

Illustrated Version

Ancient Chinese Wisdom

STORIES OF ANCIENT CHINESE ARCHITECTURE

ZHANG CIYUN & CHEN JIE

Shanghai Translation Publishing House



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Introduction

Ancient Chinese architecture is a beautiful gem as well as an integral part of Chinese culture. It is also one of the three greatest architectural systems in the world, the other two being European and Arabic architecture.

As Liang Sicheng (1901-1972), a renowned Chinese architect and “father of modern Chinese architecture,” once pointed out that the architecture of China is as old as Chinese civilization. Some archaeological discoveries indicate that Chinese people began to develop a unique construction style as early as more than 7,000 years ago.

During the following centuries, Chinese artisans, builders and architects had invented a great number of ingenious tools, construction parts, structures as well as architectural designs, techniques and styles. They had also married the art and science of designing and erecting buildings with Chinese philosophy, religion, local customs and the traditional system of social hierarchy.

As time went by, many beautiful and grandiose buildings, such as palaces, temples, mausoleums, bridges and distinctive dwellings were built all around the country and some of them, such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City and the First Emperor's Mausoleum featuring life-sized terracotta warriors are still in existence today.

Of course, there are so much more.

Traveling around China today, you may cross a bridge that was built several hundred years ago; or you may stay for a night in a courtyard or a cave-house that have been the traditional dwellings for the local people for centuries.

It is a feast for your eyes to visit famous temples, palaces and old gardens featuring exquisite designs and decorations in different part of the country. However, what's more interesting or even enlightening are the historical stories behind the walls of these buildings.

In this book, the authors will tell you many of such stories and will guide you as you knock on the gate of this ancient kingdom.



Forbidden City 故宫

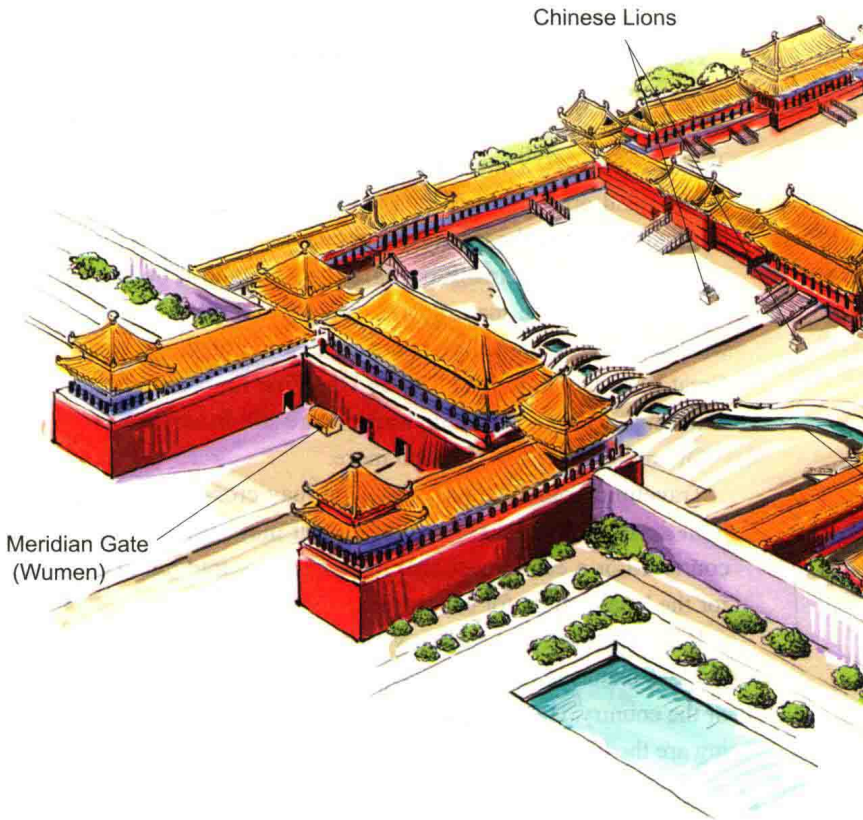
(now called the Palace Museum)

