

Chinese Treasures

As a country with a rich cultural heritage, China has a great capacity for creative artistry, and its museums are treasure troves of Eastern civilization. Visitors find that they delight the eye and nourish the mind.



CHINA'S MUSEUMS

Palace Museum

Address: Beijing, Jingshan Qian Jie, #4

Website: newweb.dpm.org.cn

I

The Palace Museum is in the center of Beijing, the capital of China. It was established on October 10, 1925, and is China's largest museum.

The museum is also known as the "Forbidden City." It covers 720,000 square meters and was the imperial palace for a succession of twenty-four emperors and their dynasties during the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) periods of Chinese history. The museum is also China's largest and most complete architectural grouping of ancient buildings. Construction was begun in 1420, the eighteenth year of the Yongle Emperor of the Ming dynasty, so the site has existed for the past 590 years.

More than seventy buildings of various sizes, containing more than 8,700 rooms, comprise the Forbidden City. These halls are aligned along a north-south axis, and extend outwards in a symmetrical pattern east and west. The central axis not

The Palace Museum.



Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-18690-2 — China's Museums
 Xianyao Li, Zhewen Luo
 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

CHINESE TREASURES



The Three Great Halls in the Forbidden City.

only passes through the Forbidden City, but extends south to Yongding Gate and north to the Bell and Drum Towers, altogether some eight kilometers. This passage through the entire city of Beijing symbolizes the centrality of imperial power. The imperial seat is at the very center of this line. The architectural design lines the buildings up in neat array on an imposing scale. In a concentrated form, this arrangement showcases China's artistic traditions and unique architectural style.

