



10-1-2014

CHEN GAOHUA. The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty. Translated by Phoebe Poon. Edited by Glenn Griffith and Phoebe Poon. Honolulu: Silkroad Press, 2015. vii, 214 pp. ISBN 978-981-4332-44-6 (Hardback).

Xian Wu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Wu, Xian (2014) "CHEN GAOHUA. The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty. Translated by Phoebe Poon. Edited by Glenn Griffith and Phoebe Poon. Honolulu: Silkroad Press, 2015. vii, 214 pp. ISBN 978-981-4332-44-6 (Hardback).," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 2014 : No. 159 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2014/iss159/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of East Asian Libraries* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

CHEN Gaohua. *The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty*. Translated by Phoebe Poon. Edited by Glenn Griffith and Phoebe Poon. Honolulu: Silkroad Press, 2015. vii, 214pp. ISBN 978-981-4332-44-6 (Hardback).

Buried deep beneath the current capital of China, Beijing, is the grandiose Dadu (大都), Great Capital, the social and political center of the Yuan Dynasty. *The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty* draws on a wide range of resources, including archeological findings, to give an overview of Yuan Dadu. The book is composed of seven chapters. The first chapter is a brief history before the times of Yuan Dadu. The next two chapters discuss the construction and physical layout of Yuan Dadu as accurately as it can be reconstructed. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 bring to life the political, economic and cultural events that occurred within the Dadu area. The last chapter deals with farmers' riots that brought about the downfall of Yuan Dynasty and the demise of Yuan Dadu.

The history of Beijing can be traced back to more than three thousand years ago when residential communities started to develop in that region. During the Zhou Dynasty (1046B.C.-256B.C.) the vassal state of Yan (燕国) made Beijing its first capital called the City of Ji (蓟城). It was so named because the plant Ji (蓟) with its beautiful violet flowers bloomed everywhere in the city. This city of handicrafts, commerce and culture was

widely known as “magnificent city under the heaven”. When the Khitans (契丹族) established the Liao Dynasty (907A.D.-1125A.D.) a dual administrative system was adopted. The Northern Government was in charge of the Khitans and ethnic minorities, while the Southern Administration was for governing the Han Chinese. The Upper Capital (上京) was set up in Inner Mongolia for the Northern Government. The Southern Capital (南京) in present-day Beijing area was for the Southern Administration. During the reign of Emperor Shengzong (圣宗), the Southern Capital was renamed Yanjing (燕京). During the Liao Dynasty the Upper Capital was the primary government center, though Yanjing was larger and more prosperous. Emperor Wanyan Liang (完颜亮) of the Jin Dynasty in 1151 ordered the expansion and reconstruction of Yanjing, and turned it into Zhongdu (中都), the central capital of Jin Dynasty. The imperial palace was situated almost in the center of Zhongdu. In 1211 Zhongdu suffered a ferocious fire which lasted five days and destroyed tens of thousands of homes. When the city was captured by the Mongols it was already in ruins. With the unification of the country by the Mongols Kublai (忽必烈) became the ruler and decided to construct a brand new city close to the site of Zhongdu, and named it Dadu in 1272. The old Zhongdu became an integral part of Dadu. To the Mongols it was known as Khanbaliq, the city of the Khan.

The design and layout of Yuan Dadu was one of the fundamental topics of Yuan studies. Without a good knowledge of the structure of Dadu it is hard to comprehend and appreciate the progressive development of Beijing as it stands today. The author combed through relevant resources in history and literature to put together this narrative of the city of Dadu. The physical description of the city, from the dimensions of the city framework to the materials that were used to build city walls, was drawn from writings by ancient Chinese scholars as well as Western travelers such as Marco Polo. The author ingeniously walks readers through a wealth of technical details, from the defense walls of the city to the imperial palace, gardens, lakes, and temples. Water drainage and road systems are also described. One long standing question in Yuan studies is why the city of Dadu was built with 11 gates. Presumably there ought to be 12 gates since symmetry is a characteristic feature of traditional Chinese building structures. For Dadu, there were three gates on each side in all directions except the north side which had only two gates. The most common explanation for this is that the structure of the 11 city gates was modeled on the image of the god of protection Nezha (哪吒), a deity in Chinese Buddhist mythology with three heads, six arms and two feet. In July 2009 an international conference on Yuan Dadu Studies was held in Beijing, jointly hosted by the China Yuan Studies Association, Beijing Historical Research Society and Beijing Social Science Academy. One topic that gained close attention was the attribution of the 11 gates of Dadu to the image of Mahakala (瑪哈噶拉), the god of protection in Tibetan Buddhism. Unsolved mysteries such as this in Yuan Dadu studies will continue to fascinate scholars.

