Chinese Architecture

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yet again in 1597. The same covered arcades, verandas, and causeways that were the trademarks of Chinese architecture made entire building complexes easy targets for destruction by fire. Even though a few fire prevention methods were adopted by the Ming court—including firewalls, an additional fire-preventing tin sheet at the base of roof eaves, and high walls that separated each of the courtyards of the Three Back Halls—none could protect the wooden halls from lightning and the general deterioration of wooden members.

Despite the ravages of periodic fires, the imperial city was, and is, alive with color. Glazed ceramic roof tiles, white marble platforms and balustrades, red walls, and blue and green decorative paint characterize the unique architecture of Chinese imperial palaces and government offices. Together with black, the colors represent the five fundamental elements of the Chinese universe (yellow is the preeminent one) associated with the emperor and the roofs of his imperial halls. Beneath a blue sky or on a dark winter morning, the Forbidden City is brilliant, dignified, and luxurious.

Tomb Architecture

Unlike any rulers of any part of China before them, the imperial Mongols did not build great death monuments. Instead, the corpses of Mongolian rulers were returned to Mongolia near the Orkhon and Kerulen rivers and Lake Baikal for burial in unmarked graves at locations that elude archaeologists to this day. More than ten Yuan-period tombs believed to belong to Mongol, probably men and women of wealth but not necessarily imperial relatives, have been excavated in Chifeng county of Inner Mongolia, however. Buried in simple, single-chamber tombs, the occupants have been tentatively identified by clothing and headgear worn in portraits on tomb walls and by datable objects excavated from inside the burial area.

Imperial funerary architecture changed dramatically under the Ming. Most significant was the elimination of what had been known in Tang and Song times as upper and lower “palaces” (shanggong and xiagong, respectively). This meant that there were no longer “sleeping palaces”
With five marble bridges between it and Fengtianmen, the scene was one of unparalleled drama in the history of Chinese imperial planning.

The next major gate leading southward from the Forbidden City was Duanmen, Gate of Uprightness. It took the form of a city gate but was never actually used. Chengtian Gate, the main south gate of the imperial city and the location of Tiananmen Square today, was next in line. Its form was the same as that of Duanmen. The emperor issued imperial edicts in front of Chengtianmen, and every autumn the supreme judiciary of the Chinese government pronounced sentences there on persons convicted of serious crimes. Last of the gates was Great Ming Gate (Da Mingmen), the central entry to the imperial city.

In accordance with Confucian etiquette traceable to the Zhou dynasty, the imperial city had not only those five gates, but also three courtyards. The three courts, or sanchao, were divided into the “outer court,” or dachao (great court), and two “inner courts,” chuangchao (frequent court) and riciao (daily court). In Ming Beijing, the outer court was the three-hall complex in the front part of the Forbidden City. Although the emperor held court daily at Fengtian Gate, Fengtian Hall (later Taheidian, the Hall of Supreme Harmony) was used only for grand ceremonies such as those of New Year’s Day, the winter solstice, the emperor’s birthday, and state banquets. Huagai and Jishen halls (later the Hall of Central Harmony and the Hall of Preserving Harmony) were utilized only for audiences with officials and banquets for the princes, and as places for changing imperial robes.

Southeast and southwest of the Three Great Halls, outside the Forbidden City but inside the imperial city, were the ancestral temple (taimiao) and the twin altars of soil and grain. Two of the rites that took place in these areas had roots in the inviolability of the sacred hereditary imperial authority: the recognition of imperial heredity by worship of the dynastic founder and his own ancestors at the temple, and the placement at the altars of five colors of earth — azure in the east, vermilion in the south, white in the west, black in the north, and yellow in the center (each sent from a different prefecture to symbolize the unity of the empire). Even though the Temple of Heaven complex became increasingly important in Ming China, supplanting the worship of the imperial ancestors, the original ancestral rites and their architecture were preserved in accordance with age-old specifications.

At the back of the Forbidden City was the man-made Longevity Hill (Wansuishan). Originally erected for defense, it eventually had palatial halls and pavilions built on it and fruit trees planted around it. Once a place for practicing archery was opened there, it was transformed into a gardenlike detached palace.

Most of the halls and gates of Ming Beijing not only were modeled after those of the first Ming capital but also had the same names as their Nanjing counterparts. This was true of the two sets of three halls that comprised the nucleus of the palace city, the six palaces east and west of the Back Halls, the three courts and five gates, the symmetrically positioned Wenhua and Wuying halls, the ancestral temple and soil and grain altars, and Rengong Hall. Still, four changes are apparent. First, the size and scale of buildings was greater at Beijing. Nanjing’s palace city was two hundred meters shorter from north to south than Beijing’s, and Meridian Gate at Nanjing was three-fourths as wide as the Beijing Wumen. Second, there was some improvement in imperial garden architecture. At Beijing, Taiye Pond, which had been built in Jin times, was dredged during the mid-Ming and expanded into the imperial gardens that encircled the area of Beijing known as the Lake District. Similarly, and third, the east garden that had been used initially for archery practice was transformed into a detached palace known as the “south inner” with hills, water, trees, flowers, halls, and pavilions. Finally, Wansuishan was also transformed into a detached palace.

