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KISS BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

IMAGES OF THE FORBIDDEN CITY



图书在版编目 (C I P) 数据

天地之吻：故宫图像 = Kiss Between Heaven and Earth :
Images of The Forbidden City : 英文 / 李文儒著；李绍毅译。
-- 北京：故宫出版社，2012.4

ISBN 978-7-5134-0191-3

I . ①天… II . ①李… ②李… III . ①故宫—摄影集

IV . ① K928.74-64

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2011) 第 199631 号

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出版发行：故宫出版社

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印刷：北京雅昌彩色印刷有限公司

开本：889 × 1194mm 1 / 16

印张：14.75

印次：2012 年 7 月第 1 版第 1 次印刷

印数：1—2000 册

书号：ISBN 978-7-5134-0191-3

定价：160.00 元

Contents

Contents / 1
Whose Forbidden City? / 2
Supreme Planning / 4
Walking toward Supreme Harmony / 14
Snow Dancing in the Forbidden City / 28
Palace Wall Willows / 46
Walls, Walls, and More Walls / 58
Imperial Squares / 70
Imperial Courtyards / 80
A Thousand Gates, Ten-thousand Doors / 86
The Throne in Control of All the Lands under the Heaven / 102
Kiss between Heaven and Earth / 116
Big Chinese Roofs / 124
Flowing Imperial Authority / 134
Inside and Outside the Windows / 146
Dancing Colorful Ribbons / 154
Patting All the Balustrades / 162
Glazed Flowers / 176
Mountains and Water in the Imperial Palace / 186
Life and Death Predestined / 196
Crying Palace / 206
Grand Sculpture to Worship Heaven / 216
Appendix: Episodes in Restoration of the Hall of Supreme Harmony / 226

Whose Forbidden City?

The construction of the Forbidden City, the imperial palace of China, was prepared in 1406, started in 1417 and completed in 1420. From Zhu Di, the Chengzu Emperor (r. 1403–1424), to the last emperor of China Puyi (r. 1908–1911), altogether twenty-four Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) emperors ruled and lived here.

The 1911 Revolution ended the autocratic monarchy of China. In 1914, the National Gallery of Antiquities was founded in the Forbidden City. In 1925, based upon the Ming and Qing imperial palace and its collections, the establishment of the Palace Museum was announced.

The former Forbidden City became a museum open to the public. As the largest and most intact palatial complex, the great architecture of the Forbidden City has been distilled into classic images.

The frozen and yet changing images of the Forbidden City belong to its creators, belong to all those who have seen and thought about it during the past 600 years, and belong to the eyes and hearts of everybody.



