Monumentality of Time:  
Giant Clocks, the Drum Tower, the Clock Tower  

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This essay investigates two essential problems in regulating and presenting time. The first concerns the relationship between time keeping and time telling; the second, the places and instruments that facilitated these two practices. I will focus on the period in Chinese history when the notion of public time was closely associated with the idea of monumentality—when giant clocks were created to legitimate political authority and when time was announced to a populace from imposing buildings in the center of a city. Whether concealed inside the palace or exposed to the public, these clocks and buildings brought order to the country and helped construct different social spaces and identities.  

The three types of mechanical/architectural constructions studied in this essay—the traditional drum tower (often accompanied by a bell tower), the Western-style clock tower, and giant clocks—point to divergent systems of technology, spatial conception, and political power. Oversized chronographs were routinely commissioned by Chinese emperors as symbols of political control over a unified time/space. Sometimes installed in the throne hall, such clocks complemented the drum tower in a marketplace to define twin centers in a traditional Chinese capital. Because of its governmental affiliation
and public role, the drum tower was instrumental in maintaining imperial dominance as well as in shaping a community; it derived its monumentality from both its architecture and its sound; its meaning is explicated in both official inscriptions and private memoirs. When the drum tower fell silent and was replaced by the clock tower around the early twentieth century, these events signified the appearance of a new kind of monumentality pertaining to a crucial shift in China’s historical temporality from a traditional empire to a modern nation-state.

Time Keeping and Time Telling in Traditional China

People who connect public time telling to Big Ben outside the Houses of Parliament in London will have trouble distinguishing time telling from time keeping, because in that case a single clock, which moves and sounds automatically, performs both roles. But in the ancient Chinese system, two sets of equipment were employed in separate places for these two purposes. Time keeping relied on horology and astronomy, which allowed the government to regulate seasons, months, days, and hours. In his Science and Civilization in China, Joseph Needham emphasizes over and over the political significance of time keeping to a Chinese emperor.¹ Hellmut Wilhelm considers ancient Chinese astronomy and horology a secret science of priest-kings.² Time telling, on the other hand, conveyed a standardized official time to a large population. The principal instrument for this purpose was a drum tower (sometimes accompanied by a bell tower). A drum tower was not a “clock” because it did not compute time and did not record the passage of time. It came alive only at designated moments, when it amplified signals from an official clock and transmitted these signals to the public. What a drum tower presented to the public, therefore, was not a continuous, even, and unidirectional movement of time, but an official schedule of projected operations and recurring events.³

Time keeping and time telling therefore both provided important means for exercising political control, but the former helped control knowledge while the latter helped control a populace. The locations of these two types of control also differed: time keeping, as a secret science, was practiced in the sealed imperial domain; time telling was by nature “public” and had to be exercised in an open social space. These two locations, as well as the two kinds of political control they implied, were further related to different ideas and traditions of monumentality in ancient China.

As I have explained elsewhere, no monumental architecture was pursued in prehistorical and early historical China; the Chinese works that had a social and political significance comparable with that of the colossal monuments found in other early civilizations belonged to a special class of buildings. These objects—ceremonial halls and how the most advanced cultures utilized the most advanced — an excessive amount of space, they remained portable to their utilitarian prototypes, and their political and psychological and actual weight. Never properties of lineage temples and official ritual occasions. Underlying this was the tenet that power could be never disappeared even after the fall of the empire toward and during the late imperial period, it was now constructed to celebration, and mountain-like towers continued to be constructed throughout China’s imperial period. The twentieth century A.D., two thousand years after the Han constructed them, they were concealing power and the limits of its power in an increasingly complex social and economic context.

Once we connect time keeping and time telling to this larger context, we can study more closely the uses of time in some of the practices, as well as the structures that supported them. In this context, it is clear that the Confucian classics written during the Han and the Tang dynasties served as a foundation for later developments made for this purpose and others. In the Confucian classics, the emperor was the personification of the whole universe, the universe and its cycles were the prime mover of history. This is the way the emperor was expected to shape the world and the way he was expected to be throughout his life. This is the way the emperor was supposed to be. This is the way the emperor was expected to be.

The triangular relationship among the emperor, the people, and the gods that was characteristic of ancient China was seen as an ordered social system. This idea was further elaborated in the Confucian classics, where the emperor was described as the chief protector of the people. In this system, time was the means to the end of maintaining the social order and the social order was the means to the end of maintaining the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time. The emperor was the one who controlled the time, and the people were the ones who were controlled by the time.
found in other early civilizations (hence “monumentality” in a general sense) belonged to a special class of objects known as liqi, or “ritual paraphernalia.” These objects—ceremonial jade carvings and bronze sacrificial vessels—always utilized the most advanced techniques available at the time and “squandered” an excessive amount of human labor. Though some had exaggerated sizes, they remained portable and maintained typological connections with their utilitarian prototypes. They were called “heavy objects” (zhongqi) for their political and psychological importance, not for their physical appearance and actual weight. Never intending to dominate public view, they were sacred properties of lineage temples, accessible only by the lineage members on special ritual occasions. Underlying this art/architectural tradition was a political tenet that power could be maintained only by keeping it secret. This tradition never disappeared even after architectural monuments gained increasing popularity toward and during the imperial era: lofty buildings and colossal statues were now constructed to celebrate an enduring political or religious institution, and mountain-like tumuli immortalized individual rulers. Consequently, throughout China’s imperial history from the third century B.C. to the early twentieth century A.D., two traditions of symbolic art and architecture, one concealing power and the other displaying it, worked together to construct an increasingly complex social and political space.

Once we connect time keeping and time telling to this art/architectural context, we can study more closely the spatial concepts related to these two practices, as well as the structures and equipment created for them. Time keeping consistently served to define the centrality of political power, and instruments made for this purpose readily fell into the category of liqi. For three thousand years, Chinese political theory held that harmony between time and space was the foundation of rulership over a unified country. This idea was already firmly established in the Book of Documents (Shang shu), one of the Confucian classics written during the second and first millennia B.C. The book begins with the “Canon of Yao” (“Yao dian”), which records that Yao, a legendary sage emperor in the time of Great Harmony, established a system that allowed him “to compute and delineate the sun, moon and stars, and the celestial markers, and so to deliver respectfully the seasons to be observed by people.” In this system, time was conceived from and framed within the “four ends” of the world, and the mythological emperor could thereby define his position at the center of this temporal/spatial structure known as China.