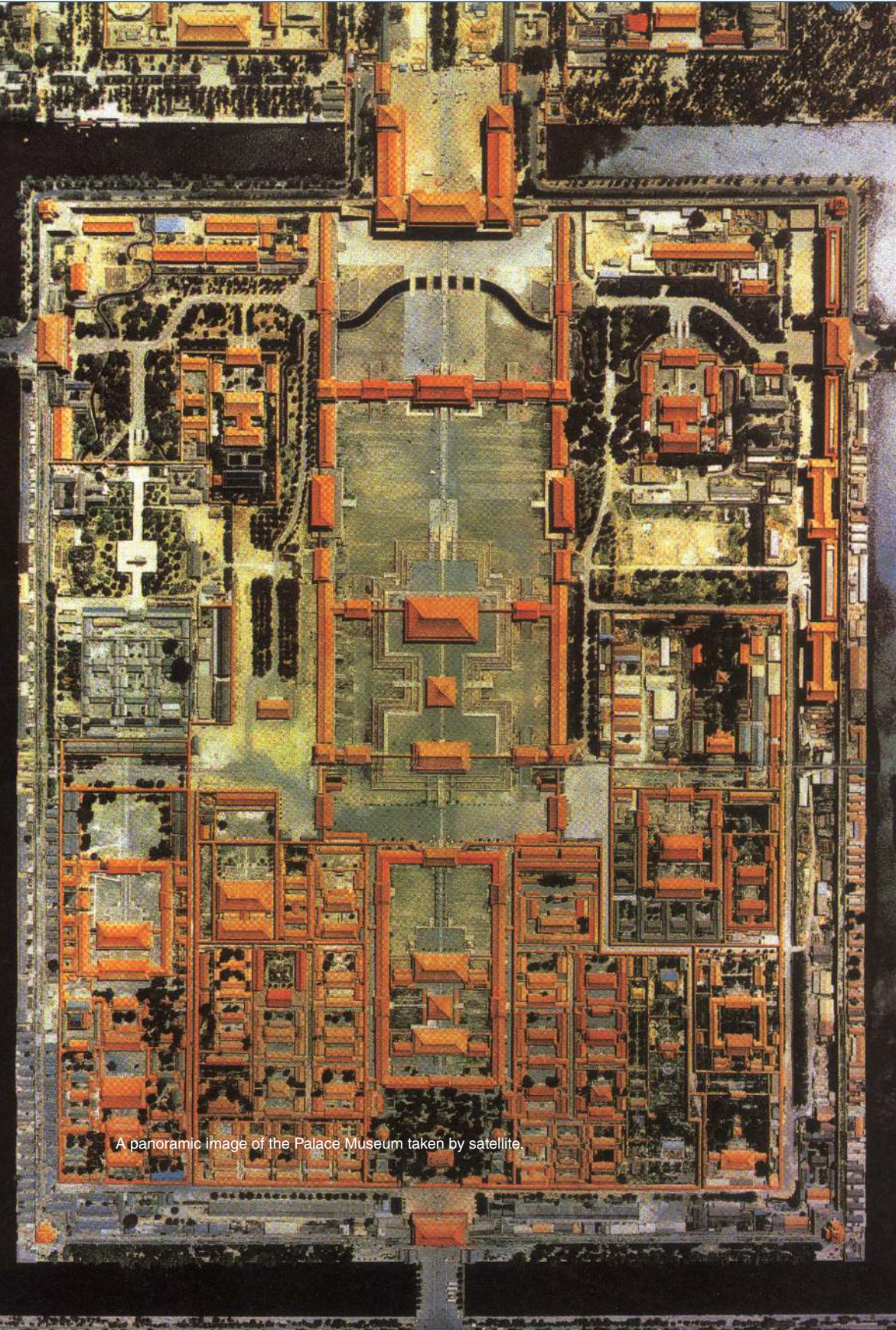


The recessed ceiling of Taihe Hall in the Forbidden City.

Entering the Forbidden City from Tian'an Men Gate, we first move straight through the Duan Gate then arrive at Wu Men, or the great Wu Gate. The popular name for Wu Men is "The Five Phoenix Tower," and it marks the front entrance to the Forbidden City. As we move through Wu Men, spread out before us is



Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-18690-2 — China's Museums
Xianyao Li, Zhewen Luo
Excerpt
[More Information](#)



A panoramic image of the Palace Museum taken by satellite.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-18690-2 — China's Museums
 Xianyao Li, Zhewen Luo
 Excerpt
[More Information](#)

CHINESE TREASURES

a broad courtyard with the twisting course of the Jinshui Creek (Gold Water Creek) passing from west to east like a jade belt. Five marble bridges have been constructed over this waterway. Passing through the Taihe Gate to the north of the bridges we reach the core of the Forbidden City, the three famous great halls called Taihe Hall, Zhonghe Hall, and Baohe Hall.

Taihe Hall is 26.92 meters high, 35.05 if the platform is included, and occupies a space of around 2,377 square meters. It is the largest hall in the Palace. A red-lacquered dais around two meters high sits in its center, upon which is a golden lacquered and carved dragon throne. Behind the throne is a screen carved with dragons. On either side of the dais are six great golden pillars with golden dragons coiling around them. In the recessed ceiling well above the throne is a large coiled golden dragon, with a silvery pearl suspended from its mouth. Taihe Hall

was the location of the emperors' most important ceremonies, such as inaugurations, birthdays, the New Year, and the arrival of winter.

Behind Taihe Hall lies Zhonghe Hall. This is a square hall with four ridge poles along the roofline that join at the top with a large, round, gilded object called a *baoding*. The building's profile is extremely beautiful. When the emperor was about to officiate at important ceremonies, he would first rest in this building and receive the visits of his various ministers.

Behind Zhonghe Hall is Baohe Hall. Throughout the Qing dynasty, every New Year's Eve, the emperor would hold a great banquet in this hall. This was



The marble royal ramp of Baohe Hall in the Forbidden City.



CHINA'S MUSEUMS



The bridal chamber for emperors and empresses of the Qing dynasty.

also where the highest exam of the *Ke-ju* examination system was held.

Emerging from Baohe Hall and following the stone steps downwards one arrives at an open rectangular courtyard. This space divides the Forbidden City into front and rear sections. To the south of the square are the three main Halls and, to the east and west of them are Wenhua Hall and Wuying Hall. These are commonly called the “Outer Court,” where the emperor conducted affairs of state. To the north of the square, inside the Qianqing Gate, was the Inner Sanctum. During the Qing dynasty, this was where the emperor and his empresses and concubines lived. The main buildings include Qianqing Palace, Jiaotai Hall, Kunming Palace, and six palaces to east and west.

Qianqing Palace was at one time where the emperor slept. Throughout the Qing dynasty, however, the emperors used this as a place for daily administrative affairs. Later emperors also met foreign emissaries here. Behind Qianqing Palace is Jiaotai



CHINESE TREASURES

Hall, which is where memorials to the empress were conducted and where she received congratulations on her birthday. It also is where the Qing dynasty's twenty-five "treasures" were kept, the twenty-five seals with which the emperor exercised his rule. Behind Jiaotai Hall is Kunming Palace, which originally held the empress's bedchambers. Later in the Qing dynasty it was made into a place where offerings to gods were made, and also where the emperor was married.

Qianqing Palace, Jiaotai Hall, and Kunming Palace together constituted the Rear Three Halls, their placement being basically the same as the Front Three Halls, but with decoration and coloring that were markedly different. The Front Three Halls used dragons as a primary motif. The Rear Three Palaces saw phoenixes gradually increase in number until there were numerous flying phoenixes, dancing phoenixes, phoenixes with peonies, and other such decorative elements.

