

The Great Baoen Temple: History and Myth

Abstract

Hsiao-t'i Li

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct the history of a temple, which stands as a microcosm of traditional Chinese culture.

The Great Baoen Temple was first built in 247A.D. by Sun Quan of the Three Kingdoms, at the request of a Buddhist monk from India, who performed a *sarira* miracle. From 373 to 375, it was rebuilt and significantly expanded by the pious Wuti of the Liang Dynasty. In 1413, Emperor Yongle of the Ming Dynasty made vigorous efforts to revamp the temple and its surroundings. As a reflection of the vitality of the new empire, Emperor Yongle spent vast amounts of money to transform the Great Baoen Temple into a fabulous landmark of the city of Nanjing.

A nine-story pagoda stands in the center of the temple compound. The pagoda was made of five-colored glaze. The light and sound emanating from the *sariras* contained inside the pagoda lend an awe-inspiring and mysterious aura to the temple, enhancing its extraordinary architectural achievements. Two monks of the Wanli period, Hanshan Deqing and Xuelang Hongen played crucial roles in the renovation of the temple and the pagoda.

According to the recollection of Zhang Dai, this marvelous building, together with the Qinhuai pleasure quarter, Liu Jingting's story-telling, and the tea house at the Taoye Ferry, constituted the most prominent features of late Ming Nanjing. This paper explores the rich cultural and historical heritage of this famous Nanjing temple, and attempts to interweave the religious myths, political forces, financial aspects, and network of imperial patronage, all of which molded the temple's development. As such, the Great Baoen temple is an ideal topic for study, allowing us to gain a fresh understanding of the traditional Chinese city.