

The Traditional Chinese Architecture Series • Five Books on Ancient Architecture in Beijing

中国古代建筑知识普及与传承系列丛书 • 北京古建筑五书

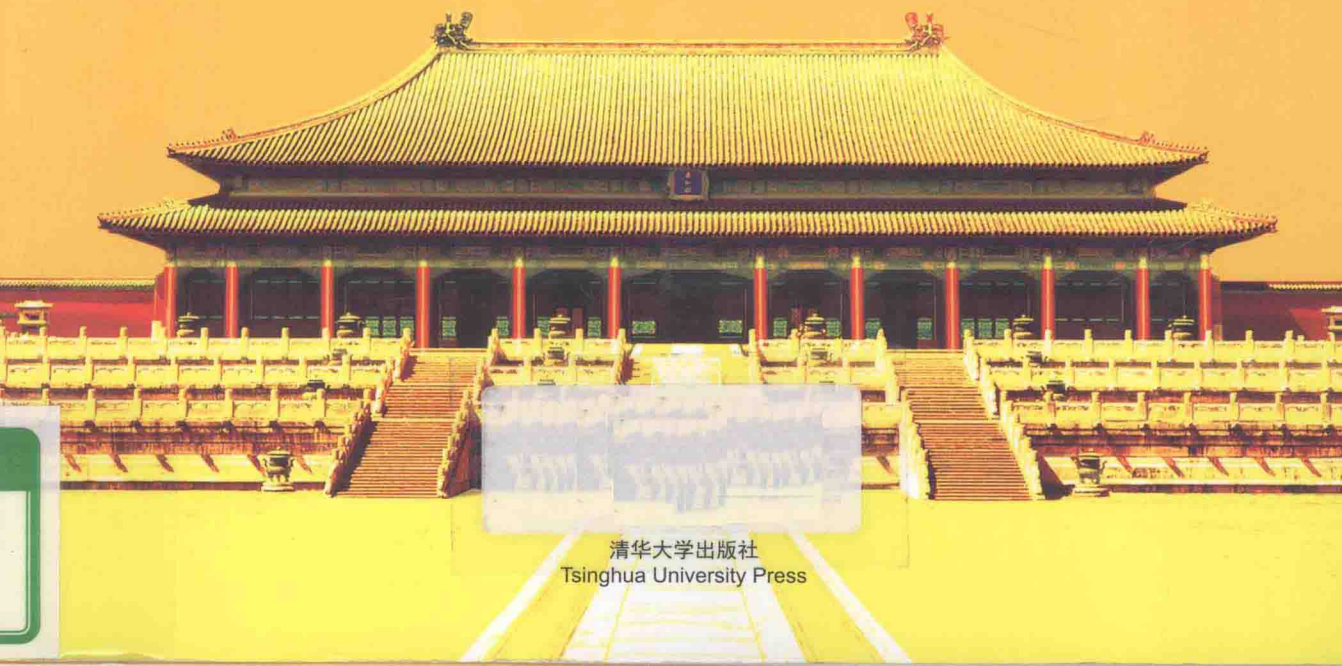
# THE FORBIDDEN CITY

## 北京紫禁城（英文版）



Liu Chang

刘畅 著



清华大学出版社  
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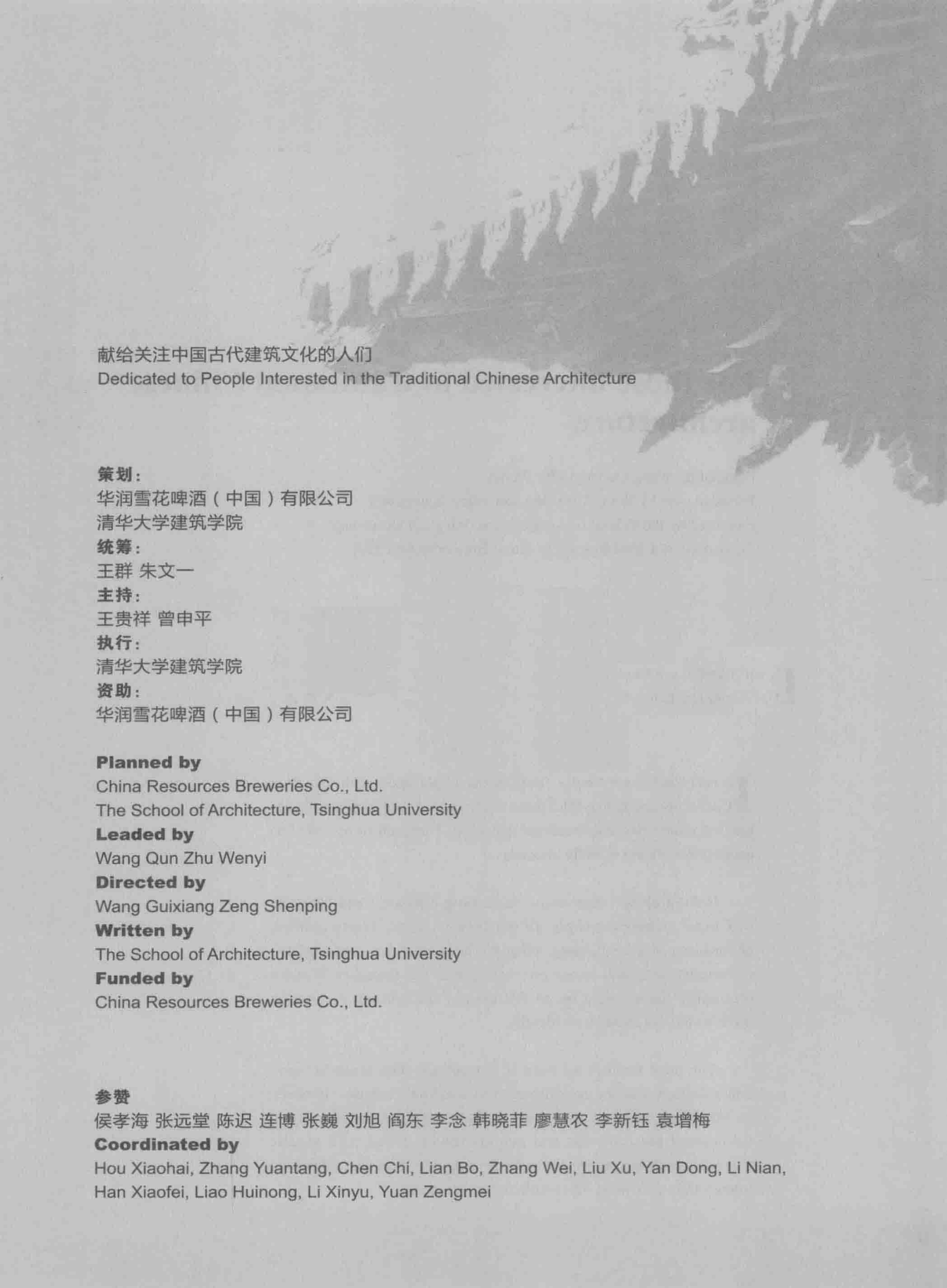
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Dedicated to People Interested in the Traditional Chinese Architecture

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## For those interested in traditional Chinese architecture

Planned by Wang Qun and Zhu Wenyi

Presided over by Wang Guixiang and Wang Xiangdong

Executed by the School of Architecture, Tsinghua University

Sponsored by China Resources Snow Breweries Co., Ltd.

## General Preface (I)

In early 2008, we finally finished our negotiation with Tsinghua University and held a brief press conference. Faced with perplexed-looking journalists and irrelevant questions, I thought to myself: this cooperative project is really necessary.

Behind all the clamor for “becoming a power” and “the rise of China”, Chinese people do not lack wisdom, determination, enthusiasm, or even funding. What we lack—and this is essential—is “originality”, both in our products and in our thoughts. Without originality there would be no distinction, and without distinction there would not even be an identity.

The most distinct we have is our culture. The academia says that architecture is the crystallization of a nation’s culture. However, as Mr. Liang Sicheng said, quite politely, “Ancient buildings that have stood for centuries and neighborhoods filled with artistic charms, which are prominent embodiments of a nation’s culture, are often totally sacrificed for so-called ‘improvement’.”

