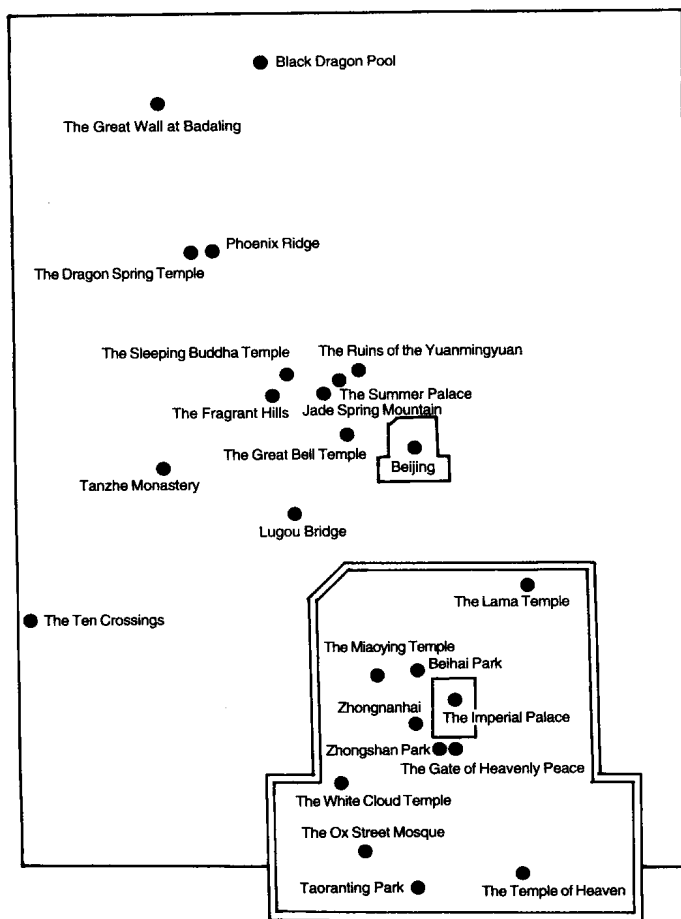
Editors' Note

There is virtually no sight in Beijing that has not a fascinating story or legend attached to it, whether to do with its foundation, its architecture or the historical figures associated with it. This time-honoured local lore, still very much alive in the city, weaves marvellous tales around the natural wonders and architectural showpieces of the capital, peopling them with miraculous immortals and imaginatively embroidering their history.

Apocryphal though most of them are, they embody in their eulogy of honest toil and talent and their condemnation of wickedness a historical reality that all too often is missing from the history books themselves.

We invite you to taste through them the authentic oral literature of Beijing.

A sketch map of sights mentioned in the book



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The Temple of Heaven

THE Temple of Heaven Park, the largest remaining group of temple buildings in China, is in the southern district of Beijing. Its construction began in the fourth year (1406) of the reign of Yongle of the Ming Dynasty and ended in the eighteenth year (1420). It was the place where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties worshipped and prayed for good harvests. At first it had separate altars of earth and heaven. It adopted its present name during the Jiajing Period of the Ming Dynasty.

It has inner and outer altars. Its wall is circular in the north representing heaven, and square in the south representing earth, according to the age-old Chinese saying that Heaven is round and Earth square. The outer altar has fruit trees and gardens, while the inner altar has most of the buildings — the Altar for Grain Prayers in the north, the Circular Mound in the south and the Hall of Abstinence inside the western gate. A 360-metre raised causeway connects the Altar for Grain Prayers and the Altar of the Mound.

The Altar for Grain Prayers is made up of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest, the Hall of Imperial Heaven and the Gate of Prayer for Good Harvest. Immediately inside the gate is a three-tiered circular base with white marble balusters, occupying 5,900 square metres, on which stands a triple conical-roofed hall the well-known Hall of Prayer for Good Harvest. It is thirty-eight metres high and yellow-glazed on the roof. Inside the hall are pillars arranged in orderly rows; the inner four representing the four seasons of the year, the twelve in the middle representing the twelve months of the lunar calendar, and the outer twelve representing the twelve two-hour periods of the day. Twenty-four eave pillars stand for the twenty-four solar periods of each year. Every year, in the first month by the lunar calendar, emperors of the Ming and Qing would come here to pray for a good harvest. The Hall of Imperial Heaven to the north was where the tablets of the gods were kept.

The Circular Mound Altar refers to the Circular Mound and Imperial Vault of Heaven. It was here where emperors worshipped Heaven at the beginning of winter each year. The altar is circular and three-tiered. Ancient Chinese cosmology regards the sun as male, so the numbers of parts in a building must be male too, i.e. in odd numbers or multiples of odd numbers. A whisper at the centre of the mound sounds louder to the speaker than to the bystanders, because of sound waves bouncing from the balusters many times in succession. The Imperial Vault of Heaven, with a blue-glazed roof, is where the tablet of the God of Heaven

used to be kept. Around the vault is a smooth, circular wall known as the Echoing Wall. As sound bounces off the carved wall in succession, a whisper at one point on the wall can be heard as clearly at the opposite point sixty metres off as over a telephone. In front of the vault are the Three Echoing Stones: a clap over the first stone produces a single echo, over the second a double and over the third a triple echo. Outside the northwestern wall is a 500-year-old cypress tree named the Nine Dragon Cypress.

