

A Thick Description of Traditional Life in Peking.

— A review of Susan Naquin's

Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900.

Liu Ping / Fan Ying

Beginning in the 1980's, just as other great changes were taking place in the field of Chinese history,¹ a group of American historians who specialized in the studies of Chinese countryside began to turn their attention to Chinese cities, for example, Frederic Wakeman from southern rural China to the Shanghai police, and Elizabeth Perry from Huaibei country to the Shanghai workers' movement. Susan Naquin is also one of them. In 2000, Stanford University Press published her book, Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900. The book's publication was met with excellent reviews. Philip Kuhn wrote that "with temples as the focus," the book provides "a five-century urban history that reveals the full range of political and cultural factors that defined the capital"; he regarded it as "a landmark in our understanding of imperial Chinese urban life and an excellent introduction to the imperial institution in its social setting".² Susan Mann said, "Naquin's monumental book traces the relationship between the temples that defined Peking's public spaces and the people who lived within and beyond the Chinese capital's nested walls."³ Susan Pares commented, "Professor Naquin's study represents the fruit of over a decade of research into the contribution of Peking's many temples to the fabric of city life over five centuries. It is

¹ In this paper, the significant changes include the interests shifting from the revolution to social changes in the modernization, from macrostudy to microstudy, from countryside to cities and from political studies to social and cultural studies.

² Philip Kuhn, book review, *American Historical Review*, 107(1):167-168 Feb 2002.

³ Susan Mann, book review, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (3): 510-512 Win 2001.

exemplary in its erudition, thoroughness and judiciousness.”⁴ As of now, there are more than ten book reviews on Naquin’s book and among them only two published in Chinese: one was written by a Taiwanese scholar and another was translated from English.⁵ As there have not been any book reviews from Chinese mainland, we have decided to discuss it from the perspective of theoretical developments in social cultural history and urban history.

Structure

The most impressive feature of Professor Naquin’s book on Peking is its magnitude. With 700 pages of extremely well-documented text (plus another 100 for appendices, bibliography and glossary-index), she touched creatively on many aspects of urban life. Although the book is subtitled, “Temples and City Life,” its content is far broader. The book was composed of three parts and sixteen chapters. Part I, “Peking and Its Temples,” provides a general introduction to geographical, historical and archeological Peking, distinctive features of Chinese gods, clerics, and temple life, and the public space formed around it. In Part II and Part III, the author gives a comprehensive account of the shifting representation of the city in images, elite writings, and guidebooks of the Ming and Qing, examining the different functions of temples in the two periods. An epilogue reflects on Peking’s post-imperial history and gives a concluding overview of Beijing’s changing roles in the twentieth century.

Drawing on more than twelve hundred separate sources in six languages, Naquin provides a rich and colorful picture of late imperial Peking, encompassing almost every aspect of city issues related to temples. While admiring her prodigious research, we found that some parts are tangentially related to the concern of the subtitle, such as the construction of the city, the segregation of Han and Manchu, imperial politics, literature, landscape and reminiscence. Obviously, to the author, the “city life” in the subtitle refers to city life as it related to temples, not city life in general. However, the author evidently dwells too much on the background introduction of temples and city life. Considering the wide range of subjects included in this monograph, this book can also be seen as a religious, social and urban history of

⁴ Pares, Susan, *Asian Affairs*, Jun2002, Vol. 33, Issue 2.

⁵ 巫仁恕：《评韩书瑞 (Susan Naquin) 教授〈北京：寺庙与城市生活〉》，载台湾《明代研究》第六期（2003年12月）；《中国学术》2004年第3、4期合刊（第十九、二十合刊），古柏撰、何恬译。

Ming-Qing Peking, or in some sense, it can be used as an encyclopedia on traditional Peking, and can be appreciated as a new *Dijing Jingwu Lue* (帝京景物略). As Kristin Stapleton remarked, “[it] is a record of one of the most impressive research projects ever carried out by an individual historian of late imperial China.”⁶

Perspective

Ming-Qing Peking was a great city based on self-sufficient economy and highly centralized state power. Besides traditional institutions of the state and family, the only places that can bind different groups of people together are public spaces such as temples, theaters, teahouses, brothels and business districts. Temples are among the most typical of these.

In the last several years, scholars in social history of rural China and regional studies have tended to pay more attention to lineage and temples. Lineage is the foundation of the social structure in rural China, while temples are an important part of ordinary life for average people, playing an important role in the popular religion and popular culture.⁷ While most scholars pay their attention on the country temples in southeast China or Taiwan, Naquin turn her gaze to the capital of the empire.

Temples are the center of urban life. Besides a temple's religious function, it has many non-religious functions as well, serving the city as library, museum, garden, theater, market, asylum, firehouse and tourist site. Temples located almost everywhere throughout the city exerted great influence on officials and commoners, believers and nonbelievers, Chinese and Manchu bannermen, women and eunuchs. Temples as the vessels of Chinese religion and lay religious associations as social organizations are two symbols of Chinese traditional culture. If Peking is among the best examples of traditional cities in China, temples in Peking are no doubt among the best sites for examining urban life.

