

WITNESSES
TO
TIME
THE
MAGNIFICENT
TREES
OF
BEIJING

樹之聲

北京的古樹名木

阿南史代

生活·詩書·新知·聯書店

Virginia S. Anami

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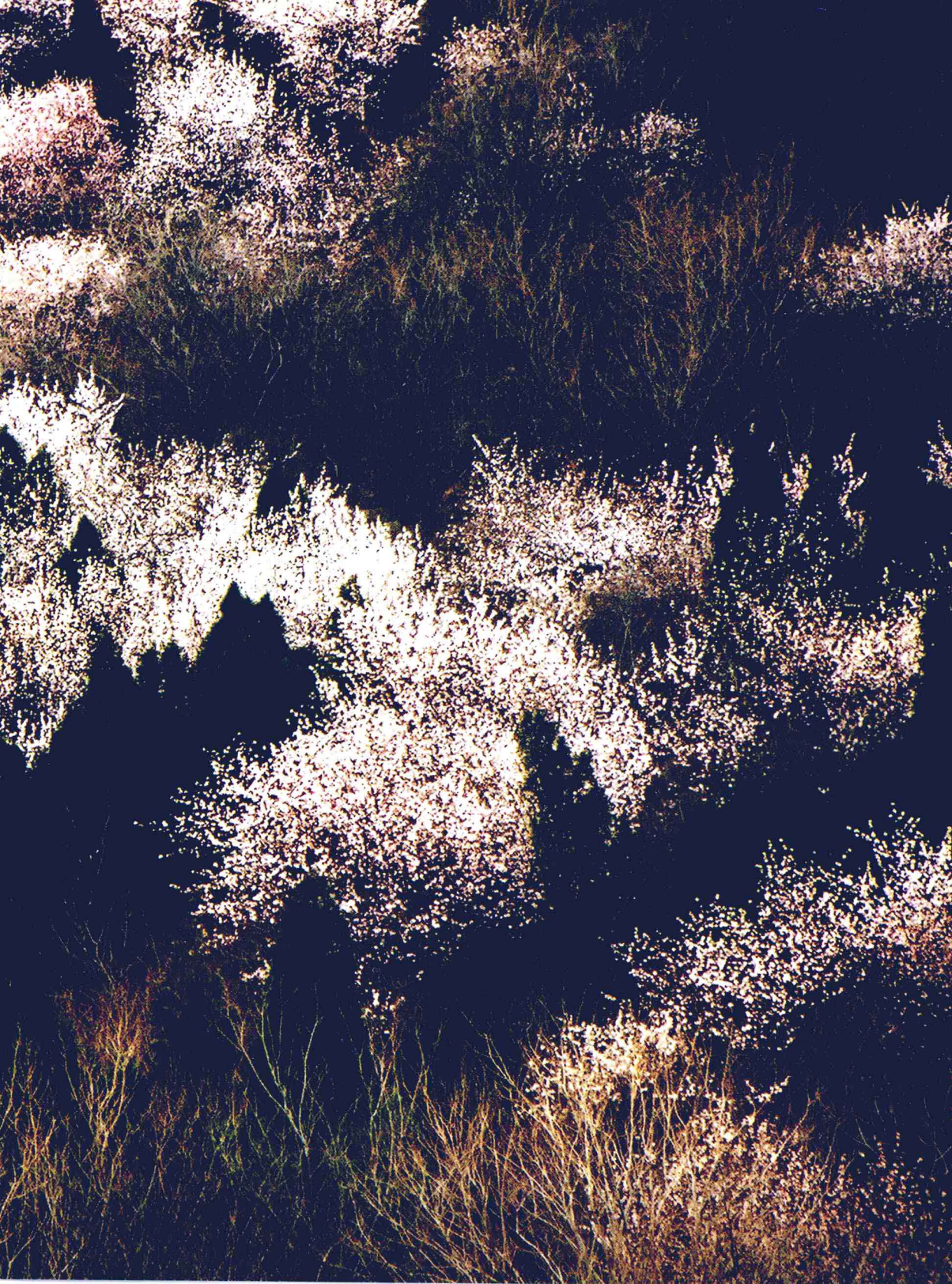
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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THE MANY VENERABLE TREES OF BEIJING THAT HAVE STOOD AS
WITNESSES TO TIME IN ALL CORNERS OF THE MUNICIPALITY. THEIR VERY EXISTENCE ENABLES
US TO TOUCH THE PAST AND NOURISHES OUR FUTURE.





BEIJING'S ANCIENT TREES

Virginia Anami deeply loves Chinese traditional culture and because of her interests, so my wife Fang Jing and I became good friends with her during her several postings in Beijing. Now she has published this book containing hundreds of pictures of ancient trees in Beijing, which are the result of her hard efforts to travel extensively and take numerous photographs over several years. When she asked me to write a preface to her book, I felt a bit embarrassed for I didn't help her with anything for this book.

Virginia Anami (originally an American citizen) loves Chinese traditional culture in a special way. Besides being steeped in ancient Chinese books and documents, she often walked out of her home to investigate and search. She visited all the suburbs and outskirts of Beijing in search of ancient trees, which she photographed, resulting in this wonderful picture book. Her way of research and investigation is worthy of emulation.

As Virginia Anami puts it, *Witnesses to Time: The Magnificent Trees of Beijing* not only records the old trees in Beijing, but also tells the city's long history. Most ancient trees are found in old temples or villages. In the Introduction to her book, she says, the book is a journey through time by traversing the historical annual rings. "The ancient trees scattered within the city and on its outskirts outline Beijing's past."