Dadu became the political, economic and cultural center of the Yuan Dynasty. People of many different ethnic backgrounds lived there. Besides the majority of the people of Han nationality who had lived there for many years, Mongols and Muslims, as well as minority groups from different parts of Xinjiang all moved to the capital. Many of the new dwellers in the city were nobles, scholars, craftsman and clergy. Dadu also attracted a good number of foreign travelers, such as Marco Polo, Odoric of Pordenone and Moroccan adventurer Ibn Battuta. They wrote extensively of their experiences in the capital city, and their writings became indispensable resources for modern day Yuan Studies scholars. In and around the Dadu area, farming techniques were greatly improved. The Yuan government officially issued the first guidebook on farming and sericulture. Business was booming with silk industry and arms production. Commercial cargos were shipped into and out of Dadu region on land and by sea. Expansions of canals and improved road systems quickly turned Dadu into a hub of international trade. When constructing Dadu, Kublai Khan ordered an imperial academy to be built by the Confucius Temple. Education of Chinese classics was promoted as one of the means to solidify the dynasty's ideological power. Dadu witnessed a revival and new birth of art, culture and literature. Religious compounds exemplified spectacular architecture. Dadu was the Mecca for men of letters for inspiration and creativity. A unique style of literary writing, Yuan drama (元杂剧) emerged. Three of the four most prominent dramatists were natives of Dadu. Some of the plays of the Dadu era continue to be performed and are still popular today.

The prosperity of Dadu was at the expense of a life of toil for peasants. Corrupt bureaucrats amassed enormous wealth while the people at the bottom of the social ladder lived in extreme poverty. Confrontations between the rich and the poor led to numerous riots. Added to the devastation caused by wars was a severe famine between the year 1358 and 1359 in the Dadu region. Millions died of hunger, and starving people fed on dead bodies. Zhu Yuanzhang (朱元璋), the fearless rebel from the south, eventually conquered the Yuan regime and occupied Dadu. The old ruined city acquired a new name Beiping (北平), but lost its status as a capital city.

It should be pointed out that the English translation of *The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty* did not include the entirety of the original Chinese publication. On the colophon page of the English publication was printed "English edition ©2015 by English Professional Publishing, Inc. Chinese original edition©2010 China Renmin University Press." On the cover page of the 2010 Chinese publication the book title was *Studies of the Great Capital and the Upper Capital of Yuan Dynasty* (《元代大都上都研究》). The book actually has two parts: Part One is *Yuan Great Capital* and Part Two is *Yuan Upper Capital*. At the very end of the Chinese book there is a postscript telling us Part One was written by CHEN Gaohua (陈高华) and published in 1982, while Part Two was jointly written by CHEN Gaohua and SHI Weimin (史卫民) and published in 1988. In the authors' words, "When republished now the two books were combined as one book with two parts in order to give readers a complete picture of the multiple capital system in Yuan Dynasty." The

authors also remarked that except for one slight change from “Lamaism”(喇嘛教) to “Tibetan Buddhism” (藏传佛教) the two parts of the book remained the same as when they were first published in the 1980s. It appears that only Part One of the 2010 Chinese publication by China Remin University Press was translated into English by Phoebe Poon. This was edited by Glenn Griffith and Phoebe Poon and published in 2015 with the title of *The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty*. Unfortunately this title gives rise to some confusion. The title of the English book *The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty* creates a misconception that Dadu was the only capital in Yuan Dynasty. As described in Chapter Four, when Dadu was completed, the original capital city for the Mongols, The Upper Capital (上都) in Kaiping, took second place, and was turned into a sub-capital (陪都). That was the dual-capital system for Yuan government which was not uncommon in Chinese history. It was the tradition for Yuan emperors and their families to go and stay in the Upper Capital in April, and move back to Dadu, the Great Capital, in August or September every year. In fact the Upper Capital, though politically not as prominent as Dadu, retained its capital status and served the Mongol emperors well for their nomadic lifestyle. To translate the Chinese 元大都 as “The Capital of the Yuan Dynasty” is misleading since Dadu was one of the two major capitals. It might better be rendered as “The Great Capital of the Yuan Dynasty” or simply “Dadu of the Yuan Dynasty”. On a minor side, a quick scan through the notes for Chapter One at the back of the English publication unpleasantly revealed a few errors: no.4 “Changhe ge 长恨歌” (Changhen ge); no.44 “Zhang Li 张棣” (Zhang Di); no.45 “Li Xichuan 李心传”(Li Xinchuan) and no.56 “Yan Wanwu 阎文儒”(Yan Wenru). If these are printing errors or slips of pen, the following errors may be of a different nature: no.1 “Chen Kuo 沈括(Shen Kuo); no.10 “Mou Quansun 繆荃孙” (Miao Quansun) and no.55 “Yao Guanghao 姚广孝”(Yao Guangxiao). More caution in editing would have enhanced the enjoyment of reading the book.

CHEN Gaohua is one of the best-known Chinese scholars in Yuan Studies. His book *Yuan Dadu* 《元大都》 published in 1982 was translated into Japanese in 1984, and into Mongolian language in 1985. The English translation by Phoebe Poon is a creditable contribution to the research literature of Yuan history in the western world. The glossary of personal names, building names and official titles is a handy reference tool for general readers, and Yuan studies scholars may find it useful, too.

Xian Wu 吴宪

Michigan State University