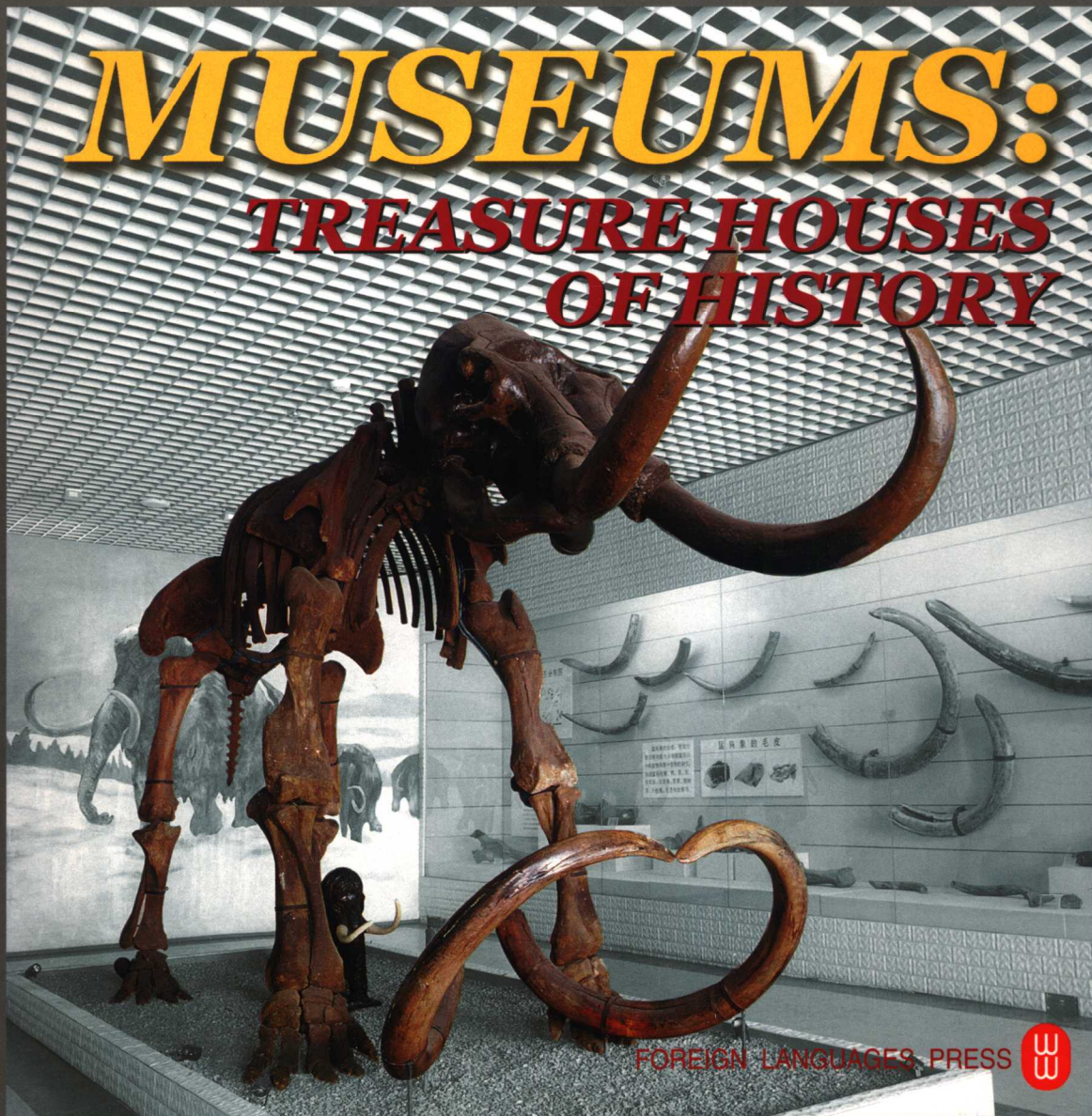


CHINA



MUSEUMS:

