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Bailin Temple Library:

Rare Glimpses of a Unique Institution

by Ye Xu

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I had long wished to visit the Bailin Temple library. It is considered to be one of China's national treasures. It is located in Northeastern Beijing, in the Temple of Bailin, on Learned Men Street (Guozhi Jian). The library's collections consist of rare books, manuscripts, block-printed editions, monographs of famous writers, original tortoise shells and bones with inscriptions, books of rubbings, atlases, paintings, etc. Many of the items in Bailin Temple are believed to be the only copies in the entire country. It has been said that in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution had just started, Premier Zhou Enlai moved troops in to protect the library because the Red Guards were burning books. Many times when walking down Learned Men Street, looking at the eaves of the temple over the surrounding wall, I wished I could change myself into a little bird so that I could fly inside the temple to see the treasures.

In order to gain entry to the library, one must first undergo a background check, a process that can be extremely complicated. The patron must demonstrate that he or she is qualified to touch the materials. The first thing I had to do was visit the library to find out what documents I needed to prove my qualifications for studying there. I then went to my Institute to get a certificate to verify my identity and the purpose of my research. Next, I went to get a reference letter from China's Ministry of Higher Education to prove that my research project was for a textbook that was being sponsored by the Ministry. I then went to the Beijing Municipal Government to get the certificate. I also visited the National Library of China to get a credit certificate. Beijing's winter was windy and very cold, and it took me two weeks on bicycle to collect all the certificates. I had to visit the same agency several times to get one thing done.

My second visit to the Bailin Temple library was interesting. The guard took my six certificates and my work ID and then gave me a token. I used the token to enter the reading room outside the temple. At one end of the reading room, there was a long, wooden table stretching across the entire width of the room, which served as both reference desk and circulation desk. Four or five circulation librarians working at the desk took order forms and went into the temple to retrieve the items. There was a wall behind the door leading to the temple that only librarians were allowed to pass beyond. Thus, I have no idea

how far the temple was from the reading room. The reference librarian sat behind the desk at the right end as one faces it. There were no computers, and no reference books. What the reference librarian had was a chair, scratch paper, and a pen. In order to avoid fires, no electricity was allowed in the library. Each librarian held a large flashlight to search for materials in the temple. There were no open shelves at all.

The card catalog was located on the other side of the room opposite the desk. The card drawers were scattered all over the shelves, the tables—even on the floor. I had to look everywhere for the right drawers, and sometimes I had to wait for others to finish their searching. After hours of searching the card catalog, I filled out three forms with my personal information and the information about the items I wanted. The librarian took the form and my token; she then gave me another token for the items I borrowed. I waited about half an hour to get my first book. By that time, my stomach was already rumbling with hunger so I had to return the book in order to go to lunch. The librarian carefully checked the book to make sure there was nothing wrong with it, and then returned my ID token. I ran to the reception room to get all my certificates back and then ran to lunch. I had to go through the same process again after lunch. After this experience, I always brought lunch with me.

In the center of the reading room, there was a huge coal-burning stove. There was always a big kettle of boiling water on top of the stove, and all kinds of bread, cake, and dumplings brought by librarians and patrons. The first time I wanted to make a cup of tea, I walked around the stove on my toes trying to figure out how to reach the kettle. Some patrons came to help and told me to feel free to ask for assistance whenever I needed the water. Most patrons were men, who are taller.

I felt my heart warm as I went to Bailin Temple library in the frozen winter. I spent my whole winter vacation there in 1985. Today I still remember how happy and excited I was when I first touched the items I had dreamed about for years and saw them with my own eyes. Those were the happiest times of my life.

There were so many rare books I wanted to read, some Chinese classics, criticism, historical geography, and inscriptions. Some of these books are incomplete manuscripts, but each is the only one of its kind. I was also interested in some books that had been officially banned in the past. For example, the famous prohibited book, *Ming Shi Ji Lue* (Ming Dynasty History), which was published in 1661, caused a horrible massacre. According to historical account, the case implicated seven hundred families, with more than one thousand people being killed in 1663. The Qing rulers killed all those involved with the book, including printers, binders, deliverers, sellers, buyers, and all of their family members, relatives, and friends. Because people would not dare to record the case in those years, there was not much written about it. I could read indirect descriptions about the book, but I would rather read the book myself at the library.