Naquin is not the first to analyse city life in pre-modern China through a study of religious institutions. Several influential articles in *The City in Late Imperial China*, the seminal work in Chinese

⁶ Kristin Stapleton, book review, *Urban History*, 30(1), 2003.

⁷ 参见杨念群:《“地方性知识”、“地方感”与“跨区域研究”的前景》,《天津社会科学》2004年第6期。

urban history⁸, took up the question of how urban communities were sustained by common religious practices and the institutions that organized them. But Naquin did it on an entirely different scale. In her expanded study of Peking temples, Naquin analyzed how temples attracted imperial patronage, provided sojourners with the spiritual comforts of home, brought city residents together for a variety of purposes, and contributed to a local urban identity that survived Peking's loss of "imperial" status in the early twentieth century. To uncover these issues, Naquin examined numerous stone inscriptions, including nearly fifteen hundred rubbings from the Peking Library. With her many discoveries related to Peking's temples, Naquin provides us with a new approach to the urban history and traditional society and culture. Her research on these temple associations promises to change the way historians think about urban communities in Chinese cities, as well as how they study them.

In Urban History

Naquin's work is a landmark for both the study of Peking's history and Chinese urban history. Up to the present, publications on large cities as Shanghai, Tianjin, and Beijing are most numerous in the P.R.C, with the broadest range of topics. At the same time, there has been a trend toward turning from the study of big cities to the study of mid-size and small cities, and from coastal cities to interior cities. Besides this, new directions in urban case studies include regional urban history and the shape and evolution of urban networks, urban typology and morphology, and urban society and culture studies.⁹

All case studies of individual cities comment to some extent on changes in urban morphology over time. In English-language scholarship, several recent books have explored this aspect of urban history in considerable depth.¹⁰ Yinong Xu's thorough study of Suzhou from prehistoric times to the Qing explains the reasons for the great morphological stability of that city over the centuries, pointing to the authority

⁸ G. William Skinner, *The City in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1977.

⁹ Liu Haiyan and Kristin Stapleton, *State of the Field: Chinese Urban History*. Chengshi Shi Yan Jiu, forthcoming.

¹⁰ Yinong Xu, *The Chinese City in Space and Time: The Development of Urban Form in Suzhou* University of Hawaii, 2000; Tobie Meyer-Fong, *Building Culture in Early Qing Yangzhou* Stanford, 2003; Piper Rae Gaubatz, *Beyond the Great Wall: Urban Form and Transformation on the Chinese Frontiers* Stanford, 1996. Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temples and City Life, 1400-1900* University of California, 2000;

that the state maintained over the realm of urban construction throughout the imperial era. Tobie Meyer-Fong also emphasizes the extent to which urban literati imbued city spaces with cultural meaning in her study of Yangzhou in the early Qing. Historical geographer Piper Gaubatz surveyed the built environments of cities on the northern and western borders of the Qing empire, arguing that they reflect stricter adherence to imperial theories of city design as well as diverse religious and residential styles of the different ethnic groups that inhabited them. Susan Naquin is one of them. Her exploration of temple culture in Ming and Qing Beijing demonstrates how city neighborhoods became connected to suburban pilgrimage temples over the course of the Qing.

As some reviewers noticed, Naquin's stress on the unique features that made Peking an exceptional city contrasts with Rowe's approach to the history of Hankou, which, in his view, displayed hallmarks of early modern transformation like its counterparts in Europe.¹¹ The appearance of William Rowe's two books on the history of Hankou in the 1980s marked a watershed in American studies of the history of Chinese cities. Rowe's detailed portrait of 19th-century Hankou demonstrated that it was possible for historians to see beyond the imperial bureaucracy into the lives of the merchants and neighborhood leaders who played the most important roles in shaping that city. By directly challenging Max Weber's contention that urban merchants in China had little commitment to cities because of their strong loyalties to their home villages, Rowe focused attention on the long-neglected topic of the management of China's cities and promoted further comparative study of Chinese and European urban development.¹²

I wish Naquin had addressed these questions more thoroughly: Is there a common urban culture in Ming Qing Peking? If so, is Peking urban culture different from Hankou?

(A similar contrast may be drawn between studies of Peking that focus on policing and social control, and Naquin's portrait of the docile urbanite.¹³ Contrasts also can be made between David Strand's

¹¹ Susan Mann, book review, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 32 (3): 510-512 Win 2001.

¹² William T. Rowe, *Hankou: Commerce and Society in a Chinese City, 1796-1889* (Stanford, 1984); *idem*, *Hankou: Conflict and Community in a Chinese City, 1796-1895* (Stanford, 1989).

