

Olympic Opening Ceremony and Confucianism

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The opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics held in the National Stadium or the Bird's Nest, was attended by thousands of people, and watched by millions more on television. One impressive aspect of the show was that it featured more than 3,000 disciples of Confucius reciting the ancient sage's quotations. For a brief introduction on the sage and Confucianism in general, let's join our reporter.

Confucius, who lived more than 2,000 years ago, was a great philosopher, politician and educator. The best places in Beijing to learn about Confucius and his philosophies are the Confucian Temple and the adjacent Imperial College in the Dongcheng District in eastern Beijing.

Built in 1302, the Confucian Temple is devoted to the memory of Confucius.

Four years later in 1306, the Imperial College was built right next to the Confucian Temple. The Imperial College served as the center of China's higher learning institution and education administration department from the 1200s to the end of the Qing dynasty in the early 20th century. This is where the emperors gave lectures following their coronations.

Spanning 50,000 square meters, the Confucian Temple and the Imperial College complex have a neat layout. Both played vital roles in the education sectors for three consecutive dynasties, namely Yuan, Ming and Qing.

There are numerous Confucian temples all over the country in memory of the sage. So why is this one in Beijing so special? A consultant for the Confucian Temple and Imperial College Museum Ma Fazhu explains.

"The Confucian Temple in Beijing is one-of-a-kind in the imperial court. It is the most reputable and the most influential in the country. A total of 19 emperors have visited and worshipped in the temple. This shows the dominant position of Confucianism in the Chinese society."

The Confucian Temple was renovated and partially rebuilt during the dynasties that followed, but it still maintained its original look. One of the most important relics in the temple is the 198 steles engraved with the names of those who passed the metropolitan examination and earned the title of "Jinshi", the highest degree of education of that time. Another important site is the stele forest composed of 189 giant steles on which major Confucianism works were engraved. The 630,000 words stele inscriptions are considered the most concise, most beautiful stone inscriptions in China.

The Imperial College is the only existing state-run higher learning institution in ancient China. Entering the main gate, there is an archway of glazed tiles. As tour guide Yang Jing explains, this is the only archway related to education in Beijing.

"It is unique because emperors walked through them before giving lectures. The construction is done in typical imperial style. Emperor Qianlong of the Qing Dynasty wrote an inscription for the archway."

Entering the archway, there is the hall where the emperors gave lectures. Tour guide Yang Jing tells us more.

"We've now come to the center of the complex - the Biyong Hall. It was completed in 1785. It is the only place in the world especially built for emperors to give lectures."

The complex was Beijing's main library for decades before it was restored to its original condition and opened to the public on June 14th, 2008, the third Chinese Cultural Heritage Day.

Tourists and visitors have been pouring in since it opened, even more so during the 2008 Olympic Games. Yu Ping is an official from the cultural relic bureau in Beijing.

"The Beijing municipal government has invested about 30 million yuan in the renovation of the Confucian Temple and the Imperial College complex. It has finally been opened to the public after three years of renovation, being one of the projects related to the 2008 Olympic Games."

<http://english.cri.cn/4026/2008/08/31/1881s400690.htm>