

Anniversary

The Forbidden City

By Richard Mawrey

October marks the sixcentenary of the world's most visited tourist site.

To Westerners there are few more names evocative of the mystery of the East than the Forbidden City. It conjures up an image of a majestic and inscrutable Emperor wearing sumptuous robes of silk and damask, surrounded by eunuchs and concubines, administering a vast empire through obsequious mandarins while poets, painters and calligraphists seek to whet his jaded cultural palate. Yet the Forbidden City was as much a purpose-built seat of government as later Western palaces such as Versailles.

Indeed, like Versailles, the Forbidden City was built by a ruler who wished to make a fresh start, away from the country's traditional capital. Zhu Di, known as the Yongle Emperor (1360-1424), was the fourth son of Zhu Yuanzhang, the Hongwu Emperor who founded the Ming Dynasty in 1368. Having fought a particularly nasty civil war against his nephew who had seized the throne, by 1402 Zhu Di had established himself as sole ruler of the Empire.

He decided to move the capital from Nanking to Beijing, which had been his power base, and took the decision to



build the vast walled palace complex which became the Forbidden City. Here, however, Zhu Di departs from Louis XIV; after more than 40 years of construction, Versailles remained unfinished at the French king's death, while the Forbidden City was built in no more than 14, a speed which, in 15th-century terms, rivals the erection of a coronavirus hospital today. The palace was finished in 1420 and (virus permitting) the Chinese will celebrate its sixcentenary this year.

As befits the palace of the Son of Heaven ruling the Celestial Empire, the Forbidden City was conceived on a heroic scale. Nearly a kilometre (over 1,000 yards) in length on its north/south axis and 750 metres (820 yards) wide, the palace is a rectangle surrounded by walls 8m (26ft) high and a moat 6m (20ft) deep and 50m (170ft) wide. Called 'Forbidden' because no person could enter without the Emperor's permission, it was clearly somewhere it would be difficult to wander into inadvertently. Within the walls are just under a thousand separate buildings, ranging from the enormous Hall of Supreme Harmony to small garden pavilions.

Yet, if Zhu Di believed his palace impregnable, later history would show otherwise. In a series of vicious wars in

Above: The Yongle Emperor.

Left: Sir Reginald Johnson and his pupil, Emperor Puyi.



Above: The Imperial Garden.

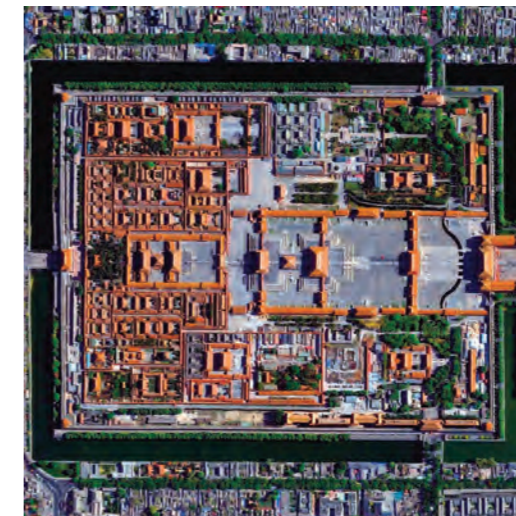
Below: The Forbidden City from the air.

1644, the Forbidden City was seized first by a rebel warlord and then by the Manchu armies of Wu Sangui, and in the course of this invasion parts of the palace were burnt down. The Ming dynasty was replaced by the Qing (Manchu) dynasty and remained the seat of the Emperor until the Empire was abolished in 1912.

This did not prevent it from being occupied and ransacked by Anglo-French troops in the Second Opium War of 1860 or by the combined forces of most of the world's other great powers when they arrived to put down the Boxer Rising in 1900. The last Qing Emperor, Puyi, had only just celebrated his sixth birthday when he was forced to abdicate in February 1912, although he was allowed to remain living in the palace until 1924, latterly with his eccentric Scottish tutor, Reginald Johnson. In 1925 it became a national museum but suffered again in the Japanese invasion of 1933 and in the civil war that led to the victory of Mao Zhedong in 1949.

Now happily on an even keel, the Forbidden City became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 and is the most visited tourist site in the world (just pipping Versailles to the post).

Gardens were an important part of the original conception of the palace and the harmonious placement of buildings, garden structures, water and plants is an essential part of the Chinese philosophy of place-making. Nevertheless, the gardens of the Forbidden City seem to have been



considered as an adjunct to the buildings, rather than a source of wonder in their own right, both in the times of the Emperors and to today's tourists. There is no feeling that the gardens exist to display the ruler's power to the awed masses in the way familiar to the palaces of European and Mughal monarchs.

The three main gardens are the Imperial Garden, the Garden of the Palace of Compassion and Tranquillity and the Garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity. The most important of these is the Imperial Garden, which was one of the first areas of the Forbidden City to be laid out by the Yongle Emperor and was intended as the private retreat of the Imperial family. Situated at the north end of the central axis, this garden has retained most of its original features despite the vicissitudes to which the palace had been subjected. It is not enormous. At 140m x 80m (2¾ acres) it is actually smaller than the Privy Garden at Hampton Court Palace but, unlike the Privy Garden, it is full of buildings and heavy landscaping.

The gardens were not simply for recreation and repose.

The structures within them frequently served a religious purpose and were the setting for prescribed rituals, often connected with the passing of the seasons. The main building in the Imperial Garden is the Hall of Imperial Tranquillity (indeed Tranquillity is a theme of all three gardens). Every New Year's Day the Emperor sacrificed to a Daoist water god to protect the palace from fire.