TREASURE HOUSES OF HISTORY



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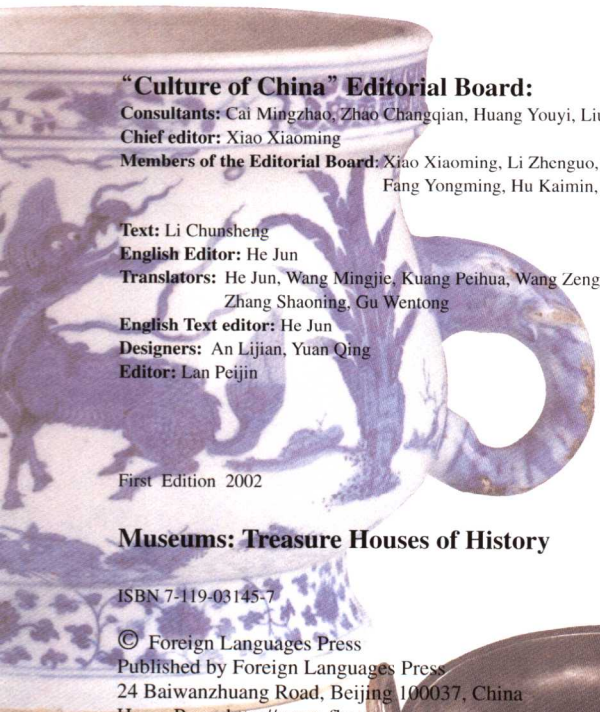
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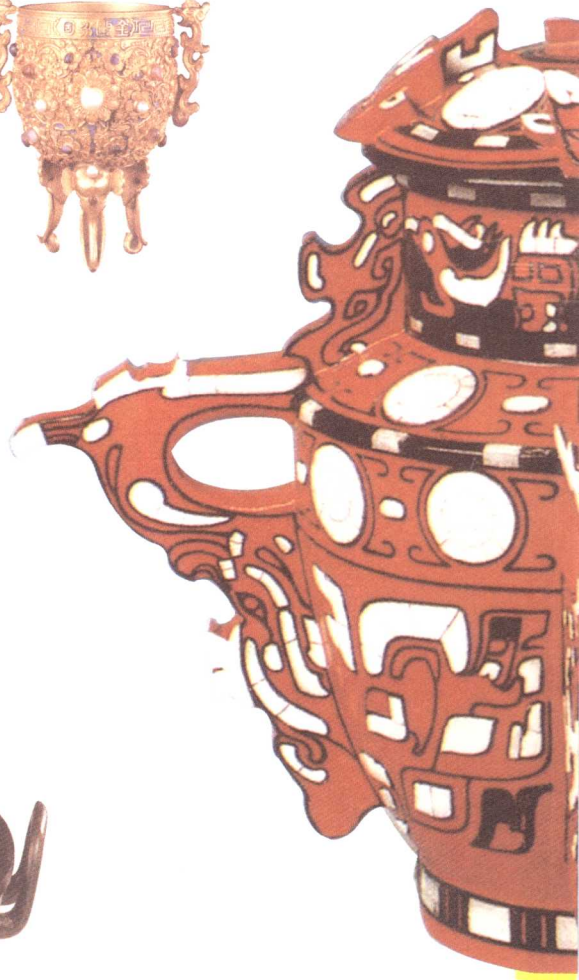
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Museums: Treasure Houses of History



China's Museums in Full Bloom

Zhang Wenbin

In China, we regard museums as an important part of our cultural and educational undertakings. The primary responsibility of museums is to collect, store and protect cultural relics and specimens, carry out scientific research activities, hold exhibitions, disseminate historical, scientific and cultural knowledge, propagate patriotism, socialism and the revolutionary traditions among the broad masses of the people, enhance the level of understanding of science, culture and moral ethics among the whole nation, increase the nation's self-confidence and cohesive force, and contribute, by way of intellectual support, to the great cause of building socialism with Chinese characteristics.

