Faculti Summary
https://faculti.net/what-the-emperor-built/

The speaker discusses their research on Chinese architectural history, revealing a notable gap in scholarship regarding the period after 1400, particularly the Ming Dynasty. While traditional architecture from earlier periods is scarce, many existing buildings date from the Ming period onward. The speaker focuses on an emperor known as the Yongle Emperor (Zhu Di), whose reign featured significant architectural projects, including a brass building on a Daoist mountain and constructions at a Tibetan monastery.

The speaker emphasizes the importance of their fieldwork across China over a decade, visiting and documenting various sites. They note that the Yongle Emperor's rise to power involved a civil war, where he killed his nephew, leading to a fresh dynasty. After this, he relocated the capital back to Beijing, reviving its significance, which had previously been the Mongol capital.

Additionally, the emperor's background influenced his architectural vision, as having lived in Mongol palaces fostered an understanding of architecture as a political tool. The speaker argues that the emperor's desire to honor a Daoist deity influenced the construction of elaborate temples and complexes.

As Yongle focused on creating a legacy through architecture, he oversaw extensive construction efforts, particularly as he wanted large, impressive structures signifying power. This video video led to the widespread harvesting of non-mu wood for construction, resulting in environmental consequences due to deforestation that affected future building efforts.

The speaker underscores the broader implications of these architectural choices on imperial legacy and societal structures, positing that architecture serves as a medium of political power and can leave lasting impacts on historical memory. They conclude by encouraging readers to appreciate the stories buildings tell and their roles in shaping society, as well as the nuanced ways architecture can influence our lives.