

## **Urban Death in China. Imprisonment and Executions in Late Qing Beijing**

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The execution of legal verdicts used to be an important urban function in the past, and still now, extended prisons are still present in modern cities. This function has been commonly omitted in the urban historiography on China. Historians are partly justified by the puzzling fact that executions are conspicuously absent from the sources they ordinarily rely on. The blackout in standard sources and the prudishness of current historiography in the evocation of executions contrast with the prurient curiosity witnessed by travelers as soon as treaty ports were open in the 1860s. Execution fields were recorded in tourists guides from the 1880s on, hence their many and various descriptions, representations, narrative evocations, and, eventually, grisly photographs that were taken on the spot or around. This wild but massive documentation has circulated for over a century among a broad public, and have been almost unanimously neglected by scholars of all countries.

Admittedly, these materials exhibit disturbing outburst of legal violence, but they are nonetheless highly valuable for legal history, for they help fill many gaps of the written documentation. On a broader scope, they are highly insightful on urban society and culture. For the China specialist, they provide opportunities to match his findings with historical research on punishments and criminality in Western cities. This talk will be an attempt at “mapping” repressive institutions of Beijing, followed by a “death walk,” or the last journey of a condemned through Beijing, relying on visual resources as well as eyewitnesses’ testimonies.