The first museum to be opened in China, known as the Nantong Museum, was established by Zhang Qian in 1905. By 1949, the eve of the founding of the People's Republic of China, there were only 21 museums in the whole country. The exhibition buildings were dilapidated and the exhibits were poorly organized. Naturally, they did not receive many visitors. This indicates the backwardness of the old China in the aspects of society, economy and culture.

But since the founding of New China, and particularly following the adoption of the policy of reform and opening to the outside world some 20 years ago, the museum profession has been reinvigorated and shown sound development.

First of all, the number of museums has been increased greatly. Museums under the State Cultural Relics Bureau alone, for instance, increased from 349 in 1978 to 1,356 in 1999. There are now altogether about 2,000 museums in China. At the same time, the variety of museums has expanded rapidly. Besides comprehensive museums, there are museums specializing in social history, revolutionary history, military affairs, art, natural history, geology and minerals, science and technology, industries, nationalities, folk arts, and renowned figures and their former residences. It is very common for museums to be run by cultural relics administration departments or other bodies, and even individuals. Besides, they are now more evenly located across China. In the 12 provinces and autonomous regions that make up the west of the country, where there used to be a dearth of such facilities, there are more than 400 museums of all types. Moreover, the establishment of a number of new and modern museums such as the Shanghai Museum, Henan Museum, Shaanxi Museum of History, Art Exhibition Hall of the Nanjing Museum and Exhibition Building of the Second Phase of the Chinese Museum of Science and Technology have helped to narrow the gap between Chinese museums and the museums of the developed countries.

Chinese museums are treasure troves of Chinese civilization. The rich variety and priceless value of China's cultural relics are known throughout the world. Relics housed in museums under the State Cultural Relics Bureau alone total over 9,300,000. Together with relics housed in museums run by other bodies or individuals, there are about 12,000,000 relics preserved, many of which are on display. The Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics, Administrative Measures Concerning Museum Collections formulated by the State Cultural Relics Bureau, lay down standardized rules concerning the administration of museum collections, and the standard of care of articles made of metal, paper, lacquer, wood or silk, and specimens of flora and fauna has been improving steadily. In fact, many protection techniques now applied in China's museums are the

most advanced in the world.

Meanwhile, many highly professional specialists have emerged in the course of the development of museum work, and they have made remarkable achievements in their research work. Before the end of the 1970s, professionals specializing in national history and local history working in museums were mainly graduates who had majored in history, archeology or fine arts. But since the 1980s, graduates of museology courses, including some with master's degrees and Ph. Ds have joined museums of various types. In 1998, Beijing University and the State Cultural Relics Bureau set up the Chinese Cultural Relics and Museum College, which has begun to show great potential for development. Some museum-related bodies, including the Chinese Museum Society and the Chinese Natural Science Museum Society, which were founded in the early 1980s, and some other relevant professional groups have been very active in promoting cultural exchanges and co-operation activities sponsored by the International Council of Museums and other international professional organizations. They have also organized many training and research activities, published scores of academic journals, works on museology and research findings. All these efforts have further enhanced the position and reputation of the Chinese museum profession in the realms of cultural and academic studies worldwide.

One of the prominent features of Chinese museums is social education. Every year, they hold more than 8,000 exhibitions of all kinds, and the number of domestic and foreign visitors is about 150 million person-times. Many of these exhibitions have drawn extensive attention and responses because of their attractive themes, state-of-the-art presentations, highly scientific content and powerful artistic appeal. They have also held 30 to 40 exhibitions abroad each year so far, drawing an audience of 10 million person-times. Almost 1,000 museums have been designated as bases for education in patriotism, and have made special contributions to the fostering of education in moral ethics of a socialist nature.

In recent years, much attention has been paid to developing the museum profession in line with the principle of "people at the center." Museum professionals have endeavored to create an elegant yet warm environment in their exhibition halls, with beautiful ecological surroundings and a strengthened sense of service to visitors among museum workers. Museums in China not only serve as institutions for obtaining knowledge and aesthetic enjoyment, but also as attractions for tourism and consumption.