## General Preface (II)

Our purpose is to do something for the dissemination of knowledge about traditional Chinese architecture. We want to help to spread and hand down such knowledge by inviting experts to write books for the public. When we started, we were surprised by two facts because of our ignorance: first, that so many veterans and new talents are working so hard and so fruitfully in this field; second, that research in this field suffers from such a stunning shortage of funds.

We hope that the publication of the Traditional Chinese Architecture Series: Popularization and Continuation will make its due contribution to the spread of such knowledge, give more publicity to the results of the research done by veterans and new talents in the field, provide a means for readers to know more about traditional Chinese architecture, and add to our originality.

**Wang Qun**

Managing Director of China Resources Snow Breweries Co., Ltd.

Beijing, Jan. 1, 2009

## General Preface (II)

One day in 2008, Professor Wang Guixiang told me that the negotiation for a big cooperative project was under way. China Resources Snow Breweries Co., Ltd. was going to invest as much as 10 million yuan in Tsinghua University's efforts to study traditional Chinese architecture and spread knowledge about it. That is an astronomical figure for such a purely theoretical field. As the president of the school, I took the news seriously and soon followed Professor Wang to the headquarters of CR Snow Breweries, where I met Managing Director Wang Qun in a large conference room. He impressed me as an affable and smiling man.

