Why did the palace wait 188 years for a pharmacy? Beijing's old firms | Shenzhou · Beijing 02

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In the first year of the Yongzheng
emperor — 1723 — an order came out of
the palace. A medicine shop outside the
front gate was to send medicine to
the court on schedule: once every three
months, without delay.That order stayed in
force until the Qing dynasty ended.
One hundred and eighty-eight years.
Eight emperors.A private shop on a
commercial street. Why would the palace wait
for it?
At the end of the last film
we said the next stop was Yangzhou.
We are still in Beijing.
We did not change our minds.
This city's archive does not fit into
one film.Names, the axis, the canal
that was one thread: who built this
city.There is another thread: who traded
here, and what made them last.
That thread has to be finished before
we can leave. Yangzhou — we are coming.
Start with the name of the street.

In the Ming dynasty, under the Hongzhi
emperor, every lane junction in the capital
was fitted with a timber fence,
opened at dawn and shut at night,
to keep thieves out.
Outside the front gate ran a lane
called Langfang Fourth Lane. The shopkeepers pooled money and
built a fence taller than anyone else's.
In time people stopped calling it Langfang Fourth Lane.
They called it Dashilan — the Great Fence.
The map of the capital made in
the Qianlong reign prints exactly those three
characters.Walk further in, and you pass
a run of shop names.
Take them one at a time
each is a sentence an owner wrote
about himself and left hanging over the
door.Neiliansheng, founded in 1853 by Zhao Ting,
from Wuqing in Tianjin, making court boots.
Nei means the inner palace.
Liansheng is a wish for the customer:
that he rise three ranks in office.
A shoe shop wrote its customers' careers
into its own name.
Ruifuxiang takes its name from a story
in the Records of Searching for Spirits:
the blood of the qingfu insect,

mother and child, smeared on coins
money that flies home after you spend
it. The insect is the source of
wealth; rui and xiang are auspicious.
It opened in Jinan in 1862 and did
not reach Dashilan until 1893.
Quanjude, 1864. Yang Quanren, from Jizhou,
took over a fruit shop that had
closed. The fruit shop had been called
Dejuxuan. He turned the three characters around:
Quanjude. His own name held the character
quan; jude means to gather virtue together.
He did not invent a name.
He took one that had already failed
in that very spot, and turned it
around.Liubiju has two accounts.
One says: of the seven things a
household must open its door for
firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce,
vinegar, tea — the shop sold everything except
tea. The other says the two characters
refer to six rules in the old
brewing method: the grain must be uniform,
the yeast sound, the steeping clean,
the vessels good, the heat right,
the water fragrant. Both describe a shop
telling you how it works — one by

what it sells, one by how it
makes.And Duyichu: by tradition, the one
shop in the capital that had not
closed on New Year's Eve in 1752.
The name it received was given by
an emperor. Duyichu means "the only one"
a claim so large that only someone
else could confer it.
Back to that order from the palace.
The shop it was looking for had
been founded by a man named Yue
Xianyang.He was from Cixi in Zhejiang,
born in 1630. In the early Qing he
served in the imperial medical office as
a minor clerk — eighth rank, handling documents
in and out. Not a famous physician:
a clerk. For years his work was
moving paper — petitions in, orders out.
He spent his twenties watching how the
palace wrote things down.
In 1669 he left the bureaucracy, opened a
dispensary outside the front gate on West Damochang Street,
and named it himself: Tongrentang — the two
characters tongren meaning "universal and refined".
He was thirty-nine, with no reputation to
trade on.Thirty-three years later his third
son, Yue Fengming, did two things.