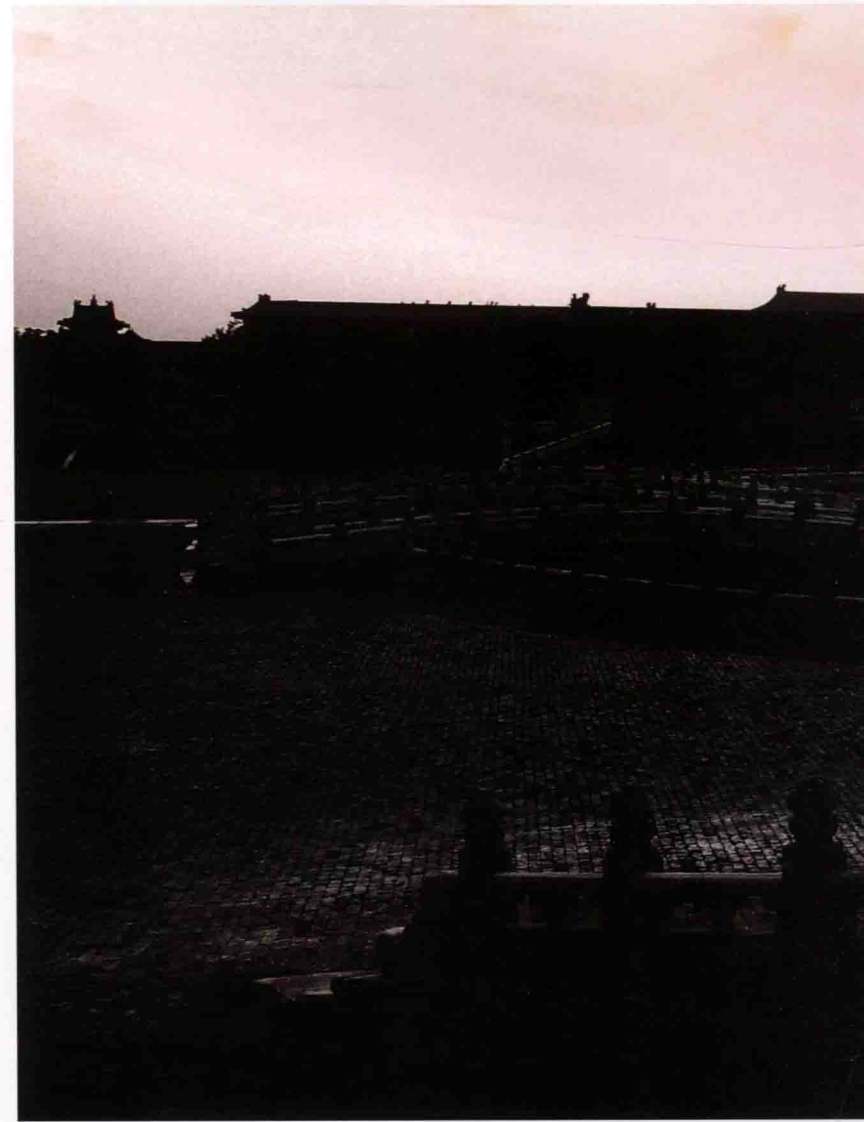


Supreme Planning

Who actually designed the great Forbidden City? Although there are no thick biographies of famous architects, and with just a few words on the design in the historical records, I still believe that the designers of the Forbidden City were among the greatest designers, whose work is unprecedented in the world.

As for imperial palaces before the Forbidden City, such as the Epang Palace, the Palace of Eternity and the Palace of Grand Brilliance, although texts and ruins still survive, when all is said and done, they cannot really be admired today and only serve as references for the imagination. Needless to say, there will never be another huge imperial palace after the Forbidden City. Therefore, whenever I mention to Chinese and foreign friends that the Forbidden City is the largest and most completely preserved palatial architecture, I cannot contain my pride.

I often stand on a high place and gaze over the Forbidden City. At sunrise and sunset, I gaze, feel and look for the glory floating and rising from the rows upon rows of yellow roofs. I often stroll through the palaces and walk through the labyrinthine courtyards.







On chilly winter nights with thin clouds over the moon, I hear the strange sound of cold wind passing through deep alleys, I search and wait for the moon – sometimes hidden, sometimes appearing – between the silhouettes of high walls, roof ridges and eave corners. At those times, strange ideas occurred to me. I thought about the planning and design of the Forbidden City that cannot be explained with ordinary reasoning. I tried to overturn my idea that the designers of the Forbidden City were the greatest designers in the world. I once found a reason which I thought was good enough to persuade myself, i.e. the emperor was in fact the one who had the final say. So long as he agreed and willed it, anything could be done.

However, this reason did not finally persuade me. I still believe that the Forbidden City came from a grand concept, a grand plan, and a grand design.

After the construction of the Forbidden City, poems praising the imperial achievement were needed as usual. Zhu Di asked those officials he considered his most talented to compose them. Grand Scholars of the Belevdere of Literary Profundity, the imperial cabinet Yang Rong and Jin Youzi created *Ode to the Unification of the Imperial Capital*, while Li Shimian wrote *Ode to Beijing*. Besides the eulogies extolling the Yongle emperor as the "Sacred King", most of them were stately portrayals of the