Even since that day, I had been pondering over a question: how can traditional Chinese architecture be related to beer, which came from the West? Mr. Wang's smile seemed to imply the answer: although there is apparently no relation between architecture and beer, things will change after CR Snow Breweries joins hands with Tsinghua—the study of traditional Chinese architecture will bear the deep mark of Snow Beer.

Shortly after that, a contract-signing ceremony was held at Tsinghua University, which gave me another opportunity to meet Mr. Wang. I still remember one episode of the event: having stamped the seal on the inauguration plaque which symbolizes cooperation, he saw that the ink was rather pale and sighed with regret. All at once I recognized his character—a perfectionist mindful of each and every detail.

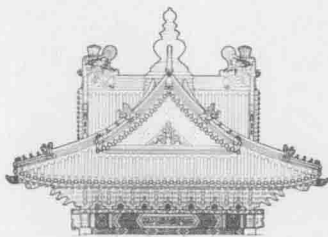
A person who is strict with himself represents an enterprising company, which will surely put a strict demand on its partners. This quality is shared by its partner, the Architectural Design & Research Institute of Tsinghua University. Despite its modest size, this team can trace its history to the Society for Research in Chinese Architecture founded eighty years ago with financial assistance from the patriot Zhu Qiqian. Six decades ago, Liang Sicheng brought this undertaking to Tsinghua and wrote the first systematic book on history of Chinese architecture. Today, thanks to the hard work of Professor Wang Guixiang and his colleagues—some his junior and others his senior—as well as all the others in the architectural history community, the study of traditional Chinese architecture has borne a wealth of fruits. This team is yet another powerful force, and its cooperation with an equally powerful company is bound to produce outstanding results.

Managing Director Wang Qun and Professor Wang Guixiang, an entrepreneur and an architect, have brought about a successful marriage between the business field and the culture & education field. I am convinced that this cooperative project will usher in a new era for the study and dissemination of traditional Chinese architecture.

**Zhu Wenyi**

Dean of the School of Architecture, Tsinghua University  
The campus of Tsinghua, dawn of Jan. 22, 2009





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# Illustrating the Layout of the Forbidden City



From the 14th to the 15th century, architects all over the world heard some call or were inspired in some way. In Europe, they left the Middle Ages behind and rang in the Renaissance. In China, when the Ming Dynasty had overthrown the tumultuous Yuan Dynasty, they built the Forbidden City in Beijing, which still exists today.

I imagine two arias, one western and the other Chinese, about architects of that period.

The western author was Alberti (1404—1472), an Italian architect, architectural theorist, writer, painter, sculptor and mathematician, who is often seen as a model of the Renaissance man. He was so proud of his *Ten Books on Architecture* and the Saint' Andrea in Mantua, a church designed by him, that he wrote,

*Oh! How sweet is the glory that we gain through our efforts. What worthy efforts are ours, through which we may show to those who are not yet alive, that*

*we lived with other values than those of our times, and we have left something of our mind and names besides a mere funeral stone, inscribed and positioned! As the poet Ennius said: Do not cry for me, do not hold funeral rites for me, for I live in the words of learned men.*

In China, during the Ming Dynasty (1368—1644), Yang Rong, Jin Youzi and Li Shimian respectively wrote an ornate essay by the imperial order in 1421, when the Forbidden City had been completed. Yang Rong wrote in *The Great Unification of the Imperial Capital*,

*The great unification was achieved in the reign of our sage king, who was born wise and improves his talent every day. His home is the whole of China, and he turns to count on all the talented people he has attracted. He recognized the importance of building the capital, and the idea was a consensus among all his people. Divinations were made to find the right place and time for construction. The capital was designed to surpass all previous ones and to be in*

① Alberti, L.B. *Della tranquillità dell'animo*, See Lefaivre (1997), p.150, and p. 270, no.109. The Italian translation is as follows; "Oh! Dolce cosa quella gloria quale acquistiamo con nostra fatica. Degne fatiche le nostre, per quail possiamo a quei che non sono in vita con noi, mostrare de'essere vivuti con altro indizio che colla età, e a quelli che verranno lasciargli di nostra vita altra cognizione e nome che solo un sasso a nostra sepoltura iscritto e consignato! Dicea Ennio poeta: non mi piangete, non mi fate esequie, ch'io volo vivo fra le parole degli uomini doti." (*Opere volgari di L. B. Alberti per la più parte inedite e tratte dagli autografi*, ed. A. Bonucci, 5 vols, Florence, 1843, Vita anonima di Leon Battista Alberti in vol. I, XCI-CXVIII. p. 48) The Italian translation is based on the Latin version: *Rerum italicarum scriptores*, ed. L. A. Muratori, III, cols 295-304.