The Hall of Abstinence is where emperors fasted before the ceremony. It is made up of a main hall, a chamber and a bell tower. The main hall is quite beamless. Before it stand bronze human figures and tablets indicating the hours. Around the Hall of Abstinence are 163 rooms. Two deep "imperial ditches" on either side of the wall indicate the extreme seclusion of the place in the past, adding more mystery to the park.



Motherwort

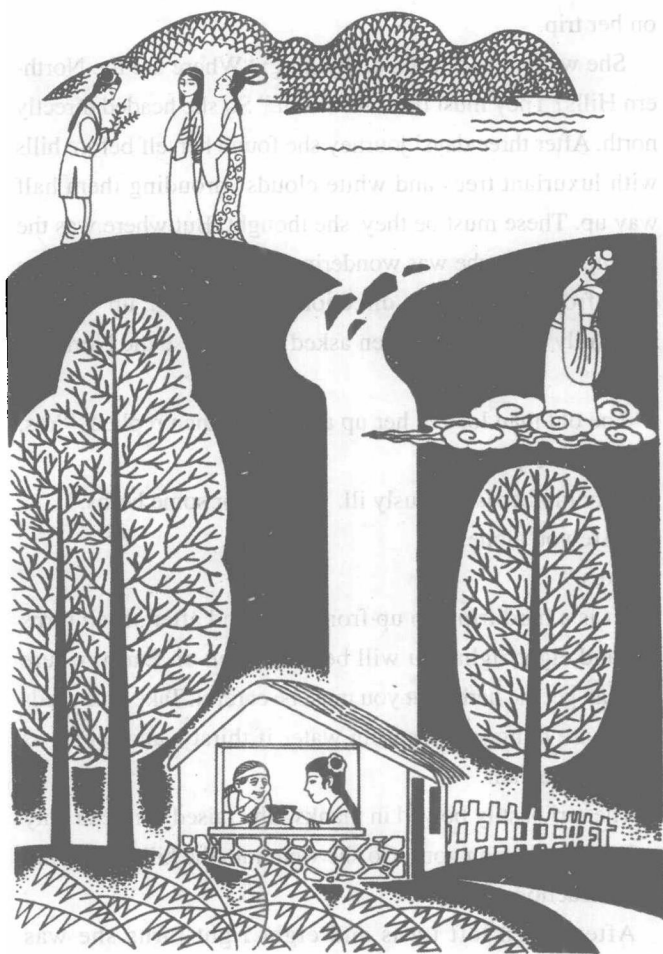
THE Temple of Heaven used to abound with motherwort and had many herbalists processing and dealing in the medicinal herb, for which sick women came from all over the country.

Beijing people believed the herb came from the immortals.

There used to be a village of twenty-odd households, where once an old man died leaving his wife and young daughter in poverty. Before long the old woman fell ill too. The villagers were worried, not to mention the daughter, who wept by her mother every day. When she heard that a wonder drug from the Northern Hills could cure her mother, she made up her mind to go and get some. She said to her mother before she left, "Please don't worry about me. I will return as soon as I get the herb."

"How can I let a young girl go such a long way?" said her mother, upset.

"Don't worry," the girl reassured her. "I'm old enough to take care of myself."



She asked somebody to take care of her mother, then went on her trip.

She walked and walked, thinking: "Where are the Northern Hills? They must be to the north." So she headed directly north. After three days' journey she found herself before hills with luxuriant trees and white clouds shrouding them half way up. These must be they, she thought. But where was the way up? Just as she was wondering, a white-bearded old man came from the opposite direction. She walked up and respectfully greeted him, then asked: "Are these the Northern Hills?"

The old man looked her up and down, then replied, "Yes, but why are you here?"

"My mother is seriously ill. I came for some herbs."

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"It is a hard trip. Go up from here, and after seven turns left and eight right you will be at Heaven on Earth, where you can get the herb. But you must be careful. Take pine seeds if you are hungry and spring water if thirsty, and return as soon as you can."

The girl hastily bowed in thanks. She raised her head only to find the old man gone. So she went into the hills following his instructions.

After seven left turns and eight right turns she was exhausted. As she sat down on a boulder she noticed a spring at her feet. She took several mouthfuls from it. Strangely, she

found her mind clearer and eyes sharper. Under some weird pine trees close by, she found some pine seeds and ate them up. She felt her strength return. She got to the summit without a stop.

From the summit the view was breathtaking: green peaks and trees half visible in mist and clouds like a wonderland. In a valley was a moon-shaped pool, its crystal-clear water mirroring the clouds and distant peaks. She looked at herself in the water. To her surprise she found her face no longer racked with grief at her mother's illness but lively and ruddy. No wonder people say the Northern Hills are miraculous, she thought to herself, if even a poor girl like me has changed. The herbs here must be able to cure my mother.

Just then she heard somebody talking behind her. She turned around and saw two angelic girls walking up to her, one in white and the other in bright yellow. Plum flowers embroidered on their dresses made them even more beautiful. Where had they come from in such a remote place as this, she wondered as they approached.

The girl in white broke into a smile and addressed the daughter as "sister". Not knowing what to do, the daughter returned the same greeting. Then the girl in yellow came up and took her hand, asking, "Sister, why are you here?"

The question brought tears to the daughter's eyes. "My mother is seriously ill, and I am here for herbs. Please help me."

"Don't worry," the two girls comforted her. "We will help