Study in the Bailin Temple library can always offer unexpected gains. One day, I borrowed a poetry anthology written by Su Shi of the Song Dynasty. I found the book had a lot of postscripts written by Weng Tonghe, the famous tutor of Qing emperor Guang Xu. I was told that Weng was a great calligrapher, but had never seen his handwriting. It was an amazing moment when I recognized what a valuable book I was holding. Chinese scholars enjoyed writing commentaries while they were reading. Notes and commentary at the top margin of a page were called *mei pi*, “eyebrow commentary.” Weng wrote a lot of “eyebrow commentaries.” At the end of each volume, he also wrote hundreds, even thousands of words of postscript. His style was regular script, very beautiful. I guess Weng’s family owned the book, and somehow the library acquired it. I found a lot of Bailin Temple collections have *mei pi*. Therefore, I did not read the books alone. I read the books together with previous readers. Some *mei pi* made me happy, some didn’t. Some commentators are great, and I can never forget them. They were my teachers, even though I do not know all of their names. A lot of time has passed since I experienced reading at the library; still I have a strong feeling of gratitude to the library’s collection. Previously I had only been able to read fragments of these works in other books, but now I could read the original books.

Besides enjoying the books I had dreamed about, the most exciting thing was to visit the reference librarians. Two senior librarians took turns at reference services, and they were wonderful paleographers. In order to describe how great they were, I have to tell you several stories. My first question for the librarian was about ancient Chinese astronomy. Astronomy is the oldest science in China. In ancient times, it was intimately connected with government and civil administration. It was believed that people and the universe were closely related and that events happening in the heavens directly affected events on earth, or more particularly, the destinies of kings, princes and the countries they ruled. It is difficult to mark the boundaries between early Chinese religion, history, literature, medicine, astrology, and astronomy as in other cultures—the subjects were interrelated. Therefore, the reference librarians are expected to have a thorough knowledge of all the subjects discussed above within the ancient books.

For example, one planet that appears many times in *Zuo Zhuan* (*Zuo Commentary*, Spring and Autumn period, 722-481 B.C.) is the planet Jupiter (year star in Chinese). The text frequently uses Jupiter’s location as a chronograph. However, if we carefully examine the *Zuo Commentary*, Jupiter did not always appear to follow its expected revolution of 11.86 years. It caused me to wonder how I was going to understand this text. Which part of the text should I believe? Is there any authoritative research to outline the ancient event in the Gregorian calendar?

When I brought these questions to the reference librarian, he smiled, “This is a big question, young lady. You have asked a very important one, which is how to understand ancient texts. In fact, there are many unsolved questions in the study of the *Zuo Commentary*. Scholars from China and all over the world have debated many of these issues for years. So if you really want to gain a clear idea about which part of the text you should believe, you have to read all those research books as well.” He then started writing a reading list for me. His list included thirty-seven important titles as well as the names of forty-two authors. When he wrote the list, he kept describing the major features of the books, the authors’ personal anecdotes and their characters. He also described some of the debates among these scholars. In the end, he had written a five page reading list for me! I was amazed.

I asked him, “Since you have finished reading these books, how do you evaluate the authenticity of the *Zuo Commentary*?” He did not answer my question directly. Instead, he asked, “Do you remember what Gu Donggao said in his *Chunqiu Dashibiao* about astronomy?” I answered, “I don’t remember him mentioning Jupiter.” “That’s about right,” the librarian said with a smile. When we talk about solar eclipses, the chronologists take it as normal science; however, the ancient Chinese took it as an abnormality, a disaster, and a sign of change, a change for the emperor, and for the ordinary person. Therefore, the author of the *Zuo Commentary* tends to record all the solar eclipses he has seen, particularly the abnormal ones. When we read ancient texts, we have to remind ourselves to be sure not to judge ancient people by modern ways of thinking. The *Zuo Commentary* recorded a total of 36 solar eclipses; 35 of them are exactly the same as those determined by modern astronomical research. You can see how great our ancestors were. As for the one or two mistakes, there could be many reasons for errors. The author may simply have missed one, or he may have seen no need to record Jupiter at the times when there were no human changes accompanying the star. It was an amazing experience to visit this librarian. He helped me a great deal in searching for reference books, and also by sharing his research methodology with me.