These words deserve contemplation. While appreciating the exquisitely photographed pictures of the old trees, we should try to understand the "historical annual rings" of Beijing. Only by doing so can we do justice to Virginia Anami's original intention to look for and photograph those trees that have now become landmarks of old Beijing.

Virginia Anami is always concerned with humanity, not just objects. She never photographs an object just for its own sake, but in its human context. She has also taken a large number of pictures of old wells, temples and other

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sites that are related to human existence. Wherever there is an old well, there is most likely a place where people lived: it might be a deserted village or a vanished temple. All these pictures reflect Mrs. Anami's concerns and emotions.

As a reader, I warmly congratulate her on the publication of *Witnesses to Time: The Magnificent Trees of Beijing* and hope that readers will benefit from its illuminations of the past of historic Beijing.

August 2006



VOICES OF AGED TREES, VISIONS OF THE ANCIENT CAPITAL

In spring of 2006, before leaving Beijing, Virginia Anami left her address to friends, including her personal web page named “littletreebeijing”. I know that she could not easily forget those trees because she told her friends, who would all miss her, that whenever they see the city’s aged trees it would be like meeting with her. Now we are happy to read Mrs. Anami’s book: *Witnesses to Time: the Magnificent Trees of Beijing*.

From 1983 to 2006, Virginia Anami lived in Beijing three times for altogether 11 years. With an open and optimistic mind, this American – Japanese scholar, who named China as her “third country”, was touched by the culture of China’s ancient capital and has enthusiastically introduced Beijing to the world through her writings, photo exhibitions and lectures. In this new book she selected trees as a special vision to tell stories about Beijing’s past and present.

Majoring in East Asian History and Geography, she considered that history is not merely a long chronological table of important events. In her mind, the footprints of history still remain around us. Discovering the value of Beijing’s aged trees has reflected her wisdom in academic exploring. She originally was studying ancient temples in Beijing. When those historical sites appeared to be washed away by the passing of time, this persistent researcher found a clue that could lead her to the discovery of the place of her quest. She realized that although Beijing’s trees had been through many disasters, they remained indomitable and always took on the mantle of the sites’ history. Again and again the trees helped her identify the ancient sites: “Many times I was met by blank stares by locals when I asked the name of a certain temple. Yet when I inquired about their oldest tree, they immediately led me to the place I was looking for.”

Gradually, those trees themselves became another important research topic and Virginia Anami developed a deep love for these royal witnesses of Beijing’s history. “Like old wise men confident of their knowledge over the years,

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these trees have reticently watched the unfolding of time.”

A piece of vivid folklore, a page of unforgettable history, always remained between branches and leaves.

The process of exploring for aged trees was a chance to practice the method of studying by “walking and talking”. Going out of her home, approaching nature and people has been Mrs. Anami’s consistent way of learning. Undoubtedly this custom has deepened her academic thinking and given her a wider vision. Even though there is a vast amount of data collected on Beijing’s trees, few have actually verified the information of all the old and famous trees by actually searching for each and every one of them. Integrating theory with practice, combining history with reality and linking natural science with the humanities are the fine characteristics of her research. With gentle humor, Virginia Anami has recorded many interesting encounters that tell us how she regarded even difficult challenges as joyful experiences.

Mrs. Anami’s love for Beijing’s trees should deeply move everyone. In city courtyards or on towering hillsides, the aged trees greeted her. During these years, in all seasons and times of day, she fixed her eyes on the aged trees and communicated with them beyond time. She has now become well known for her knowledge of Beijing’s trees. Often her descriptions of certain trees are so detailed it is as if she was enumerating the heirlooms of her own family.

Through observing the aged trees for many years, Virginia Anami has brought about a special aesthetic judgment on these silent friends. For her, the aged trees were guides and storytellers; moreover they were messengers of communication between the miraculous nature and humanity: At Ditan, the Altar to the Earth, she wrote that people appeared to glean energy from the sturdy cypresses as part of morning exercises. And she noted how many of the trees have wonderful polished knobs on their trunks. “These trees must have felt the massage and are all the more healthy.”

Virginia Anami is a scholar with strong social responsibility. She pays a good deal of attention not only to the past, but also to the future. She knows that we shouldn’t take these magnificent creatures for granted. The deep feelings she has for Beijing’s aged trees spurs her to appeal for protecting them:

“...to give them some voice and recognition. In doing so it is hoped that there will be a growing appreciation of the very special role these trees have in holding Beijing’s history. In turn, this awareness will help to protect the environment of these important statesmen of long ago so that they can continue their life spans to meet the generations to come.” In doing so Beijing’s aged trees will hold fast to their locations and follow the progress of existence of mankind. She notes that being kind to trees means placing hopes on the future.

Pictures in this book taken by Mrs. Anami and Mr. Liang, as well as the sketches by Mr. Qi, make a permanent record of the trees. Appreciating these wonderful pictures, remind me of meeting her one day as she stepped out of her blue cross-country jeep, wearing a pairs of sneakers, but carrying a pair of high heels. She had gone from one official reception straight to a research exploration. It was her custom to be conscientious about every detail. Every aged tree of this book shows us the most graceful image in Mrs. Anami’s mind, and behind the images we can see that she went



from place to place, and trudged from here to there.

Let us go along as if we were riding in Virginia Anami's jeep, wandering together to meet Beijing's famous aged trees and listen attentively as they share their voice of history.

August 2006