The triangular relationship between time, space, and political authority gained a more complex and dynamic form around the third century B.C. The new pattern, called “monthly observances” (yueling), was translated into the architecture of Bright Hall (Mingtang), perhaps the most complex imperial
ritual building ever attempted in ancient China (fig. 5.1A). On top of the structure was an astronomical observatory called the Room of Communicating with Heaven (Tongtianwu). On the hall’s main floor, twelve chambers along the four sides corresponded to the twelve months, surrounding the central chamber that stood for the middle of a year (fig. 5.1B). It was the emperor who linked these static spaces into a temporal/spatial continuum: he would begin his year in the first room at the northeast corner (where the yang ether rose) and move clockwise through the hall. Each month he would dwell in the proper room, dress in the proper color, eat the proper food, listen to the proper music, sacrifice to the proper deities, and attend to the proper affairs of state. It was understood that his synchronous movement with heaven and earth would secure harmony between his rule and the universe. Conversely, by turning himself into the moving hand of a huge clock, the emperor could complete the symbolism of the ritual building as an embodiment of the cosmic order.

With such significance, the Bright Hall and related ritual structures became a logical place to house new types of clocks designed to tabulate detailed temporal divisions. It is therefore no coincidence that the earliest “mechanical clock” recorded in Chinese history—a seventh-century machine known as the “twelve double-hour wheel” (Shi'er chenche) and designed by an artisan from Haizhou in south China—served exactly this role. This invention was presented to Wu Zhao in 692. Instead of utilizing it for any practical purposes, Wu, the only female emperor in Chinese history, installed it in a Celestial Hall (Tiantang) next to her Bright Hall to symbolize her mandate from heaven.10 This Tang case exemplifies a long tradition in ancient China, in which various kinds of advanced chronographs, including some extremely complex hydraulic clocks, were invented under imperial patronage to serve the symbolic role of legitimating political authority. The most ingenious example of such a clock was completed by Su Song in 1088 (fig. 5.2).11 Powered by an enormous water wheel, this forty-foot-high “monumental” clock reproduced the movements of the “three luminaries”—sun, moon, and stars—which were crucial to calendrical calculation and astrological divination. Along the movements of the celestial bodies, little manikins revolved in measured pace to show the hours, the quarters (ke, each of which equaled fourteen minutes twenty-four seconds), and the night watches.12 Su Song’s experiments were followed by those of Guo Shoujing, who served in the Mongol court of Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century. The clepsydra he created in 1262, according to the History of the Yuan Dynasty (Yuan shi), was itself a metal-framed building that reached more than seventy feet in height and was given the name Precious Mountain Pavilion (Baoshan lou). Embellished with images of the sun, the moon, and dragons that could open their mouths and roll their eyes, it was also equipped
Fig. 5.1. (A) Reconstruction plan of Bright Hall, constructed by Wang Mang in 3 A.D. near Xi'an in present-day Shaanxi province. (B) Twelve rooms of Bright Hall and the imperial positions during the twelve months.
why these clocks had to be so large that their significance lay not only in the harmony between human and cosmological models, and their exaggerated size, technical ingenuity, and most convincing proof of the harmonies in nature alone could possess these attributes.

Indeed, we find this authoritary throughout China's history. In the thirteenth century, the new instrument at the court was the Western-style clock known as the "throne." A visitor to the Forbidden City, the throne halls called "Jiaji" were the most significant of all the halls. The first group consisted of the "golden boxes." The second group included the "throne;" a traditional hydraulic style mechanical clock to demonstrate the knowledge of time, the universe, and of the universe. He could then ask why in this hall two large clocks marked "action"—an ancient political concept.

More than eighteen feet tall was represented by a wooden clock known as the "Huangchao liqi tushu" (Illustrations of Imperial China) (fig. 5.4). It was the standard court ceremonial equipment of the book in 1759 and published clock a "self-sounding bell" with a pressive size (one zhang six feet six inches) and by extension identifies all earlier emperors, as a special category.

Compared with the abundant discussion of time keeping in ancient China, this information is scarce and nonspecific. This can be explained.
why these clocks had to be so enormous and spectacular. The answer must be that their significance lay not only in their practical function as chronographs and cosmological models, and not even in their political symbolism of securing the harmony between heaven and man. Rather, the combination of their exaggerated size, technical sophistication, and visual ingenuity made them the most convincing proof of the extraordinariness of their imperial patrons, who alone could possess these intriguing and imposing objects.

Indeed, we find this relationship between giant clocks and political authority throughout China’s imperial era. Even when the Jesuits introduced European mechanical clocks to China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the new instruments were readily absorbed into an old tradition: a huge Western-style clock was made and installed next to the Chinese emperor’s throne. A visitor to the Forbidden City today can still find this clock in one of the throne halls called Jiaotai Dian or the Hall of Union. The hall realized its significance as the nexus of imperial power by displaying two groups of objects. The first group consisted of the emperor’s twenty-five official seals in golden boxes. The second group included two enormous clocks flanking the throne: a traditional hydraulic clock to the left of the throne and a Western-style mechanical clock to the right (fig. 5.3). These two timepieces were placed here for symbolic, not practical, reasons. As we have found in the “Canon of Yao” and the Bright Hall, here the idea is once again that through controlling the knowledge of time, the emperor could internalize the intrinsic movement of the universe. He could therefore rule the world without using force. This is why in this hall two large characters hanging above the throne read “Non-action”—an ancient political philosophy now facilitated by Western science.

More than eighteen feet tall, the Western-style clock in the Hall of Union was represented by a woodblock image in an imperial publication entitled *Huangchao liqi tushi* (Illustrated regulations for ritual paraphernalia of the Imperial Qing dynasty) (fig. 5.4). Assigned by the emperor to update and standardize court ceremonial equipment, a special commission started working on the book in 1759 and published it seven years later. The authors labeled the clock a “self-sounding bell” (*ziming zhong*) and carefully registered its impressive size (one *zhang* six *chi* and six *cun*). The book thus certifies this clock, and by extension identifies all giant clocks commissioned and owned by earlier emperors, as a special category of *liqi*.

Compared with the abundant discussions of the techniques and philosophies of time keeping in ancient Chinese texts, records of public time telling are scarce and nonspecific. This contrast is itself highly significant: unlike time keeping, time telling in traditional China involved little technical innovation
or philosophical contemplation. The earliest record of this activity—a two-sentence-long statement found in a late-second-century text written by the Confucian scholar Cai Yong—already sums up the basic technique, schedule, and function of public time telling for the next seventeen hundred years: "When the night clepsydra runs out, the drum is beaten and people get up. When the day clepsydra runs out, the bell is struck and people go to rest." What did change over the next seventeen hundred years mainly concerned the placement of the drums and bells: buildings that housed these instruments and their locations in a city. The central players in this development were therefore two architectural structures—the drum tower and the bell tower—which demonstrated their monumentality with their towering image, central location, sophisticated architectural forms, and public function.

