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Calligraphy Tablets in the Forbidden City

Jianrong Wang



The Forbidden City

First built in 1406, the Forbidden City witnessed three dynasties' imperial administration work and royal family life for about five hundred years before Chinese feudalist history ended in 1911. Located in the very center of Beijing, the 7.8 million-square-foot palace complex houses within its 980 surviving buildings some 1.17 million items of artwork and artifacts.

The calligraphy tablets hung over each main gate and building, although often neglected by visitors, actually are special embodiments of traditional Chinese concepts either well known or maybe unexpected by their readers. Besides explaining architectural functions, the tablets also can be read as means of decorating the architecture, conveying

political ideals, advocating academic achievements, expressing good wishes and depicting charming sceneries.

The Forbidden City was designed by Kuai Xiang (1398-1481), an architect master of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). He strictly applied to the layout of the royal palace the classical ritual

orthodox described in *Rites of Chou*, one of the Confucian classics, first published in the second century BC. The buildings in the palace, therefore, were mainly divided into two groups: the front one for court work and important ritual ceremonies and the rear one occupied as residential quarters for the royal family. From Kuai Xiang's blueprint, we can see every building in the Forbidden City had a calligraphy tablet hanging above to designate its specific function.

The three great front halls used for work and ceremonies, for example, have inscriptions of "Hall of Supreme Harmony," "Hall of Central Harmony," and "Hall of Preserving Harmony" on the tablets, since the emperor was believed to be enthroned to rule the



Hall of Supreme Harmony

people as son of Heaven. His highest goal was established to achieve harmony among Heaven, the Earth and the human being. Thus harmony was repeatedly emphasized on the tablets to idealize the effectiveness of the court. On the other hand, the three main rear halls have tablets bearing words conveying different functions. “Palace of Heavenly Purity,” “Hall of Union,” and “Palace of Earthly Tranquility” express the marital significance of the emperor. According to the dualist principle of *yin* and *yang*, all life and phenomena can be attributed to the interaction of the two opposite elements. *Yin* is feminine and absorbing. The Earth is *yin*. *Yang* is thought of as masculine and penetrating and also associated with the Heaven. The Palace of Heavenly Purity was the dwelling place of the emperor and the Palace of Earthly Tranquility of the empress. Between them lies the Hall of Union. This was a place to hold the wedding ceremony for the emperor. “Union” means the harmony between *yin* and *yang*, and the unity of the Heaven and the Earth. The auspicious effects were heightened by the power of language embodied in the tablet.

Calligraphy tablets can always enhance the aesthetic charm of architecture as a whole, which can explain why they have developed as a common feature of

Chinese traditional architecture, and are found on almost every main gate, wall and building of those historic palaces, mansions, temples and gardens. The tablets in the Forbidden City distinguish themselves also with magnificent decorations. Gold-gilded wood frames, flying dragons in relief, and gold characters in blue backgrounds are widely applied here, for such elements as gold and dragons were regarded as symbols unique to imperial authority. These elements match the luxurious paintings of the complex with perfection.

To achieve the best decorative effect, the tablets take horizontal shapes sometimes



Hall of Cultivating Minds tablet

to meet with the outer appearance of a specific architecture (for example, when the space between the roof and the purlin above the gate is not wide enough) and also avoid the visual dullness of too many repetitions of vertical ones. The decorations on the tablets are sometimes changed to create a friendly and intimate feeling. So-called volume-tablets above a study look like an open scroll book, with neither heavy color nor intricate patterns, to imply the academic isolation and quietness within both the place and the owner.

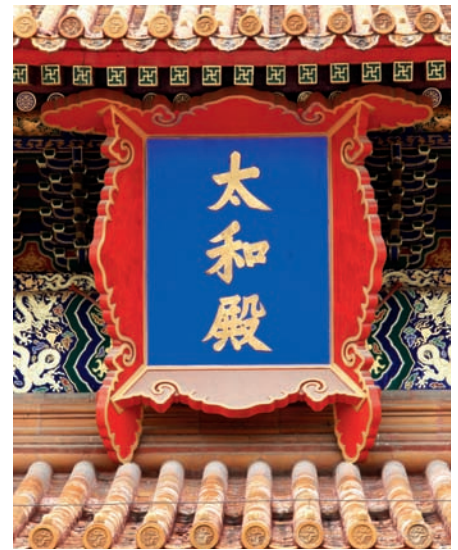
In practice, the extents and functions of tablets have gone far beyond Kuai Xiang’s original design. The popularity of tablets throughout the long, recorded history of China has been deeply rooted in one of the five essential Confucian concepts “the rectification of names.” The concept first appeared in *The Analects* by Confucius. To keep a sound social order, Confucius argues for the priority of rectification of names. Without a proper name, rank cannot obtain its supposed power, the expression in language does not sound reasonable and the action though taken is always subject to failure. Convinced by this basic concept, people believed tablets taking the solemn form of public communication were an effective means to help rectify names.

Many influential *literati* would keep tablets around their working or/and dwelling places to exalt to the public their highest moral or behavior principles. Those poetic words and handsome handwriting could always win audiences' hearts. Following those great examples, emperors also occupied the small yet influential communicative platforms to promote their governing ideologies. Chinese people categorize this kind of influence as "to educate with non-verbal actions." The influence intended, or maybe unintended, thus began to work out silently from the tablets.