Chinese museums have made regular contributions to the reform, development, stability and social progress, and played a unique role in socialist material civilization as well as spiritual civilization. However, we have to admit that the museum profession in China is, on the whole, still not fully developed, and does not meet the expectations of a large Oriental country with a civilization of 5,000 years. There still exist a number of difficulties and problems. However, these difficulties and problems will surely be solved as long as we further emancipate our minds, follow the principle of "seeking truth from facts," base our work on reality, handle the difficulties and problems correctly, strengthen administration, deepen the reform and encourage new developments and creations. As a result, the Chinese museum profession will accelerate its progress and make greater achievements.

The Chinese Communist Party and the People's Government pay great attention to the significant role of the museum profession in the course of socialist construction. We must uphold the orientation of advanced culture and the principle of serving the people. We are convinced that, with the support of Party committees and governments at all levels, backed by people of all walks of life, and through the hard work of those working in the field of cultural relics and museums, the Chinese museum profession will develop rapidly and make its due contribution to the progress and sustained development of China and mankind as a whole.

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1. The Palace Museum

The Palace Museum, opened on October 10, 1925 on the basis of the imperial palace of the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties (also called the Forbidden City or Imperial Palace) and its collections, is a comprehensive national museum with emphasis on the history of those dynasties, and their palace buildings and cultural relics.

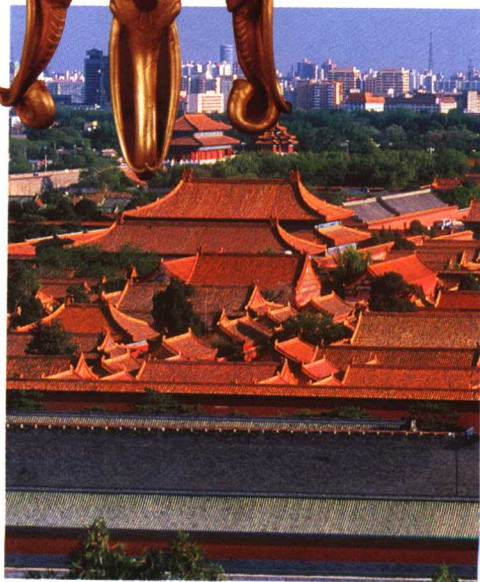
Situated in the center of Beijing, the Forbidden City, built from 1406 to 1420, is 750 m wide from east to west; north to south, 960 m; and the city wall, 10 m high, covers an area of over 720,000 sq m. The Forbidden City has 150,000 sq m of floor space, and is the largest and most complete extant group of ancient palace buildings of post and panel structure in the world. The buildings are arranged along a north-south axis. The city is surrounded by a moat, and there is a watchtower on each corner of the city wall.

The Forbidden City can be divided into the outer and inner courts in terms of building layout and use. The outer court, with the Taihedian (Hall of Supreme Harmony), Zhonghedian (Hall of Central Harmony) and Baohedian (Hall of Preserved Harmony) in the south, was where the emperors held court meetings and ceremonies; and the inner court, centered on the Qianqinggong (Palace of Celestial Purity), Jiaotaidian (Hall of Celestial and Terrestrial Union), and Kunminggong (Palace of Terrestrial Tranquility), was the place where the emperors did their daily work, and where they and their empresses and concubines lived.

The Palace Museum has 930,000 cultural relics, including ceramic, jade, bronze, stone, enamel, gold and silver articles, imperial seals, calligraphic works, paintings, lacquer wares, precious stone products, carvings (bamboo, wood, trunk, bone) and furniture. The Imperial Palace was put on the list of cultural relics under the state protection by the State Council in 1961. It has also been included on Unesco's World Heritage List.



