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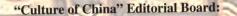
Sketch Map of Ancient Chinese Architecture



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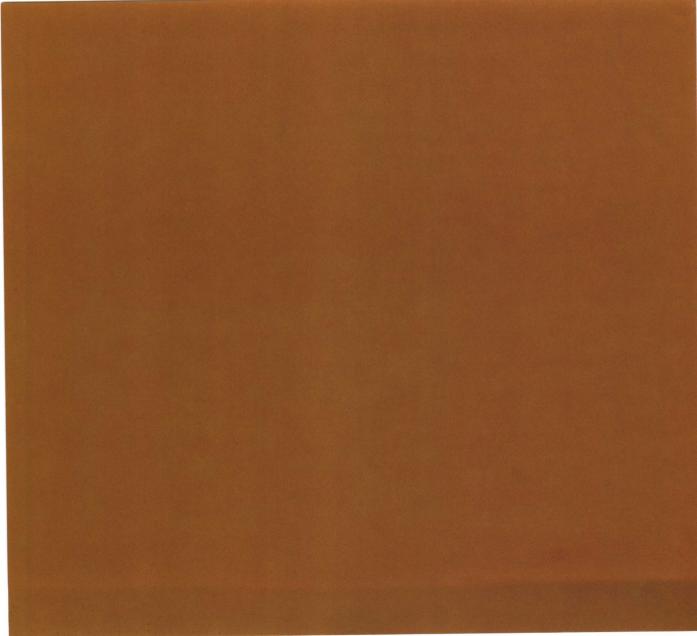
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Ancient Chinese Architecture





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Preface

Lou Qingxi

China is a country with a long history, a rich cultural tradition and an ancient civilization. On this land, our ancestors left us an abundance of splendid, time-honored architectural legacy, which has undergone thousands of years of development to become a distinct part of world architectural history. These features are demonstrated mainly in the following aspects:

1. Wooden Framework

Wooden frameworks for buildings appeared at a very early period of Chinese history. First, rows of wooden pillars are raised from the ground, on which horizontal wooden roof beams and crossbeams are placed. The roof timbers are laid on the beams, so



that the weight of the roof is all transmitted to the ground by way of the beams and the upright pillars. The advantages of this form of structure are as follows: First, the wooden framework bears all the weight of the building, which makes the installation of both the outer and inner walls flexible and able to be placed in accordance with practical needs. For example, the outer walls can be substantial, thick and made of bricks or stones in the north, and thin, made of bamboo and wooden planks in the south. Doors and windows can be installed between the erected pillars, or the pillars can be left open. Inside, the house can be divided into spaces with different purposes using wooden partitions and screens. Second, the wooden framework is shockresistant, because the parts are linked by mortise-and-tenon joints. So, when subjected to a violent shock such as that from an earthquake, a wooden framework is less likely to break or fall down than a brick or stone one. The wooden pagoda at

Fogong Temple in Yingxian County, Shanxi Province, is a 67-m-high wooden structure. In its over 900 years of existence it has been jolted by several earthquakes, but it still stands erect and firm. Third, a wooden framework is easy to construct. Wood is a natural material, not like bricks and tiles which are manufactured. Compared with stones which are also natural materials, wood is much easier to obtain, refine and work on. Covering an area of 720,000 sq m and with nearly 1,000 wooden-framework buildings totaling 160,000 sq m, the Forbidden City (the former Imperial Palace) in Beijing, built in its present form in the Ming

Dynasty, took 13 years from the preparation of materials to total completion, in which almost ten years' time was for the preparation of materials, and the time for construction on the spot was no more than three to four years.

Of course, wooden structures also have their disadvantages. Their durability is not as good as structures of brick or stone. Wood is vulnerable to fire and humidity, and attacks by insects. Thus, wooden structures tend to last a shorter time than brick or stone structures. For example, such an important building as the Taihedian (Hall of Supreme Harmony) in the Forbidden City had had to be rebuilt time and again after being destroyed by fire. Besides, wood grows very slowly and cannot be cut on a large scale recklessly.

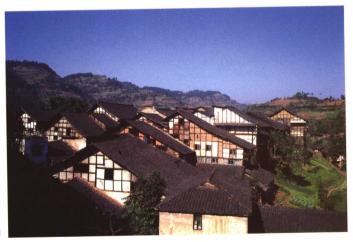
2. Collective Layout of Structures

Traditional Chinese buildings are always found in pairs or groups, whether they are residences, temples or palaces.

The *siheyuan* (courtyard house or quadrangle) in Beijing is the typical form of residence in north China. It is a compound with houses around a square courtyard. The main house in the courtyard is occupied by the head of the family, and the junior members live in the wings on each side. This layout not only conforms to the feudal Chinese family moral principle of distinction between the older and younger, and male and female members, but also provides a quiet and private environment for family life. In the north, the land is vast and the population is not so large, and so the courtyards there are large, and the buildings one-storied; in the south—in Zhejiang, Anhui and Jiangxi provinces—there is comparatively little land for the large population, and so the court-

yards are small, and the buildings two-storied and located on all four sides of the courtyards. This is called a *tianjing* (skylight) courtyard house. In the case of very large families, several *tianjing* courtyard houses can be connected to make a large residence with several courtyards.