Cai Yong’s statement implies that by the third century, drum towers and bell towers had been constructed in or near residential areas to announce time to the residents. A newly excavated second-century tomb mural supports this record with visual evidence: it depicts a tower soaring over a residential com-

 pound, probably a walled village.

Fig. 5.3. The clepsydra and mechanical clock in the Hall of Union in the Forbidden City, Beijing, eighteenth century.

is a large, red drum (fig. 5.5) announced at marketplaces, a "market pavilion" (shì lóu). The Western Jin (263–317) tall terrace: "A drum was hung up and was closed. There was also a bell within fifty Chinese miles." It was probably only during

Chang'an. We know this not only in official documents as well because the establishment of these an urban design based on wards. To be sure, pos


pound, probably a walled village or town; the only object visible in the tower is a large, red drum (fig. 5.5).\textsuperscript{15} In early imperial China, time was also announced at marketplaces, usually built around an administrative center called a “market pavilion” (shi lou). Both traditions continued into the post-Han period. We are told, for example, that a famous marketplace in Luoyang during the Western Jin (263–317) was dominated by a two-story building on top of a tall terrace: “A drum was hung in the building. When it sounded, the market was closed. There was also a bell. When it was struck, the sound was heard within fifty Chinese miles.”\textsuperscript{16}

It was probably only during the Tang, however, that a centralized system of public time telling was established in a major city such as the capital, Chang’an. We know this not only because this system was recorded for the first time in official documents as well as in contemporary travelogues,\textsuperscript{17} but also because the establishment of this system was closely related to the culmination of an urban design based on walled residential units called \textit{li} or \textit{fang}, both meaning “wards.” To be sure, politicians and administrators had recognized
long before the Tang the main town. But this idea was the largest metropolis in the world, laid out on a square grid made of pounded earth about 1600 feet extended over five miles near the “imperial city” stood at the centre, the adjacent “administrative wards were neatly arranged and government offices. Each corresponding to the four cardinal directions, closed at dusk and opened at dawn, these gates were sound signals.

Because an independent bell was sent out from the southern gate, the Gate of Inheriting from the past, sounded each day at dusk and on horseback shouted out warning sounds. In 636, a reform of the Secretariat of Emperor Taizong throughout the capital to announce official guards were to concentrate some of the measures is recorded in the book.

At sunset, the drums closed. From the second watchmen in charge of policing the watches, while the midnight watch, the drums within the streets were beaten so that the gates of the wards and

The specific function of time was lost in a more general sense, it is public time telling in a Chinese city and in Buddhist temples still specific and local. The government evening, on the other hand, transmitting time signals from the gates, gently practiced throughout more
long before the Tang the role of public time telling in safeguarding a village or town. But this idea was applied to an entire city only from the Tang. The largest metropolis in the contemporary world, Chang'an was a planned city laid out on a square grid in nearly perfect symmetry (fig. 5.6A). Its outer walls, made of pounded earth about ten to fifteen feet thick and thirty-five feet tall, extended over five miles north to south and nearly six miles east to west. An “imperial city” stood at the center of the north end of this large rectangle, facing the adjacent “administrative city” to the south. As many as 108 residential wards were neatly arranged on the east, south, and west sides of the palaces and government offices. Each ward was rectangular, with the four sides corresponding to the four cardinal directions. Each side had a gate, which was closed at dusk and opened at dawn. What dictated the opening and closing of these gates were sound signals from the imperial city.

Because an independent drum tower still did not exist, such signals were sent out from the southern gate of the imperial city, called Chengtian men or the Gate of Inheriting from Heaven. Before 636, the drums above this gate sounded each day at dusk and dawn. Following the drumbeats, official guards on horseback shouted out on the streets, telling people to close or open their ward gates. In 636, a reform was initiated by Ma Zhou (601–48), president of the Secretariat of Emperor Taizong: drums were to be installed on every street throughout the capital to amplify the signals from the imperial city; the official guards were to concentrate their duties on night patrols. The result of these measures is recorded in the New History of Tang:

At sunset, the drums were beaten eight hundred times and the gates were closed. From the second night watch, mounted soldiers employed by the officers in charge of policing the streets made the rounds and shouted out the watches, while the military patrols made their rounds in silence. At the fifth watch, the drums within the Palace were beaten, and then the drums in all the streets were beaten so as to let the noise be heard everywhere; then all the gates of the wards and markets were opened.

The specific function of this system was to facilitate the nightly curfew. But in a more general sense, it fully realized the government’s supervision of public time telling in a Chinese city. Although drums and bells at marketplaces and in Buddhist temples still sounded at regular hours, their roles remained specific and local. The government-sanctioned drumbeats at morning and evening, on the other hand, controlled the entire capital and its residents by transmitting time signals from the palace to every street. This control was diligently practiced throughout most of the Tang. During the following Song dy-
nasty, however, the walls were pulled down and more houses and stores built; and there emerged a new street history. Consequently, thousands of new shops and houses were built; local temples and temples of the family were established.

This Song legacy, however, which followed a centralized time-telling system, was soon dispersed. Soon after, the Song capital Kaifeng in 1032 was conquered by the Jin in this conquered city the Song capital Zhongdu in the Jin reign of the Jurchen and, outside this city, the monk suffered. The Jin, however, did not want to relocate the two towers in the Jin's Southern Capital district and at a spot where the The drum towers in Zhaoyuan, Tower (Pu lou), while the many Tower (Wen lou). Both drum tower and bell tower and the building of shops and residential areas followed the Jin system of urban architectural design. When Ming arrived in present-day Beijing, he found that the drum tower and bell tower were used to extenuating circumstances: Cavalry troops, thirty to forty soldiers, sirens were sounding, extenuating the law; offenders

The central location of the ruins provided a blueprint for structuring today, a considerable number of towers and/or bell towers at the central hubs that were adopted by the designers of Ming structures for the Yuan towers (fig. 5.6). A drum tower and bell tower were used in the methods used in these buildings...
nasty, however, the ward system gradually declined and finally collapsed; more and more houses and shops in the capital had their gates directly open to the streets; and there emerged a burgeoning nightlife unseen in previous Chinese history. Consequently, both the night curfew and the “street drums” were abolished; local temples now carried out the role of announcing dawn and dusk.

