

# The Forbidden City

Zǐjìnchéng 紫禁城  
Gùgōng 故宫

**The Forbidden City, located in the center of Beijing, is the largest and most complete ancient palace in China, an unparalleled monument whose massive architecture and beauty encapsulate the Chinese notion of the unlimited power enjoyed by imperial rulers.**

The Forbidden City in the heart of Beijing is an ancient architectural complex, commonly known as the “Old Palace” in China; it was the home of Chinese rulers and the seat of Chinese government for more than five hundred years.

Completed in 1420 during the Yongle reign of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), it continued to be used by a total of twenty-four emperors of the Ming and the Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. After the last emperor Pu Yi was evicted from the former Qing palace in 1924, a museum was established in the palatial compound to house the paintings and artifacts from the imperial collections, which at that time also included items later shipped to Taiwan. The Forbidden City, as the largest and most complete ancient palace in China, was added to the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 1987.

The palatial complex is located in a quasi-rectangle of 72,000 square meters (961 m × 753 m), wrapped in a wide, stone-lined moat and massive brick-colored walls with soaring corner towers showing intricate roof designs. The principal structures within the compound inherited heavily from Ming constructions, built with timber frames on stone foundations and yellow glazed-tile roofs, clearly

deployed with a north-south oriented axis in mind. The buildings are physically and functionally divided into two major sectors: administrative buildings for the outer (front) court in the south and residential halls for the inner (back) court in the north. The southern court can be easily accessed through the main entrance, called Wu-men (Meridian Gate), an imposing U-shaped structure opening toward the south. Its central gate tower, rising 37 meters above the ground at one end of the axial line, is the tallest structure of the entire palatial complex. The area in front of this awe-generating passageway was a prominent venue for issuing edicts and conducting ceremonies.

Immediately adjacent to the north face of the Wu-men Gate is an expansive, open square (26,000 square meters) with the bow-shaped Golden Water River running through it. This man-made river flows to the outside moat and is remotely linked to the source of spring water in the outskirts of Beijing. The square is framed in the north with the Taihe (Supreme Harmony) Gate and it functions as the vestibule leading toward a three-tiered, white stone terrace, the majestic site of three principle structures of the palatial complex: Taihe Hall, Zhonghe (Central Harmony) Hall, and the Baohe (Preserving Harmony) Hall. The nine-bayed Taihe Hall has a south-facing façade of 60.01 meters wide and is the largest of all buildings within the Forbidden City as well as the largest extant timber-framed building in China. This monumental structure was a throne room for Ming emperors, but was frequently used as a ceremonial center during the Qing. Both the Taihe and Baohe Halls are designed with double-eaved roofs and distinct embellishments symbolizing imperial power. They are linked to the smaller,



**Architectural details of the Forbidden City reflect highly specialized building techniques.** PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.

square Zhonghe Hall in the middle along the line of the stone-carved Imperial Way, which also was part of the central axial line of the ancient imperial city.

Through the central passageway of the Wumen Gate, the Imperial Way projects south and merges with a series of city gates including the Tian'an (Heavenly Peace) Gate at the modern Tiananmen Square. This axial line eventually directs toward an area where the Temple of Heaven and Twin Altars of soil and grain are located. It is evident that Chinese traditional planning principles were used for the ground plan and location of the palace so as to delineate the celestial king's pivotal position in his sovereign space. West of the outer court inside the Forbidden City is a building for the emperors to receive ministers and hold courts, called Wuying (Military Eminence) Hall. It also is the base of Forbidden City's own printing house, which has produced important literary works including the mammoth *Siku Quanshu* (Complete Collection in Four Treasuries), a ten-year editorial enterprise resulting from the Qinglong

emperor's 1772 edict. This project brought together all varieties of important textual materials known in the imperial collection and libraries, and eventually led to the production of the largest single assembly of Chinese classical texts. This 36,000-volume work has since remained as a major source book for different fields of Chinese studies, and it is now made available in electronic versions based on one of the original copies previously kept in the Wenyuan (Literary Profundity) Pavilion, the imperial library located immediately north of a Wenhua (Literary Glory) Hall. The latter was a lecture hall for studying Chinese classical texts and is a mirror image of the Wuying Military Hall at the opposite side of the outer court, thus balancing the civil and martial components within the compound.

The inner court in the northern part of the palatial compound is an enclosed area with a crisscross of alleys within a perimeter of 1,500 meters. The major components are three residential complexes aligned along the central axial line, which pierces through the imperial garden and



**Twin boys pose on stone lion in front of Tiananmen, gateway to the Forbidden City. The pair of stone lions were stationed to protect the gate. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.**

the Shenwu (Divine Might) Gate in the northern sector of the Forbidden City and points outside toward the Di'an (Earthly Peace) Gate, and the Drum and Bell towers further north. The Qianqing (Heavenly Purity) Palace in the south of the inner court was the residence of the emperor during the Ming dynasty and the early Qing period; it later became the place for conducting state affairs, with furnishings replicating those used in the outer court. The

Kunning (Earthly Tranquility) Palace in the north was the seated empress's chamber during the Ming Dynasty, but was renovated to hold an altar for performing Manchu sacrificial rites during the Qing era. Between these two is the smaller Jiaotai (Union) Palace that functioned as a venue for the empress's coronation and other festive occasions, and as the home of ritual paraphernalia and twenty-five Qing Imperial seals.

East and west of these three palaces are a series of self-contained courtyards and minor palaces belonging to the seated emperor's concubines and children, in addition to the ancestral shrine in the east and the Yangxin (Mental Cultivation) Hall in the west. The latter became the emperor's chamber starting from the Yongzheng's reign (1722–1735). The Ningshou (Tranquil Longevity) Palace in the northeastern sector of the Forbidden City, built for Qianlong Emperor's retirement (1795), is also remarkable. Its courtyard features an outer court and an inner court to emulate the principal setup of the Forbidden City, and it is furnished with complex recreational facilities and innovative landscaping designs. A colorful glazed-screen wall at its entrance, representing nine animated relief dragon figures, is one of the most conspicuous items of the Forbidden City. Inside the inner court of the entire palatial compound are religious settings in which to perform Buddhist, Daoist and Lamaistic, as well as Shamanistic, rituals. They attest to the liberalism in Qing religious practice.

Over the course of five centuries, some of the buildings within the Forbidden City were razed or plundered, while renovations and new addition also were been made. Nevertheless, distinct features and the original layout of the principal buildings remain discernible up to this day. The ground plans, designs, color schemes, building orientations, and names of these architectural structures clearly were made in accordance with principles prescribed in ancient texts of Grand Rituals and Yin-Yang correspondences essential for the dwellings of the emperors. These

visual forms interpret traditional Chinese cosmological views regarding the terrestrial existence of celestial kings, known as “sons of heaven.” The architectural structures also bear witness to highly specialized crafts and technologies accomplished during the Ming-Qing era (1368–1912), ranging from stone carving, textile designs, ceramic productions, metalworking, and engineering for heating, water supply, and drainage systems—tangible evidence of synthesized cultural refinements and technological inventiveness originating from China and peripheral regions. They provide important clues for studying the concept of Mandate of Heaven in Chinese sovereign rule that had perpetuated for than five thousand years.

**TzeHuey CHIOU-PENG**

## Further Reading

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