One might ask how a librarian could talk to me for so long. Didn’t he have other patrons? The situation at the reference desk at this library is quite different from most other libraries. There was always a group of well-educated patrons standing in front of the reference librarian. They got together as a study group, and the librarian played a leadership role while others participated in the discussion. It was a wonderful chance to meet the first rate paleographers, and it also opened my eyes to the real characteristics of these scholars. Sometimes the discussion required looking at dozen of books to resolve an argument. The reference librarian would go and get the books, and we would look through them for the information we needed. Such books were only available at

the library. The debate among the scholars could be no less serious than a debate among senators and congressmen. Sometimes it could be fun too. Once when we talked about how knowledgeable some of the ancient scholars were, the librarian told us a story. Jiang Yingke of the Ming dynasty wrote a book called *Xuetao Xieshi*, which told about a scholar in Feng Fang named Nan Yu. Because Nan Yu was famous for his knowledge of literature and traditional Chinese medicine, the head of Ningbo County sent a lower rank official to Nan Yu's house asking for a prescription. Nan Yu wrote a poem consisting of four items of herbs as the prescription:

Take the pit out of a Chaulmoogra seed,
Add another half of a fig,
Use three wolfberry barks,
Get one piece of guisqualis fruit.


大枫子去了仁,无花果多半边。
地骨皮用三粒,史君子加一颗。

However, when the head of the county read the prescription, he knew that Nan Yu used a rather unique method to write the poem. Each line of the poem was a hint to the reader to disassemble the characters into parts and reassemble them to get one new character. The reader should compose the four new characters to get a new line that the author really intended. When the head of the county finished his homework, he got the meaning, "A gang of crafty officials!" When we appreciate Nan Yu's talent, we cannot help bursting into laughter. With the passing of the centuries, we can still see, through their poetry, something of the emotions that stirred people in ancient China.

Study in the Bailin Temple library was a rare chance to get some idea of how splendid the Chinese paleographers are. The two reference librarians I saw were also experts in determining the authenticity of cultural relics. Some patrons brought their private collections to the library and asked the reference librarian for appraisal. The patrons asked the librarian to share his tips for discerning the false from the genuine. He said that most imitators were book dealers who used to color the paper to make it look ancient. They cut out the publisher's record and falsified the seal, attributed the wrong author to the work, and forged ancient literature. You can see genuine copies, reproductions, transcripts, and genuine seals impressed on false scrolls. Some of them make fake annotations on a picture or its mounting. It was a common phenomenon that the old wood blocks for printing changed hands from one publisher to another. Some publishers were honest in stating the true origin of the book. Others used the pretext that the old wood blocks were

worn for misleading book buyers about a book's source. The greatest scoundrels were the book dealers who played tricks and changed the appearance of data, prefaces or postscripts. One book dealer, Gao Shiqi, the owner of Qingyin Tang (Qingyin publisher) collected calligraphy and paintings. He was one who dared to deceive the emperors by selling a lot of his fake collections to the imperial palace. He had a confidential book, which recorded all his collections in two categories, authentic works and fake works. The librarian made a joke, "You know, the emperors were not easy to cheat. There were many marvelous paleographers working for them. The reason that Gao Shiqi dared to gamble with his life in fooling the emperor was because his tricks were very hard to see through. Determining the authenticity of ancient works is an art."

According to the librarian, the skills of rare book identification come from practice. Read more, read with your heart, and you will get the idea. However, for those who hardly get a chance to touch rare books, one method is to examine the names that appear in the text. In the old society, the emperor's name could never be uttered. Those whose names were the same as the emperor's faced castigation and sometimes execution. Changes in names reflect the times and history of China. On the one hand, the phenomenon of changing names helps us to identify the time. On the other hand, it adds more work for librarians because Chinese names themselves are a big problem. Intellectuals usually have a number of names including their given name, ideal name, studio name, nickname, honored name, name given by emperor after their death, etc. The librarians at Bailin Temple library were experts on name authority records. Whenever we were discussing names, the librarian could count them as if enumerating their family valuables. I admire their capacity for memory from the bottom of my heart.

I was lucky to study in the Bailin Temple library. Its collections, and especially its librarians, are national treasures. 

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