This Song legacy, however, was again broken by the subsequent Yuan dynasty, which followed initiatives made by the Jin to revitalize the Tang system of centralized time telling. Founded by Jurchens in the early twelfth century, the Jin soon became a major military power in north China and seized the northern Song capital Kaifeng in 1126. Architectural projects pursued by Jin rulers, both in this conquered city (renamed the regime’s Southern Capital) and in the main capital Zhongdu in present-day Beijing, reveal a conscious return to Tang urban design. Most tellingly, in Zhongdu, a drum tower and a bell tower flanked the southern gate of the imperial city. A night curfew was reestablished, and time signals were sent out from these two three-story buildings at dusk and dawn. The Jin, however, did not stop at revitalizing the Tang practices, but went further to relocate the two towers from inside the palace to outside it. This was done in the Jin’s Southern Capital Kaifeng: a drum tower and a bell tower were built near the Zhaoqian Bridge south of the palace, near the city’s main commercial district and at a spot where the city’s major land and water traffic routes met.

The drum towers in Zhongdu and Kaifeng were known as the Martial Towers (Wu lou), while the accompanying bell towers were called the Civilian Towers (Wen lou). Both names were adopted by the Yuan dynasty, whose drum tower and bell tower also stood in the center of the capital amidst a multitude of shops and residences (fig. 5.6B). There is little doubt that the Yuan followed the Jin system of public time telling and the corresponding urban architectural design. When Marco Polo traveled to Dadu, the capital of the Yuan in present-day Beijing, he found that the drums and the bell on the two towers were sounded every evening to announce the start of the curfew. Only under very extenuating circumstances was anyone allowed to travel on the streets. Cavalry troops, thirty to forty strong, patrolled the city to arrest anyone violating the law; offenders were beaten with a rod.

The central location of the drum tower and bell tower in Yuan Dadu provided a blueprint for structuring contemporary and later Chinese cities: even today, a considerable number of old cities and towns still retain their drum towers and/or bell towers at the central crossroads. The same pattern was adopted by the designers of Ming-Qing Beijing, who substituted newer structures for the Yuan towers (fig. 5.6C). On the other hand, although Beijing’s drum tower and bell tower were rebuilt several times and grew taller and taller, the methods used in these buildings to keep time remained old-fashioned and
even degenerated. During the Yuan and Ming, officials stationed here continued to use an old Song clepsydra to determine the moments to strike the drums and the bell. This clepsydra was lost some time during the Ming; the Qing used “incense clocks” for the purpose. This type of timekeeper was made by compressing powdered incense in metal templates to form elaborate traceries often resembling characters on a Chinese seal. When burned, the incense would follow the trail, passing markings that indicated a measurement of time, often periods of the night watches. It was this kind of rudimentary device that was employed in Beijing’s drum tower and bell tower to regulate public time telling during the last three hundred years of China’s dynastic history. Unlike the clocks installed next to the emperor’s throne, these two towers had nothing to do with state-of-the-art horology. Instead—as I will show in the following section—their power lay in their silent images and invisible sound, two split features that connected the towers to divergent social spheres in the capital.

**Beijing’s Drum Tower and Bell Tower**

Historians of Chinese architecture are used to studying traditional Beijing from its two-dimensional layout (the maps in fig. 5.6 exemplify this interest). As a result, an important feature of this city has escaped most discussions of its design: during the five and a half centuries of the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368–1911), the drum tower and the bell tower were the two tallest structures standing on Beijing’s central axis, exceeding the emperor’s primary throne hall, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, by more than twenty meters. But the real difference between the towers and the throne hall was still not their height but their visibility: while the Hall of Supreme Harmony was concealed inside the layers of walls of the Forbidden City, the drum tower and the bell tower were exposed to public view. In fact, among all imperial buildings in Ming-Qing Beijing, these two towers were the only ones that can be called “public monuments.” Even today, their towering appearance above the surrounding commercial and residential buildings generates a strong impression of architectural monumentality.

The drum tower and the bell tower are the subject of a wide range of literary works, including official documents, commemorative inscriptions, government archives, travelogues, memoirs, and folktales. Checking this literature, however, we find that private memoirs and local stories say little about the buildings’ magnificent architectural imagery, but are animated by a strong sensitivity to sound—the beating of the twenty-four drums and an enormous bell installed above the towers. In contrast, official documents and inscriptions rarely mention the sound but are mostly concerned with the towers’ cosmological significance and possible difference and what this desirable answer is that the towers to practice their folktales were created the sound issuing from the intention of the towers memoirs and folktales the towers’ audio presentation kinds of literature indicate.

The only description able to find, for example, the resident, which reports a peak of eighteen slow beats, and the fast nor slow. A well-known inspired by the sound of the bell when the Yongle emperor in the century, the foundry master’s emperor was furious and the foundry master’s daughter jumped into the huge mold making herself a permanent clutch at her, but only cast a perfectly cast. But to the ears sound “Xie!” —the sound of looking for her missing person.

I have started this discussion and stories, not with empirical, but with unofficial literature preserved in a historical study: these two completely silent; to a modern upon their form and decoration gone, their visual aspect has historical significance. It is true that citizens, can happily observe and can also reconstruct their repeated construction and of allying ourselves with the phases on the buildings’ architecture echo theirs too closely.
logical significance and political symbolism.²⁹ We wonder why there is such a difference and what this difference means. The easiest but perhaps most reliable answer is that the official documents were issued by people who built the towers to practice their control over public time telling, but the memoirs and folktales were created by people whose everyday lives were directly affected by the sound issuing from the towers. The official documents often announce the intention of the towers associated with the towers’ visual presentation; the memoirs and folktales often reveal the reception of the towers associated with the towers’ audio presentation. The different content and focuses of these two kinds of literature indicate two contrasting aspects of the towers’ meaning.

The only description of the rhythmic sound of the drums that I have been able to find, for example, comes from a private memoir written by a Beijing resident, which reports a popular saying in old Beijing: “Eighteen fast beats, eighteen slow beats, and there are yet another eighteen beats that are neither fast nor slow.”³⁰ A well-known Beijing folk tale, on the other hand, was inspired by the sound of the bell, which was considered peculiar.³¹ It relates that when the Yongle emperor ordered a new bell to be cast in the early fifteenth century, the foundry master failed repeatedly to obtain a perfect casting. The emperor was furious and threatened to punish the incompetent man. The foundry master’s daughter heard about this. To save her father’s life, she jumped into the huge mold when the molten metal was poured into it, thus making herself a permanent part of the bell. Her father made a desperate clutch at her, but only caught hold of one of her shoes. This time the bell was perfectly cast. But to the ears of Beijing’s residents, it ever since gave forth the sound “Xie!”—the sound of the Chinese word for “shoe”—as if the girl kept looking for her missing personal belonging whenever the bell was struck.