Temples and palaces also sometimes display this layout. In the Forbidden City in Beijing, there are nearly 1,000 halls of varied sizes which are all grouped around large or small courtyards. Of these courtyards, the biggest is in the Outer Palace, formed by the Taihemen (Gate of Supreme Harmony), the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the Tirenge (Hall of Manifested Benevolence) and the Hongyige (Hall of Enhanced Righteousness). It has an area of over 30,000 sq m. In the Inner Palace





in the rear section of the Forbidden City, the Six Eastern Palaces and the Six Western Palaces were the residences of the imperial concubines, the empress and the empress dowager. They are all small-scale separate courtyards connected by lanes, and compose the largest palatial complex in the world.

In some mountain areas and other places with complicated landforms, structures or courtyards cannot be connected with each other regularly and symmetrically. They can only be laid out according to the local topography. In the mountain areas in southeast Guizhou Province, the Miao and Dong peoples build their houses on wooden or bamboo stilts. Built according to the rise and fall of the landform and arranged in rows with the mountain contours, these houses compose one village after another in picturesque disorder.

In garden architecture, in order to create an environment with hills and waters of natural beauty in a limited space, structures are usually carefully separated and laid irregularly to make variable spaces and different landscapes. Although occasionally grouped around courtyards, the pavilions, terraces, towers and halls are often separate scenes with a tenuous connection between them.

In both regular and irregular architectural complexes, decorative archways, pillars, screen walls, and stone lions and tablets besides small buildings play an important role in dividing space and forming scenes.

Most structures in traditional Chinese architecture are simple rectangles, and it is the architectural complex composed by single structures rather than the single structures themselves that expresses the broadness and magnanimousness of ancient Chinese architecture.

3. The Artistic Treatment of the Architectural Image

Ancient Chinese artisans ingeniously made the heavy roofs of buildings look light and graceful by forming the ridges and eaves into curves, and making the four corners stick up. The style of a roof can be divided into four basic types: *fudian* (wings), *xieshan* (hip and gable), *xuanshan* (suspended gable) and *yingshan* (hard gable), which denote a roof with a single layer, several layers, four corners and many corners. All these make the huge roof an important component of ancient Chinese architecture with an outstanding artistic image.

In order to impart lightness and grace to pillars, the diameters of the upper ends or both ends of upright pillars are slightly reduced, making them look like weaving shuttles. Beneath the pillars, stone foundations are needed to prevent humidity from underground eroding the wooden pillars. The foundations are often carved with decorative patterns. With the same purpose in mind, the two ends of the beams and crossbeams are given downward-pointing curves, giving them the shape of a crescent moon; thus they are called "crescent roof beams." The protruding parts of the roof beams are carved into various patterns, such as branches and leaves, and geometric figures.

The entrance doors of ancient structures are mostly made of wood with several upright wood boards connected side by side by horizontal wooden planks attached to them by iron nails. The heads of the iron nails are arranged on the doors in a regular order, and the color of the nail heads is different from that of the doors, which make them a special decoration. In addition, the knockers and handle rings on the doors are themselves made into ornaments bearing different patterns. It was only with the advent of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) that glass was installed in windows, replacing white paper. To make the pasting of the



paper easier, wooden window lattices forming various complicated patterns, including geometric figures and plants, were installed.

As for open-air terraces and their balustrades, whether made of stones or bricks, their foundations, the partitions between each balustrade, the column heads of the balustrades and other components are all carved with artistic decorations. Even the bricks and stones left over after the construction of houses are pieced together into different designs according to their shapes and colors, to decorate the grounds around the houses.

The decorations on ancient Chinese structures have cultural connotations as well as esthetic ones. The dragon heads on the edges of roof ridges signify the spurting of water to douse fires. The dragon,

phoenix, tiger and tortoise were regarded as sacred animals by the ancient Chinese, and they carved images of them on eave tiles which were exclusively used on imperial structures. The emperors were supposed to be descendants of dragons, so there are images of dragons all over imperial structures, from balustrade column heads, terrace steps and stone foundations of pillars to roof beams, paintings on ceilings and carvings on doors and windows. Symbols denoting happiness, honor and longevity can be seen everywhere on traditional Chinese structures, including palaces, temples, gardens, residences, gateways, windows and roof beams. Bats represent happiness, deer stand for honor, and pines, cranes and peaches represent longevity. In addition, there are various patterns made by putting Chinese characters together, like the combination of the characters meaning happiness, longevity and ten thousand.

Ancient artisans were also good at using colors to decorate buildings. In the Forbidden City, stretches of yellow glazed tiles glitter under the blue sky, and there is a pleasing contrast between the dark green used beneath eaves, red doors, windows and walls, and white terrace foundations. Structures in private gardens in the south tend to have white walls, gray bricks and black tiles. Roof beams and pillars are usually left unpainted. Standing in harmony with the surrounding green vegetation, these structures create the simple and refined atmosphere beloved by the literati of old.