It took only four years to complete the palatial halls of Ming Beijing — in part because of the superb adaptability and potential of the Chinese timber frame, for which materials could be prepared well in advance of actual construction. Beginning in 1407, the Yongle emperor sent officials to gather timber from Sichuan, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, and Shanxi. Bricks for the palaces were produced mainly in Linqing, Shandong province, and Suzhou in Jiangsu province. The square brick tiles produced in Suzhou, known as “gold bricks” (jinzhu), were fine in texture, solid, durable, and as large as eighty by eighty by ten centimeters. Due to the complicated process by which they were manufactured, jinzhu took twelve months to produce. The stone, meanwhile, came from Fangshan county, south of Beijing. It was a kind of marble, white and of even texture. The yellow, green, blue, and black glazed ceramic roof tiles were baked in kilns in the Beijing suburbs.

Fire, the fatal enemy of the Chinese timber frame, was still a very real threat. In 1421, just a year after the Forbidden City was completed, the Three Great Halls were struck by lightning and burned to the ground. In 1428, Qianqing Hall was also destroyed by fire. The structures were rebuilt, but fire destroyed them again in 1557 and
Cining and Xian’an palace complexes, residences of the empress dowager, and Buddhist and Daoist monasteries. At the very back of the Forbidden City was a small garden, the imperial garden, in which pavilions, trees, and artificial hills were arranged. The scale and size made for a space lacking the charm, mood, or artistic interest of a traditional Chinese garden. Along the northern and western walls of the Forbidden City were rooms in which necessities of the imperial household were stored.

The entry to the Forbidden City, Fengtian Gate (Taihe Gate in the Qing dynasty), was the first in a line of gates that ended at the center of the imperial city south wall. It was here that the emperor met daily with officials and made decisions about state affairs. In the corridor on either side of the courtyard in front of Fengtian Gate were offices where two records were compiled: the daily court record (Qingzhai zhai), which was composed of notes about the emperor’s daily activities, and the veritable record (Shihui), which documented more major affairs such as imperial decrees (huadian) and rules and regulations of the court.

South of Fengtian Gate was Wumen, Meridian Gate, the main entrance to the Forbidden City, where high-ranking civil and military officials gathered to wait for imperial audiences, where prisoners of war were presented, and where other triumphal ceremonies were conducted (fig. 6.7). The single, U-shaped form with five entries evolved from the pair of qig that marked the entry to palatial architecture of Song, Tang, and even Han times.
The Forbidden City

The structures of Beijing's palace city, or Forbidden City, built in Ming times and rebuilt under the next dynasty, Qing, make up the largest surviving group of palatial architecture from premodern China. Occupied continuously by twenty-four emperors for five centuries, the Forbidden City consisted of 8,310 bays of buildings, most of them originally built between 1417 and 1420. Still today much of the Ming scale and layout can be seen. The plan combines aspects of Ming Nanjing and Yuan Dadu.

The Forbidden City measures 960 meters north-south by 760 meters east-west, with a gate at the center of each wall and a tower at each wall corner (fig. 6.1). It can be thought of as having two halves: to the south is the imperial court, also known as the Three Great Halls, where the emperor conducted state affairs, held grand ceremonies, entertained officials, and received guests; to the north are the inner quarters, the Three Back Halls, where the imperial family resided.

The Three Great Halls, Fengtian, Huagai, and Jingshen—better known by their Qing-period names of Taihe, Zhonghe, and Baohe—are elevated on a triple-layer marble platform shaped like a capital I. The center hall is the pinnacle of the north-south line of imperial architecture in Beijing (fig. 6.6). East and in front of the Three Great Halls (to their left) was Wenhua Hall, and to their right, Wuying Hall. Detached in their own courtyards, these were where the emperor entertained lower-ranking officials and where an emperor could reside upon retirement from court life. Wenhua Hall, which contained a portrait of Confucius, was also a place for study and lectures. Wuying Hall was where officials and ladies of rank came to offer congratulations to the empress on her birthday.

The Three Back Halls, also elevated on an L-shaped marble platform (but only a single-layer one), were named Qianqing, Jiaotai, and Kunning. East and west of this imperial residential sector were sets of six residences and five dwellings for concubines and palace maids. The highest-ranking concubine lived in the middle of the three eastern halls, closer to the Three Back Halls. Ruibin Palace, residence of the heir apparent and other princes, was also in this part of the palace city, as was Fengxian Hall, the "inner ancestral temple," which was built for the veneration of dynastic ancestors. Beyond the eastern group of six residences and five dwellings were Renshou Hall, where concubines and palace ladies of former emperors lived out their years, as well as offices for handling numerous routine affairs of the palace. To the west beyond the six residences and five dwellings were...