I have started this discussion of the two towers with these remembrances and stories, not with emperors’ edicts or government documents, because this unofficial literature preserves a vanished aspect of the towers that easily eludes a historical study: these two buildings, though physically intact, are now completely silent; to a modern observer, their meaning seems entirely to depend upon their form and decoration. In other words, with their audible aspect gone, their visual aspect has become the most obvious evidence for their historical significance. It is true that we, as art historians or architectural historians, can happily observe and analyze the architectural features of the towers, and can also reconstruct their histories based on archives that record their repeated construction and restoration. But in such research we run the danger of allying ourselves with the patrons and designers of the towers—our emphases on the buildings’ architectural design and intended symbolism seem to echo theirs too closely. What is absent in these emphases is how the towers—
and more specifically the sound issuing from their balconies—actually worked and what they evoked.

We are reminded of this absence when we realize that the towers are now soundless and hence lifeless. This reflection leads me to propose a twofold methodology to guide my discussion of the drum tower and the bell tower. First, to understand their historical monumentality we cannot rely on their physical properties and archival records alone, but must also try to resurrect—to “listen to”—their vanished sound, and to imagine the social interactions and spatial transformations activated by such sound. Second, our only method to resurrect this vanished sound is to activate the memories of the “historical listeners”—memories of ordinary Beijingers that we have discovered in personal memoirs and folktales. It is difficult to find a better metaphor for remembrance than a vanished sound recalled. But the sound from the drum tower and the bell tower was special and indeed monumental—a sound that dictated millions of people’s daily lives for several hundred years.

First constructed in 1272 by Kublai Khan in Dadu, the drum tower has since been reconstructed and repaired many times. Its current form and location basically preserve those of the early Ming drum tower, commissioned by the Yongle emperor before he moved his court to this northern city in 1421. A magnificent wooden-framed structure, it is 46.7 meters high and covers an area of seven thousand square meters, painted entirely vermilion except for the green roof tiles and the bluish decorative bands below the repeated eaves (fig. 5.7). The lower story of the tower, actually a tall base of the entire structure reinforced by thick brick walls, raises the upper story to 30 meters above ground, from where one may look down and find traditional Beijing under one’s feet. The single enormous room on the upper story originally housed twenty-four drums, each with a round drumhead 1.5 meters in diameter and mounted with cattle skin. Now all the original drums save one have disappeared; so have the bronze clepsydra and other chronographs that imperial officials used to determine the time to beat the drums.

The bell tower stands a short distance north of the drum tower (fig. 5.7). The history of this second tower can also be traced back to the early Ming—Kublai Khan’s bell tower was located slightly to the east and is now untraceable. Unlike the drum tower that remains a timber-framed building, the bell tower was turned into a brick and stone structure in 1745—a decision made by the Qianlong emperor of the Qing dynasty after the original wooden bell tower was destroyed by fire. The same emperor also erected a large stone stele in front of the building and inscribed on the stele a long text that he composed to commemorate the “renewed harmony between heaven and earth” achieved by rebuilding the tower. It is a penchant for art connoisseurship and symbolic reasons: the new bell tower is voluminous and powerful; the height 47.9 meters—even greater than the attempt to achieve verticality. The bell tower is yin and feminine.

Like the drum tower, the bell tower also serves as a tall base. 6.3 tons in weight—is hung at the upper story. No door was installed and story. As for the drum tower, although the story, they were open wide when the sound of the drums could not be heard.

Here is the schedule for bell tower, wu hour, beginning about 7 at the bronze bell, were struck. The repri mevous paces. As summarized in the text, started with 18 fast beats, was fi
by rebuilding the tower. It is possible that Qianlong—a ruler famous for his penchant for art connoisseurship—redesigned the bell tower also for aesthetic and symbolic reasons: the new building has a sober and elegant look that both contradicts and complements the flamboyant drum tower. The drum tower is voluminous and powerful; the bell tower is slender and elegant. Its height of 47.9 meters—even greater than the drum tower’s—attests to an unmistakable attempt to achieve verticality. The drum tower is yang and masculine; the bell tower is yin and feminine.

Like the drum tower, the bell tower is also a two-level building whose first story also serves as a tall base. An enormous bronze bell—5.5 meters tall and 6.3 tons in weight—is hung inside an open vault in the center of the upper story. No door was installed around the vault to block the sound of the bell. As for the drum tower, although there are doors built all around the upper story, they were open wide when the drums were beaten on regular hours, so the sound of the drums could reach every corner of the city.

Here is the schedule for beating the drums and the bell: every day at the wen hour, beginning about 7 P.M., the twenty-four drums, followed by the bronze bell, were struck. The rhythmic sound was divided into sections of various paces. As summarized in the popular saying cited earlier, each sequence started with 18 fast beats, was followed by 18 slow beats, and then concluded
with 18 medium-paced beats. This sequence was repeated to make a total of 108 beats. Responding to the sound from the two towers, imperial guards stationed at the nine gates of Beijing’s Inner City struck the chimes or bell installed in each of the gate towers. With this joint call, all the gates of the inner city were closed one by one, local police shut the “street gates,” and people also locked their doors. The same performance of the drums and the bell was repeated at the yin hour, about 5 A.M., the next morning: the night was officially over and it was the time for the city to wake up. So with another round of the joint striking of drums and bells, the city gates slowly swung open; markets started to receive customers; and high-ranking officials departed to attend court meetings. Between these two moments—that is, between 7 P.M. in the evening and 5 A.M. in the early morning—the bell tower kept silent and only the drum tower announced the nightly hours.

This schedule seems strange to a modern observer: the drums and bell thundered only at night, and announced time to Beijing’s residents only when they were supposed to stay home and sleep. To understand this seemingly bizarre custom is to understand the working of the two towers and, indeed, a predominant system of public time telling in premodern China. I have surveyed the history of this system in the previous section; Beijing’s example discussed here allows us to summarize two basic roles of this system. First, the joint striking of the drums and bell controlled urban spaces and activities by activating Beijing’s gates—not only the main city gates but also all other gates throughout the imperial capital. One type of gate, no longer seen in present-day Beijing, was the “street gate.” Numbering 1,219, these gates divided the city’s traffic routes into short, isolatable sections. Several members of the British Macartney mission of 1793 mentioned this device in their reports and memoirs. The earl of Macartney himself wrote: “At night all the streets are shut up by barricades at each end and a guard is constantly patrolling between them.”

The unified actions of Beijing’s gates implied a daily transformation of the city’s spatial structure: when all the gates were closed in response to the evening striking of the drums and the bell, not only was the walled city isolated from the outside, but all the walled spaces within the city—palaces, offices, markets, temples, and private homes—turned themselves into enclosed and dissociated units. Roads and streets became empty and ceased to connect the city’s various sectors into a dynamic whole.

