

Imperial Palaces of the Ming and Qing Dynasties – Forbidden City

Beijing, China

Photographs by Alan Ward 2003

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

The Forbidden City in central Beijing includes the imperial palaces of the Ming and Qing Dynasties built between 1406 and 1420, which endured as the center of power in China for over five centuries. The plan of the Forbidden City follows principles and guidelines delineated in the *Book of Diverse Crafts* from the fifth century BC, which stipulated that a capital should be a square-shaped, walled city oriented to the cardinal points, with the main gate on the south and imperial residence at the center.

After entering through the Meridian Gate (1,2), large ceremonial outer courts form the initial sequence of spaces symmetrically organized along the south to north axis (3-11). The visitor passes through relatively narrow openings along the axis (2) that then open to spacious courts framed by low, horizontal buildings washed with red clay. The buildings are on platforms with peristyles along most of the edges. While the architectural frame around these courts are predominantly one-story structures, individual pavilions along the central axis are multiple levels with distinctive Chinese tiled sloping roofs to express their significance in the hierarchy of buildings (3-5). The outer court, south of the Gate of Supreme Harmony, has a curving watercourse known as the Inner Golden Water River defined by walls with marble balustrades as an architectural abstraction of a stream (4,5). Following this initial series of large ceremonial courts, the monumental scale transitions into the inner fabric of the Forbidden City with a complex network of spaces with smaller scale private courtyards, gardens and passages (13-21).

I had the opportunity to photograph the walled compound on a sunny March morning while working on the master plan for the 2008 Olympics with Sasaki. I elected to use only a 2 ¼" X 6 ½" panoramic camera. The camera uses 2 ¼" roll film that spans three frames for a single panoramic image. As a result, the camera requires frequent reloading, as only four (120 film) or eight images (240 film) are possible on each roll. This leads the photographer to be far more selective in setting up views. It requires more critical seeing and framing when you know you are coming away with so few images.

The panoramic format with its broad, horizontal view emphasizes a breadth of space that corresponds to the long and low buildings defining the large outer courts. When depicting the small private courtyards and passages between the inner courts, the horizontal image amplifies the presence of the walls defining these narrow corridors (15-18). With only one morning of photography, the few views shown here are merely emblematic of this vast complex of buildings with approximately 9,000 rooms over 72 hectares. The intensity of contemporary Beijing is visible in the first photograph dominated by people at the main entry to the Forbidden City from Tiananmen Square (1). However, once inside the walls and after the crowds disperse, there is a quiet stillness in the multiple courtyards and gardens of this preserved urban landscape, that was built according to Confucian principles that aimed to achieve a balance between heaven, nature and humankind.

List of Photographs

1. Meridian Gate
2. Passage through Meridian Gate
3. Outer court and the Gate of Supreme Harmony
4. Gate of Supreme Harmony and Inner Golden Water River
5. Inner Golden Water River
6. Peristyle of the Gate of Supreme Harmony in the outer court
7. View from peristyle to The Hall of Supreme Harmony
8. Hall of Supreme Harmony and Hall of Preserved Harmony
9. Terraces at the Hall of Supreme Harmony
10. The Hall of Middle Harmony
11. Terraces of the Hall of Middle Harmony
12. Marble balustrade and sloping hip roof with tiles
13. Inner Court
14. Gate to a passage
15. Symmetrical passage with lanterns
16. Small inner courtyard
17. High-walled passage
18. Small inner courts
19. Imperial Garden
20. Path in the Imperial Garden
21. Stones composed in front of washed red clay walls



















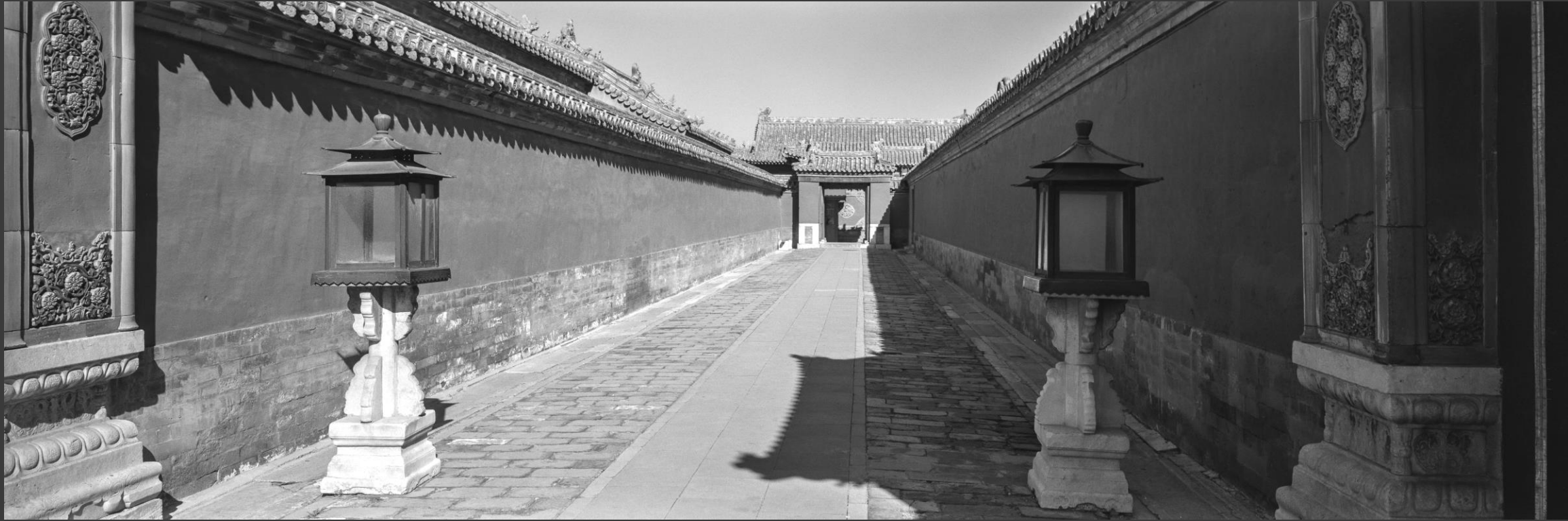
























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