Facing each other and flanked by pools are two 16th-century buildings: the Pavilion of one

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Thousand Autumns and the Pavilion of Ten Thousand Springs, with circular roofs (to symbolise heaven) atop square buildings (the earth), the whole connoting the harmony of the Universe.

Dominating the garden, however, is some seriously heavy landscaping. The Mountain of Accumulated Excellence is an artificial rock hill some 10m (33ft) high, crowned by the Pavilion of Imperial Prospect. Here the Imperial Family would come for festivals such as the Double Ninth on the ninth day of the ninth month, when the ritual was to climb hills. The prospect element was that the pavilion not only gave a panoramic view over the Forbidden City, but it was high enough to see over the curtain wall.

Peter Valder in *Gardens in China* (2002) comments that for the women of the Imperial household this was the only view they could ever have of the outside world. In October 1924 Puyi and Johnson stood there watching the tumults in Beijing, which would end in Puyi being expelled from the Forbidden City. It is an irony of history that Puyi who, as a spoilt child, had ridden a bicycle through the flower beds of the palace should, in destitute old age, be reduced to working as a gardener under Mao's communist regime.

Women, though, were not entirely forgotten in the Forbidden City. Through the royal gardens runs a pathway composed of different coloured stones lined by images of women punishing husbands for their misdeeds.

In the garden itself, trees and shrubs, such as junipers, catalpas and herbaceous peonies (*Paeonia lactiflora*) are interspersed with pieces of petrified wood and oddly shaped rocks and coral. To Western eyes, the Imperial Garden looks rather cluttered.

Women are also important in the western area of the Forbidden City known as 'the World of Women' containing the Palace of Compassion and Tranquillity, which was built in 1536 to house the widows of Emperors. The dowagers of both the Ming and Qing dynasties resided here until the Revolution, after which it became a storehouse for several decades.

The garden of this palace is perhaps the most peaceful of the three, designed for the repose of the Empresses. Its main building is the Hall of Inherence, dedicated to the Buddha, whose 'Inherence' or permanent existence it celebrated. It was decorated with yellow glazed tiles and overlooked an oblong pool crossed by a white marble bridge. The pool itself is flanked by flower borders with more peonies.



By contrast to the other two, the third, the Garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity, is a relative newcomer. The Qianlong Emperor ruled from 1735 to 1796 and his reign is considered as the apogee of Chinese prosperity and splendour. In 1796 he retired in favour of his son solely to honour his grandfather, the Kangxi Emperor, by not reigning longer than he did, but he remained the *de facto* ruler till his death three years later at the age of 87. The Palace of Tranquil Longevity had been designed to be the Qianlong Emperor's retirement home, but he never actually got round to spending a night in it.

Started in 1771, the palace consists of no fewer than 27 separate pavilions with four courtyards containing rockeries, grottoes and ancient trees. The Emperor was fond of the arts of southern China, which tended to the gaudy and elaborate, and his magnificent pavilions were considered by

Above: The Mountain of Accumulated Excellence.
Below: Peonies in the Imperial Garden.



Above: The Garden of the Palace of Tranquil Longevity.
Right: The Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service with a view of the interior after restoration.

some to be over the top even at the time (though, naturally, they were too tactful to say so).

The whole ensemble is smaller than the Imperial Garden, being less than 8,000 square metres (2 acres), but the Emperor fitted a lot into it. It had to have its own artificial hill (though not on the scale of the Mountain of Accumulated Excellence), which has a cave in its base and the Terrace for Receiving Dew on the top. The principal buildings are the Hall of Ancient Flowers and the Pavilion of the Ceremony of Purification, which has a stream cut into its floor where cups can be floated as part of the ceremony.

The Emperor's intended, but never achieved, retirement was to be spent in the Juanqinzai, the largest of the many pavilions within the Palace of Tranquil Longevity. The names of the pavilions reflected the pursuits of a sage ruler enjoying a tranquil old age: Juanqinzai translated as 'the Studio of Exhaustion from Diligent Service'; others were the Building of Wish and Reality, the Hall of Fulfilment of Original Wishes (we'd all like one of those), the Pavilion of Practising Inner Restraint (useful in times of lockdown), the Pavilion of Picking Fragrances and the Pavilion of Appreciating Lush Scenery.

Nobody likes the thought that his successors will mess about with his creation and the Qianlong Emperor passed an Imperial Decree that nothing was to be altered. The remaining emperors of the Qing dynasty respected his order and, when the Forbidden City became a museum, the Palace of Tranquil Longevity was left to moulder for the rest of the 20th century, shut to the public. In 2001, however, the Museum authorities entered into a partnership with the World Monuments Fund to bring this part of the Forbidden City back to its original splendour.

The retirement lodge was the first to be tackled (at a cost of US\$3m). The silk, jade and marquetry were lovingly refurbished and recreated, and the 250 square metres (300 square yards) of trompe l'oeil paintings in the theatre fully

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restored. These were by Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit who had been working as court painter to the emperors since 1715.

Phase Two (costing a further US\$20m) involved the restoration of three further structures: the Belvedere of Viewing Achievements, the Lodge of Bamboo Fragrance and the Bower of Purest Jade. The buildings were in greater need than the plantings in the courtyards, which required basic garden maintenance rather than dramatic new designs. The buildings have presented a challenge, because the originals involved craft skills, such as bamboo thread marquetry, stone inlay and double-sided silk embroidery, which had largely died out and had to be recreated. There will also be an interpretation centre to encourage the public to appreciate not only the palace and its garden, but also the culture and philosophy underlying its creation.

A grand opening was planned for October 2020, but it is not clear at present when or in what form it will go ahead. What is sure is that, virus or no virus, the Chinese Government will not let the sixcentenary of the Forbidden City pass by unmarked. ✿