¹³ See Alison Dray-Novey, "Spatial Order and Police in Imperial Beijing," *Journal of Asian Studies*, LII (1993), 885-922; David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s* (Berkeley, 1989).

interests on urban political transformations that result from social changes and Naquin's interests on the social and cultural transformation reflected in urban life.¹⁴⁾

In social and cultural history

In terms of social and cultural history, the highlight of Naquin's analysis is the process of the syncretization of the inner and outer city, the upper and lower social classes, immigrants and natives, and Han and Manchurians in the communal activities around temples, from which the identity of a capital came into being. Through these detailed descriptions, we see the vivid picture of the ordinary life and the actual city dwellers.

Temple fairs, also called temple markets in Chinese, refer to all kinds of social and economic activities based upon the sacred ritual. Temple fairs in Peking originated in the Liao period and became more and more popular during Yuan, Ming and Qing. In the Yuan dynasty, the government policy on religion was relatively loose; therefore different religious groups were quite active and developed in many forms. During most of the Ming, control of the religion was strict. Different religions developed severally. After the Ming, temples become more and more relevant to folk society and congregative ritual became popular. From 1700's to 1900's, temples became the public expression of the cultural identity of Peking. In the late Qing, because of the prosperity of city commerce, the role of the temple fair in the city began to decline.

Temples as discussed in Naquin's book include popular shrines, Confucian temples, Buddhist temples, Tibetan lama temples, Islamic mosques, Jesuit churches, Russian Orthodox outposts, and shamanism. Influenced by the trend of religious secularization, these temples showed relatively little difference in their appearance. The gods worshiped in the temple were also mingled and pilgrims had no special favorites. In fact, participants in pilgrimages were not only city dwellers, but also included those living in the suburbs of the city. Naquin's focus on temple fairs reveals two pictures. First, temples regularly brought together a tremendous number of people for various attractions. Second, by

¹⁴ David Strand, *Rickshaw Beijing: City People and Politics in the 1920s*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

examining these public spaces of special charm, contemporary readers can wander among the architecture, gardens, political and literary meetings of the intelligentsia, fluctuations of the price of silver, native-place lodges, and members of the royal family and natives of different social status. As another reviewer has said, for scholars in Ming Qing history, especially the specialist of Peking, no matter what subject he might chose, it's impossible to steer clear of this book.¹⁵

Summary and Questions

Susan Naquin is a meticulous scholar who is interested in details. We can see her excellent skills in the inclusion and organization of primary sources from her previous works.¹⁶ She claimed that she found these details are very interesting and she likes to describe details because she want to reveal the concrete aspect of the history.¹⁷ But on the other hand, the profusion of detail in Peking affects its structure and readability. With less information on imperial politics, the construction of the city, the segregation of the Han and Manchu, Qing Zuzhici, intellectual meetings, travel guides and regular religious festivals, the interest of the reader would be more focused on the subject.

Other critiques include the absence of some important resources like *Zidishu*, *Pinhua Baojian* of Chen Sen and *Ernuì Yingxiong Zhuan* of Wen Kang [Chinese characters?] which discussed theaters and stone inscriptions; Naquin's neglect of the Nestorian community that existed in Ming Peking and the Zhengyipai, who cultivated themselves without leaving their homes.¹⁸ These critiques seem too strict for

¹⁵ 《中国学术》2004年第3、4期合刊（第十九、二十合刊），古柏撰、何恬译，第396页。

¹⁶ Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China, the Eight Trigrams Uprising of 1813*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976. *Shantung rebellion: the Wang Lun uprising of 1774* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

¹⁷ 周武：《用新材料讲新故事——韩书瑞教授访谈录》，《史林》2005年第6期。

¹⁸ Other book reviews: Richard G. Wang, book review, *Journal of Religion*, Apr2002, Vol. 82, Issue 2:

Mary B. Rankin, book review, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 62 (1): 218-230 Jun 2002:

David Ownby, book review, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70 (4): 922-925 Dec 2002

M. Rossabi, book review, *Journal of Asian History*, 36 (1): 112-112 2002

Nancy S. Steinhardt, book review, *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol 60, No 4, Dec 2001

Michael Dillon, book review, *Historian* 66 (3): 607-608 Fal 2004

such a wide-ranging research carried out by an individual historian. But it might also partly result from the expansive interests of the author.

Naquin's revealing of the self-determination of the social group in the public space is admirable, but we also cannot neglect the political and economic associations between them, which is the soul of the real Chinese tradition.

Naquin shows her originality by demonstrating the syncretization of the Chinese and the Manchurian through analyzing the transformation of the urban culture and the formation of the identity of the city. Her argument on the segregation between Chinese and Manchurian is that it did not stem from differences in language or customs of lifestyle and religion; it was just ideology. But how can we explain the great disagreement and hostile that still existed between them and finally lead to the revolution in 1911?

Although concern for the traditions of regional culture is a good reason for the rise of regional cultural history, this kind of explanation is subject to be fragmented when it enters the realm of politics and history. Does Naquin's thick description of traditional urban life of Peking provide us with an overall history of China?