

The Prehistory of Ximingsi: Anecdotes and Imaginaire of Chang'an Buddhism*

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Abstract

Presented in the cultural context of medieval Chang'an city and the broader network of Sino-Japanese Buddhism, the article provides, for the first time, a study on the prehistory of the celebrated Ximingsi Temple from the decline of the Sui Dynasty to the rise of the Tang Empire. During this transitional period, the founding myth of the monastery was connected to an imposing residence predating Ximingsi. Through the lens of historical sources, Buddhist corpus and imaginative literature, this essay examines the accounts of the three noble householders, general Yang Su, princess Wanchun and prince Li Tai. Their stories and the anecdotal history were told and retold by fiction writers, medieval bards and commoners of the metropolis, opening a window into the public memory of Ximingsi across Asia. This is particularly evident in the case of Yang Su, whose obnoxious image was recreated and sugared by the Ximingsi abbot Daoxuan and other Buddhist saints in their writings centering on the early Buddhō-Daoist debates. The tale of the “broken mirror,” which was the most famous anecdote associated with Yang Su and his residence, eventually took on a life of its own. Mentioned in the

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corpus of Zen canon and Japanese literature, the story preserves traces of reality regarding Ximingsi, even if distorted through transmission throughout the ages.

Keywords: Chang'an, Li Tai, Ximingsi, Yang Su, yōkyoku

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