Forbidden City, which provide some clues to the design concept. Yang Rong's Ode has the following lines: "When it follows the heavenly way, it is in harmony with the time; when it discerns the direction, it locates the position. It observes, measures, manages and directs. It connects with the Heavenly River and links up to the Immortals' Sea. On the west it meets the Taihang Mountains, on the east the Jieshi Cliffs, on the south the Juye Plain, on the north the Juyong Pass. The vast expanse of deserts lie on its north, it reaches Min and Yue on the far south, neighbors flowing dunes of sand on the west and oceans on the east. Its grandeur and magnificence overpowers The Heaven and The Earth, pointing high in the blue sky and striking roots deep into the earth. It embraces the longitude and latitude, extending into infinity. It faces the Heavenly Spirits and prides itself in its eternal noble title." These lines may sound too abstruse. However, the ideas and vision in fact played decisive roles in the construction of the Forbidden City.

Ancient China did not have such means as modern science and technology provided today. Without aerial survey, satellite positioning or precise instruments, the ancients had their own remote sense, observation and investigation. The ancient Chinese believed that Heaven interacted with Earth. Heaven had a heavenly axis while the earth had an earthly axis.

Heaven had the Purple Numinous Enclosure while the earth had the Purple Forbidden City. Mountains and waters were harmonized with Heaven and determined by the people. General ideas came from imagination and vision while the specifics depended upon craftsmanship and ingenuity. If these were the Chinese world view of Heaven, Earth and Man, if these were used to guide the planning of the Forbidden City, then its design was really a spiritual condition, a concept and an idea. Therefore, it's profound, mysterious, sacred and supreme. In the minds of the Yongle Emperor, his subjects and those who participated in the project, the Forbidden City to be constructed and admired was a form and a symbol standing and communicating between Heaven and Earth.

Without a doubt, Zhu Di was the chief planner, designer and

director of the Forbidden City. Under him there was a team working out and carrying out his plans. Whoever they were, there's one point that is definite: the design of the Forbidden City depended upon thoughts, rather than calculations. Of course, there were many people to carry out detailed chores. They had to observe Heaven and Earth and harmonize them with the people. They had to investigate all the directions of Beijing. Many times, they stood on the Western Hills of Beijing and commented on the geographical conditions. Based on observations, they had to explain how the Kunlun Mountain and Range was connected with the Yan Mountains, and where the great river and seas were; they had to say what the general trends of the world were with high sky, distant mountains, broad plain, long water and deep seas,





and how Beijing and the Forbidden City occupied a supreme position between Heaven and Earth and between mountains and waters. With enough historical, literary and folklore material, they would not find it difficult to state the above. It was even easier to make the emperor believe their ideas. Zhu Di lived for many years in a remote garrison that he ruled as best as he could. Many times, he set out from Beijing to conquer the north and south. With his feelings toward Beijing and familiarity with the mountains and waters around the region, it was easy for him to identify with the place and believe that the *fengshui* of Beijing and the future Forbidden City was the best. Perhaps the first *fengshui* version of Beijing city and the Forbidden City was his inspiration. Even if the real conditions were not as perfect as the above description, it could be put in the most persuasive way. This is really very romantic.

Although one can talk about general principles when expounding the concept and design of the Forbidden City, it was still necessary to put the planning and design in very practical, realistic and utilitarian terms. The supreme Forbidden City should combine conventionality and unconventionality by simultaneously being attractive to and different from its subjects. The emperor was the emperor; the capital city was the capital city; the imperial city was the imperial city; the palace city was the palace city. The Forbidden City was the city within the city and was the forbidden place in the real sense of the word.

All the civilian and official buildings were low in Beijing. Only the Forbidden City was massive, protected with a wide moat and surrounded by high walls. No ordinary people were allowed to enter, go near, or even carefully observe it. From a high position, one might see some yellow ridges, but could only imagine how it looked inside. When standing on a high place, the people inside the Forbidden City could admire, without obstruction, the distant mountains and lands, nearby water, and expansion of grey houses at their feet. Distance could emit nobility, while mystery could maintain supremacy.