The tablets also contributed to the regulation of the official languages in the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). After the conquest of China in 1644, the Manchu emperors endeavored to balance between Man, their native language, and Han, the Chinese dominant language. The emperor ordered the former tablets of Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) with only Chinese characters changed into trilingual ones — in Man, Mongolian, and Han. Manchu people only had oral language at the very beginning. When Nurharchi ordered a written Man language system, Mongolian written language was used as a stereotype. In private, some royal family members also used Mongolian due to

the frequent marriage ties among those tribes. In court, however, either Man or Han was acceptable as the working language for many years. In 1657, Emperor Shunzhi (r. 1644-1661) decreed to preserve only Man and Han versions on the tablets in the palace, so only a couple of trilingual ones can be found now. Those bilingual tablets are commonly known as the "combined jade of Man and Han," with Man words always taking the right position to prove the language's superior position. With time passing, more and more Han people were working for the empire. At the same time, Man language was gradually receding away. The tablets show that many inscriptions written by the emperors themselves are only in Chinese characters.

Actually, the Qing Dynasty's experience was a gradual process of *sinolization*. Though the Qing despots must answer for the final fall of China's feudalist empire, at least three of them were enlightened ones with quite high political awareness and achievements. Good government under Kangxi (r. 1622-1722), Yongzheng (r. 1723-35) and Qianlong (r. 1736-95) gave China a prolonged period of peace and stability. There was expansion in the empire's territorial reach, population and general level of wealth. Their governing ideologies and working guidelines were



Hall of Supreme Harmony tablet

explicitly expressed in their handwriting on the tablets and tried to exert their influence on their ministers and citizens.

The "Non-Action" tablet in the Hall of Union is the handwriting of Kangxi. Non-action is the essential philosophy of Taoism. When applied to government, non-action asks a sage ruler to govern the world with no interference in its own way. Instead of deserting the world, the ruler should understand that the truth lies in Tao, the way of nature. Keeping a sympathetic heart open to his people and avoiding turning into a trouble-maker, the ruler is likely to grasp the essence of non-action and to create a harmonious society.

Yongzheng also left his own writings in the Hall of Mental Cultivation and the Hall of West Warmth. One is "Mediocre, Upright, Benevolent, and Harmonious." The other is "Diligent in Governance and Intimate with the Sages." These admirable moral and behavioral principles could have inspired the emperor himself and his officials to work better. Meanwhile they could have been dangerous when used as criteria to evaluate an emperor and his empire. Well known for his extreme diligence and strictness, Yongzheng is believed to at least deserve the latter.



Hall of Supreme Harmony

Qianlong had a more lively and romantic character than either his grandfather or father. He secretly visited many famous scenic places around China. There are many stories about his experiences disguised as a common traveler around his enormous land. As a collector and connoisseur, he yearned to be identified with the great artists and *literati* of the past whose works he admired. Calligraphy on many tablets in the Forbidden City was contributed by him. Outside the palace, he also left a large number of works. He even set up a small studio and workshop in the Forbidden City to appreciate those collections of extraordinary value and also to turn out his own poems, paintings and calligraphy works. The tablet within this room is inscribed with “Hall of Three Rarities” in his handwriting. In Chinese literary tradition, almost all the master calligraphers were at the same time highly accomplished scholars or poets. People believe “one’s handwriting is like one’s person.” All his personalities, accomplishments and cultivation can be reflected in this mirror. This metaphor does support the fact that the three emperors did better than their successors.

Expressing good wishes is one of the common themes conveyed in Chinese tablet inscriptions. The imperial tablets



“Mediocre, Upright, Benevolent, and Harmonious”



Gate of Divine Prowess tablet

are not exceptional. Happiness, longevity and tranquility are the frequent words to note, especially in the rear quarters. The themes are exemplified in the tablets as “Hall of Peaceful Longevity,” “Hall of Eternal Longevity,” “Gate of Great Happiness” and “Garden of the Palace of Benevolent Tranquility,” among many other similar ones.

Traditional Chinese artists hold the belief that poetry and painting are of the same root. The aesthetic spirit is echoed also in architectures. As poetry is colorless painting and painting is colored poetry, so architecture has its beauty embodied in the subtle combination of its man-made structures and natural surroundings to evoke inner intoxication and purification. Poetic language of the tablet inscriptions helps enhance the aesthetic effect of the whole architecture due to its brevity in poetic expression and weight in pertinent meaning. Many calligraphy tablets in the Forbidden City win the visitors’ notice in this way, especially “Pavilion of Rain of Flowers,” “Palace of Concentrated Beauty” and “Lodge of Fresh Fragrance.”

Attentive visitors will notice the character “door” does not preserve its original form “門” with a small hook at the right foot. It is believed that there was a severe fire in the Imperial Palace. Because of its dominant wood structure, there seemingly would be no end until every building was burned to nothing. Before it jumped to a next hall, an experienced minister arrived and instantly pulled down the tablet with “門” above the door and threw it into the merciless fire. The fire finally died just in time. Since then, in addition to the necessary fire-fighting facilities such as big bronze jars in front of each building, the “fire-hook” in the character was totally avoided as taboo on the tablets. A famous calligrapher was put to death for his ignorance of this imperial superstition.

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