The East and West Palaces were the houses of royal concubines. Because of their courtyard-like layout they were also known as

The Taihe Hall in the Forbidden City.



CHINA'S MUSEUMS



The dragon throne in Taihe Hall in the Forbidden City.

the “Six Courtyards.” Today the Six Palaces of the East have been made into exhibition halls in order to display the rare paintings, ceramics, bronzes, and various crafts that were collected and kept in the Palace. The Six Palaces of the West are basically kept as they used to be, unchanged, so that people can see how royalty lived.

The most notable building is Yangxin Hall: the “Cultivating the Mind Hall.” Qing dynasty emperors lived here from the time of Emperor Yongzheng onwards: a span of some two hundred years. Yangxin Hall therefore became the center of daily activities, with emperors often receiving ministers here and issuing decrees and orders. Two thrones were placed in the eastern room of the Yangxin Hall, to front and back; between them was suspended a golden-colored screen. This was where the Empress Dowager Cixi of the clan of Yehenala ruled from “behind the curtains,” breaking the Qing dynasty tradition preventing women engaging in politics (she lived from 1835 to 1908, and ruled in two periods in 1861 and 1873).



From Yangxin Hall moving northwards, one courtyard succeeds another in quiet elegance and serenity. Among these are the Changchun Palace and the Chuxiu Palace, the latter being where Cixi once lived.

Emerging from the Chuxiu Palace, not far to the east is the Yuhuayuan, or Imperial Garden. The Yuhuayuan is small and intimate; its architecture and atmosphere are completely different from the front section of the Palace. The pavilions and small buildings are set in the midst of pools and pine trees, artificial mountains appear to be made of strangely-shaped stones, and there are potted garden landscapes, wisteria, and bamboo. In the northeast area of the Palace is also the Ningshou Palace Garden, where the Emperor Qianlong (Qing dynasty Gaozong Aisin-Gioro Hongli, who reigned from 1735 to 1796) collected his thoughts after returning to power.

Leaving the Yuhuayuan Garden and following the passageway, one arrives at the northern gate of the Forbidden City called the Shenwu Men. Opposite this gate is Jingshan Hill. This small hill



The Thousand Autumn Pavilion in the Imperial Garden of the Forbidden City.



CHINA'S MUSEUMS

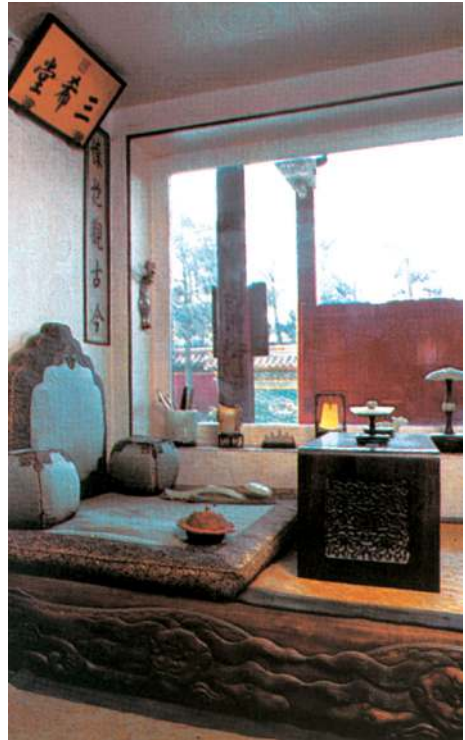
was built from earth produced by the digging of the moat in the Ming-dynasty construction of the Forbidden City. Standing on the top of the hill and looking out over the Palace one sees wave after wave of buildings, crest after crest of rooflines and walls.

II

The Forbidden City is itself also a great treasury of art. Great collections of paintings, calligraphy, sculpture, inscriptions, bronzes, ceramics, textiles and embroideries, jewels, clocks, and articles made of gold and silver are kept here. The collection contains around 1.5 million items. The Palace Museum also preserves approximately nine million historical documents and materials from the Ming and Qing dynasties. These represent an important resource for the study of the past five hundred years of China's history. Many of the more important documents can be seen in the special exhibition hall of the Palace.

Hall of Calligraphy and Painting

This is located in Wuying Hall. An exhibition called "Palace Museum Paintings Through the Ages" is usually open every year from April to November, and exhibits famous paintings from the Jin (265–420) to Qing dynasties. Some of the more famous works in the collection are by Lu Ji (261–303, a Jin-dynasty scholar), Yan Liben (601–673, a Tang-dynasty Painter), Gu Hongzhong (a Southern Song painter), Zhang Zeduan (a Song-dynasty painter), and Yan Zhenqing (709–785,



The Sanxi Hall (Three Treasures Hall) in the Palace Museum, which exhibits ancient calligraphic treasures.