The Forbidden City and its buildings are noted for their size and quantity. The whole Forbidden City surrounded by the moat covers an area of one million square meters, while the number of architectural bays amounts to 9999.5. Except for the illustrious imperial family, who else could have such prerequisites, imposing manner and prosperity? However, the layout of the Forbidden City pays special attention to stressing and serving priority, which is the earthly axis corresponding to the heavenly axis, which is the central axis of Beijing and the Forbidden City. All the important buildings are connected along the axis. The most important ones are the three main throne halls on the three-tier terrace, among which the most important is the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Every measure was used to highlight the throne hall, to make it loftier,

to connect it with Heaven and to give everyone who saw it the sense that this was indeed the palace of the Son of Heaven surrounded by clouds.

Everything is fine when the most important factor has been settled. Everything will be arranged according to its own position, shape, height, size, color, title and function. All the layout, architecture and space, no matter how big or wide they are, are serving and setting off the supremacy of the palace of the Son of Heaven with rule, order and stability. Even colors are of no exception. Beijing was entirely grey. Only the Forbidden City was yellow and red, with rows upon rows of yellow roofs and repetitions of red walls, gates and windows. Those are the colors of the rising sun in the sky with the sparkling bright light that creates glory and supremacy.

The Forbidden City was not in existence for one era alone. No one denies that the Forbidden City is a great architectural complex, and no one could deny that its designers were among the greatest. However, no one can clearly discern who the greatest designer was. Neither Zhu Di, nor those who were involved in the construction of the Forbidden City were the designers. Actually, the Forbidden City is an artistic crystallization of traditional Chinese culture. To be exact, the

Forbidden City is the formal, objective and aesthetic epitome of Chinese philosophy, poetry and rituals, as well as unconscious collective creation. The location, layout, shape, colors, correspondence, harmony and balance of the Forbidden City were guided by architectural philosophy, rather than architectural aesthetics.

Chinese traditional culture with its long history and profound implications was the origin, foundation and construction baseline of the Forbidden City. Or, we could say that ancient culture and ritual concept determine architectural aesthetics. This might be its unique feature. Facing the Forbidden City, I was so impressed that architectural philosophy and architectural aesthetics could be perfectly combined with one another. I do not know whether it's a special case or a general rule. However, I'm clear about one point: great beauty comes from the entirety and not from a part. At any time, great beauty is the beauty of the totality, which most certainly has deep cultural roots.

Great architecture comes from great planning, while great planning comes from great culture. The overall romantic imagination and detailed inspiration are glitteringly inlaid on the lofty, profound and delicate cultural background.

The supreme Forbidden City is just like that.



Walking toward Supreme Harmony

I have more than once read or heard about the following scenario: when architects, artists, designers, or diplomats, no matter whether they come from China or overseas, face the Forbidden City, they often feel that the space of Chinese palatial complex is so huge that it leaves them at a loss. When they pass through or stand under the entrance gate of the Forbidden City, they feel a unique sense of majesty and nobility. There are even those who cannot help but kneel down.

I do not know the psychological basis of this feeling. What I do know is that the eight-kilometer central axis running from the Gate of Eternal Stability, through the Forbidden City, to the Bell Tower, which most experts and scholars on the Forbidden City and Beijing unanimously extol as the supreme masterpiece of its builders, is known as the great and sacred central axis of the monarch. It seems that the greatness of the Forbidden City comes from the great central axis. It is truly the case. At least it can be said that without the central axis, the Forbidden City could not be so majestic. Of course, without the Forbidden City, the

central axis could not be so great either.

When the Forbidden City was first completed, the central axis began from the Front Gate. When the capital city was expanded 133 years later, the central axis was extended southward to the newly built Gate of Eternal Stability. The latter gate disappeared 537 years later as the starting point of the axis. The tower of the gate was rebuilt 584 years later and the starting point reemerged. For many years, only the emperor himself and a very few other people could enter the Forbidden City and Hall of Supreme Harmony along the central axis. Today, all the people can do so, just as the emperor did in former times. But not all the people realize the significance of the axial structure of the construction of the capital city and Forbidden City.

When the construction of the Forbidden City started, was there a foundation ceremony held somewhere and on what scale? Now six centuries have passed. The central axis, although the most important parts and general structure are still extant,