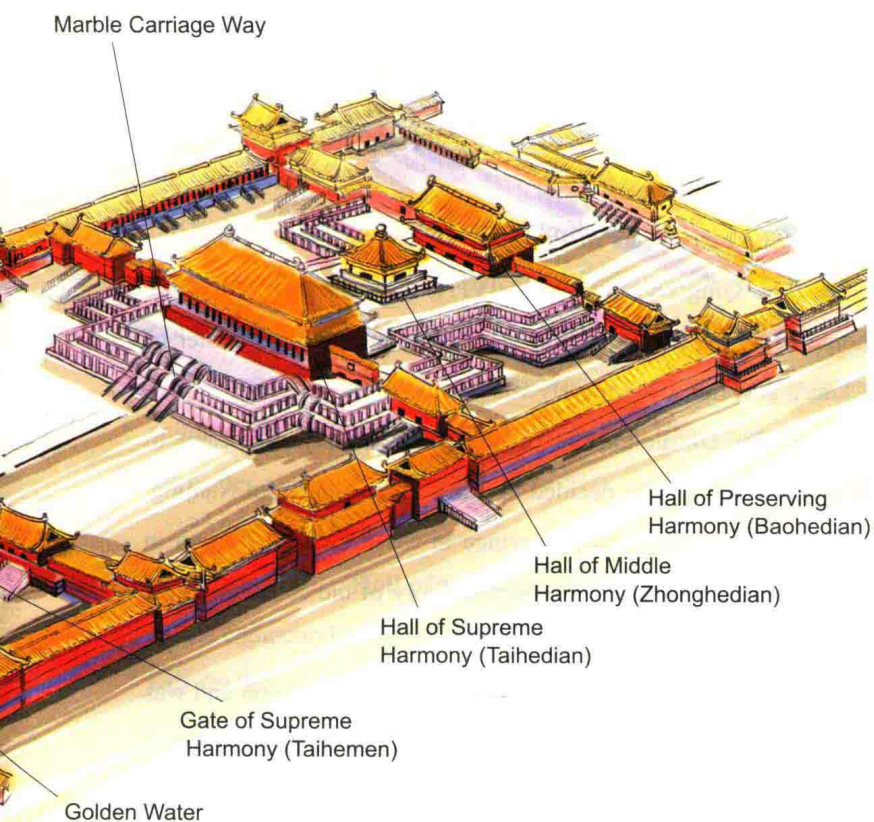
Location: Beijing

Area: 720,000 square meters

First built: From 1406 to 1420 (Ming Dynasty)

Construction style: Symmetrical arrangement





Axial symmetry

All buildings, including the most important palaces, in the Forbidden City are arranged along a north-south axis, symbolizing that the emperor is the center of the world. In addition, the whole city of ancient Beijing was built along this axis.

故宫 (gù gōng)

The Palace Museum

Forbidden City — the dragon's jewel

Located in the middle of Beijing, the Forbidden City is without dispute the largest and most grandiose imperial palace in the world today.

From the early years of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) to the end of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), the palace served as the home of 24 Chinese emperors as well as the political center of China's government for nearly 500 years.

When Zhu Di, the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty, came to the throne in 1402, he decided to move the capital from Nanjing, now the capital of Jiangsu Province in east China, to Beijing in order to better defend the northern territory of the country against tribal invasions.

The construction of the Forbidden City started in 1406 and was completed in 1420. It turned out to be a gargantuan complex with more than 870 buildings and a combined floor space of about 8,700 *jian* (an ancient Chinese spatial unit) or nearly 300,000 square meters.

The rectangle-shaped imperial compound covered 720,000 square meters. It is surrounded by a high crimson wall and a 52-meter-wide moat.

The buildings in the imperial compound, also with crimson walls as well as tall roofs covered with golden glazed tiles, were almost all built of wood and bricks, with many sitting on extensive and exquisitely carved marble platforms. The wood used in the construction was mostly precious *nanmu* found in southwest China and the floors of many halls were paved with specially baked "golden" bricks.

The beams, columns and rafters in these buildings were exquisitely painted, carved or decorated, particularly with various variations of the dragon, the symbol of Chinese emperors.

The north-south axis of the compound extends all the way to the south to the Tian'anmen Gate Rostrum and Tian'anmen Square, the center of Beijing today.

Hall of Supreme Harmony

The compound itself is divided into two parts, with the southern half (called the outer court or front court) used by emperors for ceremonial purposes and the northern half (called the inner court or back palace) serving as the residence of the imperial families as well as the site for handling daily affairs of state.

Of all the buildings in the Forbidden City, the 35-meter-high Taihedian or the Hall of Supreme Harmony is the largest and most majestic. Sitting on a three-tier marble terrace, the hall covers a space of 30,000 square meters. It was the place where the emperor

received officials and exercised his supreme power over the nation.

As a result, the Hall of Supreme Harmony served as the symbol of supreme imperial power in China during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

In addition to dozens of grandiose halls and pavilions, the compound also boasts a private garden that was specially designed for the imperial family. Covering an area of 12,000 square meters, the garden, called Yuhuayuan or Imperial Garden, was filled with ancient trees, exotic rockeries, flowerbeds and bronze incense burners.

After the fall of the Qing Dynasty during the 1911 Revolution, the Forbidden City was turned into a museum. In 1987, it was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Today, the Forbidden City is called the Palace Museum, housing more than 1 million items of art, including paintings, pottery, carvings, bronze wares and rare documents. The Forbidden City represents the pinnacle of ancient Chinese architecture and for several centuries following its completion, it exercised great influence over the evolution of architecture not only in China, but also in many other countries in East Asia.

Pictorial dictionary

• 间 (jiān) Bay

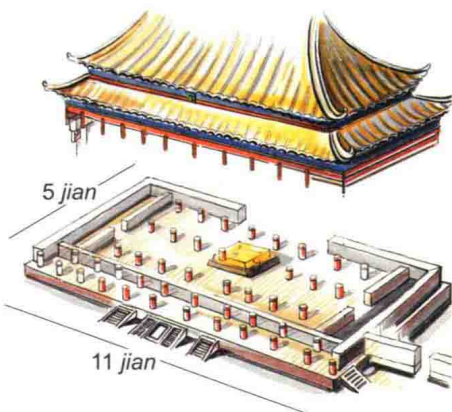
When used in terms of buildings or structures, the Chinese character 间 "*jiān*" usually means a room today. But in ancient China, it was used as a basic spatial unit of a building defined by four columns.

However, the distance between two columns or the bay width could vary according to the social status of the owner of a specific building.

For instance, for ordinary people, the bay width of their houses usually could not exceed one 丈 "*zhàng*" or about 3.3 meters. And it became wider in houses built for people of higher social status or government ranking.

For imperial palaces, such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, the bay width could reach more than 1.7 *zhang* or 5.8 meters.

So, when you hear people say that the Forbidden City contains 9,999 and a half *jian*, it doesn't mean that there are that many "rooms" in the palace, but rather the term here is used to describe the extremely extensive floor space of the buildings in the imperial compound.



Hall of Supreme Harmony

阿房宮

Epang Palace 阿房宮

Location: Xi'an, Shaanxi Province

First built: In 212 BC in Qin Dynasty, but never completed





For thousands of years, it was believed that the legendary Epang Palace was completed but burned down in the rebellion against the Qin Dynasty.