The "Unimpaired and Permanent" cup, inlaid with gold and pearls, was the special ceremonial wine cup used by the Qing emperors. It was made during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795). Height: 12.5 cm; diameter of the mouth: 8 cm



Exterior of the Palace Museum



Part of the Scroll Painting titled *The Festival of Pure Brightness on the River*; 24.8 x 528 cm, painted by Zhang Zeduan of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127)





Interior of the
Taihedian (Hall
of Supreme
Harmony)



Color-glazed vase made during the reign of Emperor Qianlong (1736-1795).
Height: 86.4cm; diameter of the mouth: 27.4cm; diameter of the base: 33cm

Part of the collection in the Museum of Clocks and Watches of the Imperial Palace



2. Shenyang Palace Museum

This museum was established in the Shengjing Palace of the Qing Dynasty in 1926.

First built in 1625, the Shenyang Palace served as the imperial palace of the Qing Dynasty before the Manchus conquered the rest of China. Shenyang then became the second capital of the empire. Covering an area of over 60,000 sq m, the palace has more than 100 ancient buildings and over 500 rooms.

The Shenyang Palace Museum mainly collects historical relics and artistic works of the Ming and Qing dynasties, among which the relics dating from before the Manchu dynasty ruled the whole country, works of painting and calligraphy of the Ming and Qing dynasties, costumes of Qing officials, and furniture and ornaments from Qing palaces are especially famous. The four categories of the basic displays—historical and cultural relics relating to Qing officials, the capital city of the early Qing Dynasty and the lifestyle of the Manchu nationality, and a collection of the most valuable cultural relics in the museum—are distributed in over 30 exhibition rooms.



Dazhengdian, built in the 10th year of Emperor Taizu (1625) of the Qing Dynasty, is where emperors presided over important ceremonies.



Interior of Dazhengdian



Jade seal with posthumous title of emperors of the Qing Dynasty

3. Taipei Palace Museum

The Taipei Palace Museum is at No. 221 on the second section of Shuangxi Zhishan Road, Shilinwai District, Taipei City.

The museum's items are mostly original collections of the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing imperial palaces. These became national treasures after the last Qing Dynasty emperor, Pu Yi, left the imperial palace in Beijing in 1924. To protect them from the ravages of war, they were moved to the rear area, and then to Nanjing in 1947. One fifth of the whole collection was transported to Taiwan in 1948, most of which were rare ancient books and records.

After being put on display in Taizhong County, the collection was moved to the present premises when the Taipei Palace Museum was completed on November 12, 1965.

The collection, including objects, paintings, calligraphic works, books and documents, are on show permanently or specially in over 20 exhibition rooms, generally arranged according to historical order. A special exhibition is one dealing with the relationship between Chinese culture and the cultures of the rest of the world. There is also an exhibition room exhibiting relics of modern times.



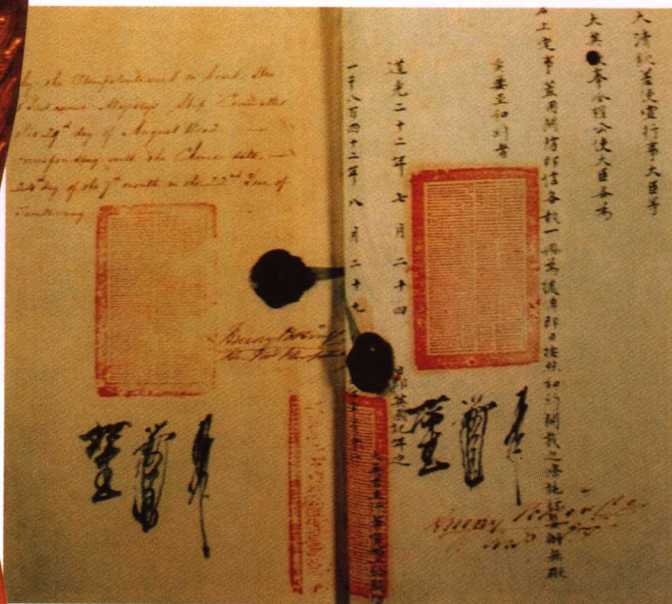
Exterior of the Taipei Palace Museum



Exhibitwn hall



Statue of Sakyamuni,
Northern Wei Dynasty



Original copy of the Treaty of Nanjing