In 1702 he moved the dispensary to Dashilan
and made it a shop.
Four years after that he gathered his
father's formulas into a book — the family's
recipes for pills, powders, ointments and pellets
and published the Tongrentang Medicine Catalogue.
An old firm publishing its own recipes
is already unusual. What he did next
is the reason this film exists.
In the preface to that catalogue he
wrote twenty characters. They were not written
for other pharmacists. They were written for
customers:"Though the preparation is tedious,
I dare not spare the labour.
Though the ingredients are costly, I dare
not cut the materials."
Two clauses, each saying I dare not.
Twelve words in the English, twenty in
the Chinese — and not one of them
is a boast. A shop that had
already been trading for more than thirty
years took its own standard and wrote
it down, in public, on paper,
where any customer could hold it against
him.
But a sentence written on paper only
spends like money if someone will stand

behind it.Seventeen years after Yue Fengming
wrote those twenty characters, someone came forward
to stand behind them.
Not a rival. The palace.
In 1723 the palace set up an imperial
dispensary and needed a private shop to
supply ingredients and prepare medicines for the
inner court. The shop chosen was Tongrentang.
The weight of that is not in
the word imperial. It is in the
fact that it was a set of
rules that could be checked.
You needed a pass issued by the
imperial household department to enter the palace.
The shop's owner had to post a
personal bond — putting his own estate behind
every single ingredient. Delivery had a deadline:
once every three months, without delay.
And at every step — selecting, mixing,
preparing — someone was watching.
Those rules ran for one hundred and
eighty-eight years, through eight emperors — Yongzheng,
Qianlong, Jiaqing, Daoguang, Xianfeng, Tongzhi, Guangxu,
Xuantong — until the dynasty fell.
Where did the money come from?
This has to be said carefully.
No source I can find proves that

supplying the palace brought a specific number
of customers. What the sources do show
is something else: the firm's reputation stopped
being something it could assert about itself.
A Qing-dynasty notebook leaves one line
travellers from the provinces arriving in the
capital bought Tongrentang's medicines, its borax paste
and its Wanying pills above all,
as gifts to take home.
The buyers were travellers, buying to give
away. A medicine bought as a gift
has left the shop's own street and
gone home in someone else's luggage
reputation travelling without the shop saying a
word.The other half of the money
came from how the shop was built:
front shop, back workshop.
Medicine sold at the front, made at
the back — the workshop stood on West Damochang Street,
mixing pills, powders, ointments and pellets in-house,
under the rules laid down in that
1706 formula book. Counter and workbench were
one business, and the customer could see
the whole of it from the doorway.So
why did these shops all gather outside
the front gate?In the Yongle reign
this area was called langfang — the name

itself says the buildings were put up
by the court to attract merchants.
Under the Qing, Manchu and Chinese were
housed separately: no markets, no theatres inside
the inner city, so trade pushed outward.
The provincial guild halls were built here
too. A merchant arriving from another province
lodged at his guild hall, found people
from home, learned the rules of the
trade — all of it running on that
one network.Add the temple fair at
the Guandi temple outside Zhengyang Gate:
the days pilgrims came were the days
customers came. Courting merchants, the divided city,
the guild halls, the temple fair
four things stacked on top of each
other, and the street is what they
stack into.
But the people doing the daily work
in these shops were not the owners.
Entering an old firm as an apprentice
usually took an introduction from someone from
your home district and a signed contract
with a master. You began with sweeping
the floor and watching the counter.
The term of service had a name
of its own: "three years and one

festival" — three years, plus one more solar
term. Note the extra season.
The old trade would not let you
stop on the day you finished learning;
you worked one season past competence,
so nobody could say you left the
moment you were useful.
Craft passed by word of mouth and
by hand.How large was the system?
In the Republican period, one garment-workers' association
counted 13,300 workers — and 5,500 apprentices.
In an ordinary trade, three or four
masters to one apprentice.
The rules were also written into the
accounts. Old firms commonly kept three-settlement books:
accounts closed at Dragon Boat, Mid-Autumn and
the New Year. A long-standing customer in
good standing could open a ledger and
buy on credit — credit running on the
same clock as the shop's own year.
Through the Republican years the medicine shop
was still trading outside the front gate.
But the city around it changed its
name first.In 1928 the government moved south
and Beijing was renamed Beiping — centuries of
capital status, gone. Beiping had lived on
the spending of the imperial clan,