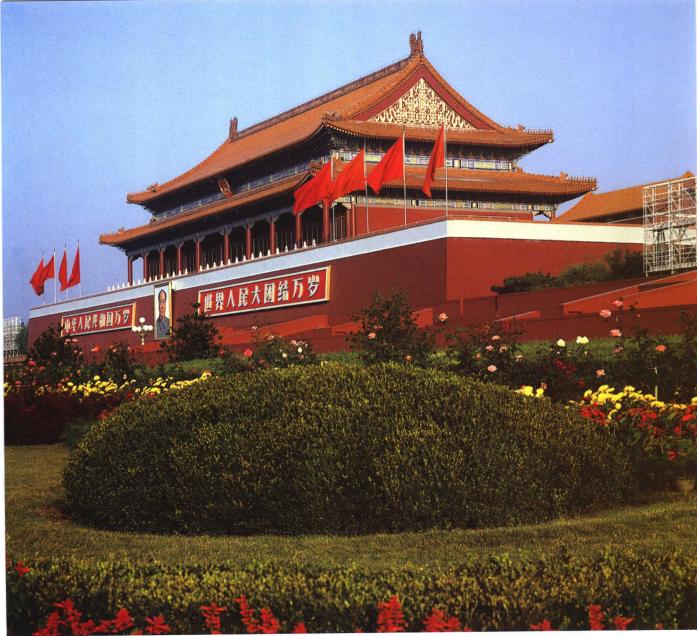
Wooden framework, collective layout and the artistic treatment of architectural image are the basic features of ancient Chinese architecture. In the following sections, we will get to know and appreciate the precious treasures of ancient Chinese architecture by introducing palaces, ancestral halls, religious buildings, gardens and local structures.

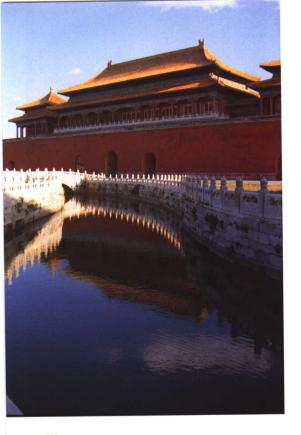
Palace Architecture

In the long history of Chinese feudal society, the emperors, as the wielders of supreme power, had palaces and other structures built which exalted them far above the rest of the populace. Thus, palace architecture represents the quintessence of the architectural techniques and esthetic aspirations of that epoch. Ancient records describe the nowvanished Epang Palace of the Qin Dynasty, Weiyang Palace of the Han Dynasty and Daming Palace of the Tang Dynasty as being huge constructions with broad courtyards, and magnificent halls, pavilions, terraces and towers. The only imperial palaces extant nowadays are the Forbidden City in Beijing and the Imperial Palace in Shenyang, which were built during the Ming and Qing dynasties, respectively. The Forbidden City in Beijing was completed in the 18th year of the reign of Yongle (1420). It was constructed totally in accordance with the traditional regulations of ancient Chinese palaces, and reflects the traditional features of Chinese palace architecture from the general layout to the specific appearance of structures and decorations. The Forbidden City concentrates the highest technical and artistic achievements of ancient palace architecture.

Tiananmen

Tiananmen (Gate of Heavenly Peace) was the front gate of the Imperial City in Beijing during the Ming and Qing dynasties. It was built in 1420, and named Chengtianmen (Supporting-Heaven Gate) initially. In 1651 it was rebuilt and renamed Tiananmen. This is a gate in the form of a rostrum with a grand tower situated on the wall high above with a double roof nine bays wide in the xieshan style of traditional Chinese palace architecture. A double roof denotes the building of the highest rank. In front of the gate, flowing from east to west, is the Golden Water River, spanned by five stone bridges, each of them facing one of the five gateways of Tiananmen. On either side of Tiananmen there stand a pair of stone lions and ornamental columns, which make the front gate of the Imperial City especially majestic and imposing.





Wumen

Wumen (Meridian Gate) is the main gate of the Forbidden City. It is also in the form of a rostrum, topped with a majestic hall with a double roof. On each side of the hall are two pavilions connected by galleries which jut forward. This layout shows the highest rank of a gate. Another Golden Water River flows between Wumen and Taihemen (Gate of Supreme Harmony), which gives access to the Outer Palace through stone bridges.



Hall of Supreme Harmony

The most important hall in the Forbidden City, the Hall of Supreme Harmony is situated in the center of the area reserved in the past for official functions. It is 11 bays wide—63.96 m—and 26.9 m



high, and built on a three-tiered stone terrace. Major ceremonies such as the enthronement of the emperor, celebration of the emperor's birthday and issuing of imperial edicts were held in the hall. At festivals, the emperor also received civil and military officials in this hall.



Inside the Hall of Supreme Harmony

Inside the central chamber of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, at the north end, there stands a throne with four gold-lacquered pillars twined by dragons. Beneath the throne is a wooden pedestal, and behind it are seven screens. There are dragon designs on the throne, pedestal, screens, ceilings and roof beams, symbolizing the divinity of the emperor as the "son of the dragon."