Traditional Beijing thus underwent a ritualized dormancy on a daily basis, and each period of its inactivity was framed and reinforced by the joint sound of the drums and bell. This primary role of public time telling, to mark the beginning and end of the nightly curfew, was complemented by the second role of public time telling, to punctuate each night into five equal divisions for the night watches—a role pertinent to the beginning of the night then marked “the first geng,” and so on till the bell of the next day at the wu geng, municipal hooks on top, patrolled the streets.

Unlike public bells and “goads to effective, prompt, and bell tower ensured of the towers raises questions. We have mentioned that the buildings standing on many eastern towers, their striking visual in the function of telling time. In the line of control of the time. Furthermore, towers could realize such a sense brought about a sense of unity.

This particular role for the bell tower was brought to prominence by the Qianlong emperor, in front of the bell tower in 1758.

My divine capital is an
Its run-through avenues
don’t population dwells there. But
Unless an instrument
in dawn and dusk cannot be
determined by its physical
multi-leveled building
be seen near and far. My face
pair, guarding the Forbidden
The last sentence in this quotation is a tribute to the imperial court. Much of Beijing will be familiar to you through the Outer City, the Inner City (see fig. 5.6C). Nested deep
night watches—a role performed by the drum tower alone. The joint striking of the drums and bell at dusk was known as ding geng, meaning literally “the beginning of the night watch.” The following bi-hourly beatings of the drums then marked “the first night watch” (chu geng), the “second night watch” (er geng), and so on till the bell joined the drums again to announce the beginning of the next day at the “fifth night watch” (wu geng). Between ding geng and wu geng, municipal night watchmen, equipped with long poles with iron hooks on top, patrolled the streets in groups of two or three.36

Unlike public bells in medieval Europe, which were “drivers of actions” and “goads to effective, productive labor,”37 therefore, the Chinese drum tower and bell tower ensured peace through the long night. This particular function of the towers raises questions about the role of their architectural imagery. I have mentioned that the drum tower and the bell tower were the two tallest buildings standing on Beijing’s central axis during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Their striking visual images, however, did little to reinforce their public function of telling time. In fact, since these two buildings sent out their sound only from dusk to dawn, their sound and their architectural image were to a large extent mutually exclusive; they were heard at night and seen during the day. During the day, their imposing but silent presence realized the political control of the time. From the point of view of the imperial authority, the towers could realize such control because they focused public perception and brought about a sense of unification and standardization.

This particular role for the monumentality of the towers is clearly stated by the Qianlong emperor, in a text that he ordered inscribed on a stele erected in front of the bell tower in 1747:

My divine capital is as broad as an ocean, and it possesses all sorts of goods. Its run-through avenues intersect with streets and lanes, and a large, well-off population dwells there. But when things multiply the opinions become diverse. Unless an instrument is created to unify people’s minds, synchronization of dawn and dusk cannot be achieved. The effectiveness of such an instrument is determined by its physical size. This is why this tower must be constructed as a multileveled building of unusual height; only in this way can its solemn image be seen near and far. Moreover, the drum tower and the bell tower will form a pair, guarding the Forbidden City to the rear.38

The last sentence in this quotation refers to the position of the two towers relative to the imperial court. Ming-Qing Beijing consisted of a number of sub-cities—the Outer City, the Inner City, the Imperial City, and the Forbidden City (see fig. 5.6C). Nested deep inside layers of walled rectangles, the Forbidden City
was the personal domain of the Son of Heaven. The next subcity, the Imperial City, protected the Forbidden City and contained imperial parks, armories, and residences of royal relatives, high ministers, and powerful eunuchs. With thick walls and guarded gates, these two cities in central Beijing blocked off more than two-thirds of the east-west traffic routes within the Inner City. To travel from the east part of the city to the west part, an ordinary Beijing resident had to make a considerable effort, either circling around Di’anmen, the Gate of Earthly Peace that marked the north end of the Imperial City, or taking a detour behind Qianmen, the Front Gate of the Inner City. If he took the first route, he would pass by the drum tower, through streets lined with large and small shops.

This hypothetical journey helps explicate two important implications of the location of the drum tower and the bell tower, which further signify the buildings’ social identity and political symbolism. First, unlike all other imperial structures in Beijing, these two towers stood outside the royal domain and were accessible to anyone who lived in or traveled to the city. Second, the area centered on these two towers was one of the busiest commercial districts in the city. Many records of old Beijing describe at length the many restaurants and shops one could find here. The authors of these records also unanimously emphasizes the attraction of this area to people of different professions and social classes. While the artificial lakes southwest of the towers offered educated people quiet places for literary gatherings and relaxation, teahouses and open-air performances attracted commoners, women, and children.

It is important to realize that the identity of the drum tower and the bell tower as a center of Beijing’s urban popular culture was already implied in the city’s symbolic structure. By locating these two buildings outside Di’anmen, the designer of Beijing consciously associated them with the element di or “earth” as opposed to tian or “heaven.” As mentioned earlier, Di’anmen, or the Gate of Earthly Peace, was the north or rear gate of the Imperial City; the south and front gate of the Imperial City was the famous Tiananmen or the Gate of Heavenly Peace. These two gates constituted a pair pertaining to the yin-yang opposition: the area outside Di’anmen was a public space populated by the subjects of imperial rule, while Tiananmen symbolized the emperor as the master of the whole population. As a designated center of Beijing’s public life, the drum tower and the bell tower both counterbalanced the Forbidden City and were subordinated to it. The political dominance of the Forbidden City over these two towers was most acutely expressed by locating the towers at the northern end of Beijing’s central axis. The symbolic center of this axis was a series of throne halls inside the Forbidden City; the two towers were therefore understood as a far-reaching projection of imperial power from the throne halls into the public domain.

It is at this juncture that the relationship between the Forbidden City, a relationship which I have mentioned several times, is distinguished by their location, technical sophistication, and the fact that they belonged to a single structure. While the clocks in the emperor’s over time keeping, the drum tower, by amplifying the clocks’ seconds, coordinates the passage of time. When the sun set, they undertook a different role: they derived their power from the Imperial City andFortified the rest of Beijing with an aura of authority.

Coda: The Clock Tower

For centuries, the sound of the drum and bell tower rang out, signaling the time when the emperors went to work, rest, open-court ceremonies. This was the sound that marked the beginning and end of the day. What the sound signified was the passage of time, the history it commemorated. The drum tower recommended the emperor to the memory it evoked, using the sound of the drum as a reminder of the past that was not forgotten; it was like the memory of yesterdays to the undifferentiated present.