*accordance with the late emperor's will. Measurements were made and the construction was under way. ... A song was composed, saying, "The magnificent imperial capital is the place where people from all directions gather. Here the emperor shows his great virtue, grace and magnanimity. His prestige and enlightened rule have affected a perfect unification." Another song goes, "The magnificent imperial city is dwelled by a large population. May it last forever. May the sage emperor and his descendants rule for ten thousand generations."*

All this is nothing but the projection of the light of western architecture into China, or the projection of the great ambition of architecture and the glory of individuals into China. Though there is a corner in the recess of each culture where all greatness is reflected upon with a cold eye and all veneer is relentlessly shattered, the strong and optimistic light has flooded Chinese departments and institutes of architecture as well as tens of thousands of graduates over the past century.

Faced with The Great Unification of the Imperial Capital, which rolls off the tongue but needs to be translated into modern Chinese, today's readers can at least find the eulogizing words trite and laden with allusions, and that the writer was a far cry from Alberti, an

individual thinking and working for nothing but architecture. The people whom we prefer to know seemed so small, with bowed heads, in the glory of the emperor. As we compare the two passages, the Renaissance seems so near and the Ming Dynasty seems so distant. Modern culture has made it difficult for us to understand our ancestors. Can it be true that the individual or the group of individuals who really designed the Forbidden City was not even worthy of one sentence or half a sentence in that ornate essay?

Maybe the truth is that they were not that important after all. To sum it up, ancient Chinese architecture relied upon four kinds of people. 1) Decision-makers such as the emperor or the owner of a garden. 2) People who explained the plan, such as ministers specializing in the ritual protocol or supervising the construction. 3) Designers, as represented by the Yangshi Lei<sup>①</sup>, a famous family surveying and designing architecture for the Qing court. Not that the emperor invited them because they were famous. On the contrary, their long service at court earned official ranks and a place in history. 4) builders, such as "craftsmen of the thirteen lines of work"<sup>②</sup> in the Qing Dynasty.

In a broader picture, the eastern people engaged in architecture differed from their counterparts in the west, and they were

① Yangshi Lei (1632-1703), a famous family surveying and designing architecture for the Qing court. Not that the emperor invited them because they were famous. On the contrary, their long service at court earned official ranks and a place in history.

② "craftsmen of the thirteen lines of work" in the Qing Dynasty.



organized in a different way. In China, people of different classes had different rights to voice their opinions, and there was never an authoritative group of architects formed by the division of labor. Thus, the process from design to construction differed from that in the west. This, plus the differences in material, technique and aesthetics, produced what we perceive as the immense difference between the end products and the diversity of architectural heritage.

Here I'm reminded of the striking difference between my daughter's toy block houses and those of my neighbor's son. Though they may have used the toy blocks of the same brand and type, adults can call it 'the diversity of children's architectural consciousness' before they sneak a peek at each other's works. In the information age, Chinese architects can peek at their colleagues in any corner of the world through plenty of channels in a fast manner. However, I find it worrisome that they are so engrossed in peeking that they seem to, or indeed, have forgotten how they used to arrange their own blocks.

Absorption in appreciating ancient properties is a good way to rid ourselves of such anxiety. It can help me calmly wait

for the social changes. When bored by the inauthentic steak, we will remember that we can make braised beef, stewed beef, and jiaozi stuffed with minced beef. The Chinese banquets better suit our bodies and tastes and are a more appetizing treat to foreign guests.

In the final analysis, the more one understands, the less likely he will praise it without thinking. This is true of architecture and any other professions, of the west and the east, and of the past and the present. All glory boils down to simple wisdom that is so ordinary that you and I can think of it. In reverse, the sparks of thinking flickering around us every day can gather and make glory.

Thus, I want to tell my story at leisure. I'll begin with big events about the front and back of the Forbidden City.

What I want to express in this introduction to the first part is not the mood of an ode or epic, but the calmness in my mind when I juxtapose the two arias and look at the 'age of creation' in the early Ming Dynasty with a cold eye, alone in the Forbidden City, away from the cheering crowd. In fact I'm not totally alone, because writing is a major source of my livelihood.

① Professor Wang Qiheng of Tianjin University, who has made an in-depth study of the Yangshi Lei family, believes that it represents the highest attainment of architects in dynastic China. See Wang Qiheng, Xiang Huiquan: "New Evidence Concerning the Yangshi Lei Family," in *Journal of the Palace Museum*, 1987 (2); Wang Qiheng: "The Feng shui of Qing Mausoleums: the Principles and Artistic Achievements of Mausoleum Design" and "The 'Golden Wells' of the Coffin Chambers of Qing Mausoleums," in *Theoretical Study of Feng shui*, Tianjin: Tianjin University Press, 1992, pp. 143-197. I hold different views on the subject.

② "The five elements" refer to tile, wood, oil, stone and earth; 'the eight works' refer to tile, wood, stone, binding, earth, painting, colored pattern and papering.