the banner households and the officials;
it was a political consumption city.
When the capital left, the spending left
with it. The newspapers of the day
put it plainly: within half a year
there was "population falling by the day,
commerce failing by the day", and closed
shops multiplied.That is the whole lesson
of this act in miniature.
The shops had not got worse at
their work. The customers they had been
built to serve stopped arriving.
A business that had spent two hundred
years getting the rules right could still
be undone by a change in what
the city was for.
After 1937 it was harder still.
The collaborationist regime ran grain rationing;
the ration was a "mixed flour" cut
with bean cake and bran.
Cloth and other goods were brought under
cartel control at fixed prices.
For a pastry house like Daoxiangcun,
oil, sugar, flour and rice were all
held back, and turnover fell month after
month. Quanjude held on until 1948, then inflation
and officers who ate without paying nearly

finished it.The real turn came in
the 1950s.In 1954 Tongrentang became the first
firm in Beijing's medicine trade to enter
joint state-private ownership. In January 1956 the whole
city followed, and in a single day
17,963 private businesses changed their character.
The method was to assess the assets,
fix the shares, pay a fixed rate
of interest, and run the firm jointly.
One requirement was quite specific: during the
transition, keep the existing way of producing
and trading as far as possible
because the value of an old firm
lay precisely in those unchanged rules.
That instruction is itself evidence.
Someone, at the time, understood that the
rules were the asset.
The change came anyway.
In the early years of joint operation
some old firms cut their range and
quality wobbled. That was written into later
research reports, and it produced protective measures:
traditional lines were to be kept,
old techniques retained, old masters supported.
Today the system still sets a price
on the old names.
In September 2023 the Ministry of Commerce and

four other departments published the results of
their review of China Time-Honoured Brands:
of 1,128 names, 1,000 passed, 73 passed
with conditions, and 55 were removed.
Note the word removed.
The official wording is not "struck off".
Removed means it used to be on
the list. Getting on took history.
Staying on depends on whether those rules
are still being kept.
The Ministry of Commerce named its first
batch of China Time-Honoured Brands in 2006.
In 2011 Dashilan was designated the country's first
"China Time-Honoured Brand cluster".
Figures from the Xicheng district people's congress
in 2022 put twenty-six such names in this
area; by 2024 Beijing as a whole had
274.Read one way, those numbers are
a scorecard. Read another: everyone still on
the list is someone who has not
yet lost the rules.
And the "three years and one festival"
never stopped. Tongrentang runs a master-technician studio
today, where intangible-heritage inheritors take apprentices for
a full three years before they qualify.
Neiliansheng still works one master to one
apprentice, and in 2008 its thousand-layer cloth-soled shoemaking

entered the national list of intangible cultural
heritage. The names changed.
The rules are still running.
If you want to go: take subway
Line 2 or Line 8 to Qianmen
station, leave by the southwest exit,
walk north into Dashilan Street. The east end meets Xianyu
Kou, and that stretch holds Duyichu,
Bianyifang, Tianxingju and Changchuntang as well.
The street is not only shops.
Daguanlou, Sanqingyuan, Guangdelou — the cinemas and opera
houses are here too.
The Ruifuxiang facade, Qianxiangyi, Xiangyihao and the
old industrial hall are listed as Major
Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the
National Level, under the heading "Dashilan commercial
buildings".What is protected is not just
the buildings. It is the way of
doing business that lived in them.
Dashilan put this city's other order on
display: not who holds power, but who
can be trusted to keep it.
From one pill, one pair of shoes,
one bolt of cloth, one duck,
Beijing accumulated something harder to demolish than
a city wall — credit.
A wall is defended by whoever holds

it at the time.

Credit is defended by everyone who ever gave it.And the story of this street is not finished.

Walk further, and it is Beijing after 1860 which needs a different set of questions.

This is our reading, not the record of the histories. The full transcript is at sylogs.com.

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