This way of telling and knowing time was two changes in public time telling: economic invasions. First, the European invasion to suppress the European forces (sent by Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Russia) occupied the Forbidden City and put an end to its use as a military base. After the Republican government was established in 1912, it was renamed Realizing Humiliation Monuments Education in the Capital. It was published on its lower level. The next...
It is at this juncture that we arrive at a more complete understanding of the relationship between the two towers and the imperial clocks in the Forbidden City, a relationship which determined their different forms of monumentality. I have mentioned that two huge clocks, one a traditional hydraulic clock and the other a Western mechanical clock, flanked the emperor’s throne in the Hall of Union. We have also observed tensions as well as connections between the towers and these clocks. On the one hand, the towers and the clocks were distinguished by their locations, accessibility, visibility, and different kinds of technical sophistication (horology versus architecture). On the other hand, they belonged to a single symbolic system and actually constituted this system. While the clocks in the emperor’s private domain signified the imperial control over time keeping, the towers manifested this control over public time telling by amplifying the clocks’ size and sound. Because the two towers sounded only at night, they undertook a daily transformation from silent architectural monuments to what may be called “auditory monuments.” As architectural monuments they derived their political symbolism from their juxtaposition with the Imperial City and Forbidden City; as “auditory monuments” they dominated the rest of Beijing with invisible sound signals.

**Coda: The Clock Tower**

For centuries, the sound of the drums and the bell dictated to Beijing’s residents when to work, rest, open the city gates, or retreat into individual courtyard compounds: this was the schedule of a community in a tightly walled city. What the sound signified was an eternal repetition recognized as time itself. The history it commemorated had no event and occasion, date or name. The memory it evoked, using Pierre Nora’s words, was “an integrated memory—all-powerful, sweeping, un-self-conscious, and inherently present-minded—a memory without a past that eternally recycles a heritage, relegating ancestral yesterdays to the undifferentiated time of heroes, inceptions, and myth.”

This way of telling and knowing time in Beijing was finally challenged by two changes in public time telling, both brought about by foreign military and economic invasions. First, the old drum tower was silenced. During the 1900 invasion to suppress the Boxer Rebellion, soldiers of the Eight-Power Allied Forces (sent by Britain, France, the United States, Japan, Germany, Italy, Austria, and Russia) occupied the tower and slashed the leather drumheads with bayonets. After the Republic of China was founded, the building was renamed Realizing Humiliation Tower (Mingchi Lou), and a Center for Common Education in the Capital (Jingzhao Tongsu Jiaoyu Zhongxin) was established on its lower level. The tower thus acquired the identity of a witness to
the “crimes of foreign devils” and a major national humiliation. This change in the building’s significance was intimately related to China’s transformation from an ancient empire to a modern nation-state. As part of this transformation, the drum tower joined some other architectural sites to arouse people’s consciousness of the calamities befalling their country. The silence forced upon the old tower thus made it a “modern” monument: not only did it serve a contemporary political agenda, but its changing monumentality implied the uprooting of its traditional “integrated memory” by a historical narrative based on events and happenings.

Second, around the same period, time was announced in Beijing by mechanical clocks installed on Western-style public buildings. Mostly attached to banks, custom houses, railway stations, schools, and government buildings, these clock towers provided the most concrete and convincing evidence for the superiority of Western science, education, and social and political systems. It would be wrong to think that these structures “replaced” the drum Tower and bell tower because they never actually constituted a practical system of public time telling. A study of their locations reveals that clock towers in Beijing were not built in residential areas. Rather, they typically appeared in places that were rich in symbolism and associated with political and economic authorities. Most tellingly, three prominent clock towers, one belonging to Beijing’s first railway station and the others standing above two powerful banks, were constructed on three sides of Tiananmen Square (fig. 5.8). Displaying their intimidating height and advanced chronographs, these towers not only surrounded the most prominent political space in traditional China but also overpowered it. To the city’s residents, however, these startling public symbols of modernity did little to change their daily life.

Themselves intruders in an old Chinese city, clock towers in Beijing were tangible references to an alien system of time and space. They transcended the city’s boundaries and connected Beijing to a huge colonial network marked by a chain of clock towers in London, Singapore, Shanghai, and Hong Kong. This social network realized the Enlightenment design of a universal scheme of time and space. Indeed, if in 1600 the Chinese saw the first Western mechanical clocks and world maps as curiosities, in 1900 they found themselves governed by such clocks and maps, which had reassigned their country—the Central Kingdom—to quite a different place in a global time-space legitimated by science.

What distinguished the monumentality of these clock towers from that of the imperial clocks and the drum tower, therefore, was a new technology which, according to Robert M. Adams, should always be thought of as a social-technical system: “What underlies and sustains technological systems is partly institutional and partly technical, partly rooted in material capabilities and

Fig. 5.8. The Japanese Dadong Bank in Tiananmen Square. Photograph by W. J. Peterson.

possibilities and partly in human.

NOTES

2. Hellmut Wilhelm, China, time and space (London: Faber and Faber, 1942), 16.
3. One definition of schedule is recurring events, arriving and departing. Dictionary, 7th ed.
Fig. 5.8. The Japanese Dadong Bank (now the Bank of China) with its Western-style clock tower near Tiananmen Square. Photograph by Wu Hung.

possibilities and partly in human associations, values, and goals."^45 The traditional, parallel systems of time keeping and time telling became obsolete when a public clock moved and struck by itself. This fascinating, automatic timepiece freed time keeping from imperial control. It also changed the nature of public time telling altogether: instead of issuing an official timetable, it presented an “objective” time that was believed to be homogeneous and universal. The silent remains of the drum tower (renamed Realizing Humiliation Tower), however, inevitably problematized this significance of the clock tower: in establishing its “universal” monumentality, it had to destroy that of the local.

NOTES
3. One definition of *schedule* is “a tabular statement of times of projected operations, recurring events, arriving and departing trains, etc., a timetable.” *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, 7th ed.


7. For an English translation of this text with the original Chinese text, see James Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 3, *The Shoo King* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871), 15-27. The passage cited here is translated by Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, 3:188. Although traditional Confucians attributed this text to Yao himself, modern scholars believe that it was probably written around the fifth or sixth century B.C.

8. For an excellent study of the relationship between time, space, and political power based on excavated divinatory inscriptions, see David N. Keightley, *The Ancestral Landscape: Time, Space, and Community in Late Shang China* (ca. 1200-1045 B.C.) (Berkeley: Center for Chinese Studies, University of California at Berkeley, 2000).


