

Curating a Museum of Stones: The “Forest of Stelae” (Beilin) and the Politics of the Past in Middle Period China

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Abstract:

Chang'an, the capital of the Tang dynasty (618–907), was the largest city in the medieval world. The walled area of the city measured 84 square kilometers and the population likely reached one million. Unlike other pre-modern cities such as Rome and Tenochtitlan that contained many monumental stone buildings, Chang'an's walls, palaces and houses were made of rammed earth and supported by wooden structures. As a result, little remains of this mammoth city are still visible above ground now in modern Xi'an. The only monuments that survived the centuries of erosion after Chang'an's abandonment in 904 were stone commemorative stelae that once accompanied almost every significant urban construction, from palaces and monasteries to private residences and tombs. In this lecture, I explore the diverse lives of these stone monuments in Chang'an during the Song, the Jin and the Yuan dynasties. Some stones were destroyed or buried, but others were re-carved and reused. A select few, including the ninth century Stone Classics (*shijing*) and stelae bearing the handwriting of masters like Yan Zhenqing and Liu Gongquan, were assembled at the Provincial School and the Confucius Temple. This collection of stone monuments began to take shape in the eleventh century and continued to expand and change in the subsequent centuries. By exploring the curatorial agenda, maintenance personnel, and visitor profiles of this collection, I argue that its social and cultural roles in the urban landscape of post-Tang Chang'an resembled those of a modern museum. What this medieval museum exhibits is a uniquely literary reading of the history of the Tang dynasty, and of China.

Biography

Xin Wen is an assistant professor of East Asian Studies and History at Princeton University. He is a historian of medieval China, Central Asia, and Eurasia. His first book is *The King's Road: Diplomacy and the Remaking of the Silk Road* (Princeton University Press, January 2022). He is now working on a second book, an urban history of Chang'an after the fall of the Tang dynasty.

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