11. This clock has been carefully studied by Joseph Needham and his collaborators in *Heavenly Clockwork: The Great Astronomical Clocks of Medieval China*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).


17. Sulaiman al-Tajir, an Arab traveler of the mid-ninth century, reported that a Tang city had ten drums over city gates which officials beat at regular hours. See Needham et al., *Heavenly Clockwork*, 93 n. 1.

18. For example, we read in the third-century B.C. text *Guang*zi: “Set up strong points and close off [the approaches to villages] with barricades. Let there be but a single road [leading into each village], and let [people] leave or enter only one at a time. Let the village gates be watched and careful attention paid to keys and locks. The keys shall be kept by the village commandant, and a gatekeeper shall be appointed to open and close the gates at the proper time.” W. Allyn Rickert, trans., *Guang*zi, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 104.


21. According to the medieval legislation, “Moving gates and before the drum has been struck, a drum and bell” (ching and gong, *The Tang Code*, vol. 2, 469-70).

22. Tang dynasty Chang’an is a city of great magnitude. Following an old tradition, the city’s streets were marked by drumming of drums and chimes at regular intervals. See Xiong, *Sui-Tang Chang’an*; Buddhist temples, see Yu Tao, *Guizi* (Beijing: Zhongguo zonggong chubanshe, 1995), 191-92.


25. Marco Polo, *The Travels* (220-21; also see 130).


27. A different account of the emperor’s role includes the twenty-four smaller ones; see Luo Zhenyu, “Beijing Zhongdu Association of Shiwhaizhi in Beijing,” *Beijing zhongdu chuanshi* (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1992).

28. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the emperor does refer to the sound of bells and chimes to stereotype and stereotype, the bell with a finite political system, (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1938), 75.


31. One early source of this kind of ritual is *Taoist* (minjian wenxue). For a modern account of the life of the emperor, see *Beijing* (Tongzhou: Zhongdu chuanshi, 1992).


21. According to the Tang Code, a book which provides the fullest documentation of medieval legislation, “Moving about the streets after the drum has sounded to close the gates and before the drum has sounded to open them is a violation of curfew.” Wallace Johnson, The Tang Code, vol. 2, Specific Articles (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 469–70.

22. Tang dynasty Chang’an had two official markets in the east and west sections of the city. Following an old tradition, the markets opened for business at midday after a three-hundred-stroke beating of drums, and closed before dusk with a three-hundred-stroke beating of gongs. See Xiong, Sui-Tang Chang’an, 173–74. For a brief introduction to time telling conducted in Buddhist temples, see Yu Tao, Zhongguo guzhong shibua (A narrative history of ancient Chinese bells) (Beijing: Zhongguo luyou chubanshe, 1999), 138–41.


24. Yang Zuan, Bian gugong ji (Records of old places in Kaifeng), cited in Yang Kuan, Zhongguo gudai ducheng zhidushi yanjiu, 450.


27. When the Jesuit Gabriel Magalhaens visited China in the seventeenth century, he observed that incense clocks bore “five marks to distinguish the five parts of the Watch or Night.” See Needham, Science and Civilization in China, 3:330.

28. A different account is that there were twenty-five drums, including one large drum and twenty-four smaller ones; the latter symbolized the twenty-four divisions of a year. See Luo Zhucun, “Beijing Zhonglou, Guliou” (Beijing’s drum tower and bell tower), in Research Association of Shishahai in Beijing, Jinghua shengdi Shishahai [Shishahai: a famous spot in Beijing], (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 1993), 139–49.

29. As I will discuss later in this essay, one official document written by the Qianlong emperor does refers to the sound of the bell. But the language used in this description is flowery and stereotyped. Instead of conveying a listener’s real experience, it endows the sound of the bell with a finite political symbolism. This text is inscribed on a stone stele, which the emperor established in commemorating the rebuilding of the bell tower during this reign.


31. One early source of this story is the late Qing publication Yanjing fanggu lu (Searching for ancient sites in Beijing) by Zhang Jianguai, reprinted in Jing Jin fengtu congshu (Books on local customs of Beijing and Tianjin) (Taipei: Guting shuwu, 1969), 79. This story has been told and retold many times, and has been elaborated into modern versions of “folk literature” (minjian wenxue). For a modern version, see Jin Shoushen, ed., Beijing de chuanshuo (Legends of Beijing) (Beijing: Tongshu wenyi chubanshe, 1957), 40–44.
32. The building was destroyed by fire even before the Yuan dynasty perished, and was rebuilt by Emperor Chenzong in 1297. It was reconstructed in early Ming and early Qing, respectively; and was extensively repaired in 1800, 1894, and 1984.

33. It is said that except for Chongwen Men, which had a bell in its gate-tower, all other gates used a chimelike instrument called a dian to ring the hours. See Hu Yuyuan, ed., Yandu tangu (Talking about the old days of Beijing) (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 1996), 40, 75.


35. Because of the system of nightly curfew, public theaters located mainly in Beijing’s inner city during the Qing dynasty staged performances only during the day, making sure that visitors from the inner city could return home before the gates closed.


38. This stele still stands in front of the bell tower in Beijing.


40. It is unclear which foreign nationality was responsible for this destruction. Contemporary Chinese authors blame either Russian or Japanese soldiers for this crime. Since evidence is given in neither case, such claims may instead reflect the changing relationship between China and these foreign countries.

41. This was accomplished in 1924 and 1925 by Xue Dunbi, the mayor of Beijing at the time. See Jin Lin, “Beijing Zhonggulou wenwu zaiji,” 214.

42. Not coincidentally, the famous ruins of the Yuemiaoyuan Garden, left from the destruction of the joint forces of the British and French armies in 1860, also attracted wide public attention from the early twentieth century, before they finally become not just a particular war ruin but a nationalist monument.

43. The meaning of the drum tower as a war ruin and a nationalist monument, however, largely vanished after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China. For about three decades from the 1950s to the 1980s, the tower was used as the site of a Workers’ Cultural Palace. It began to draw wider attention in the 1990s when its upper level was reopened to the public. Since then, the building has been renovated and a new set of drums has been made. But these are silent replicas created to showcase a perished past for the sake of a burgeoning business—the tower has become a major tourist attraction in Beijing and its lower level now houses a large gift shop.

44. Clock towers first appeared in Beijing in the eighteenth century; but the early examples were commissioned by Qing emperors for private purposes. One of them was located inside the imperial Summer Palace outside Beijing and had no public function at all. Another example, a temporary Western-style building with a clock on it, was made on the occasion of the birthday of the Qianlong emperor’s mother, as depicted in a painting that represents the birthday celebration, now housed in Beijing’s Palace Museum.