

# Symbolism in the Forbidden City

## *The Magnificent Design, Distinct Colors, and Lucky Numbers of China's Imperial Palace*

By Jie Gao

The Forbidden City, the sprawling and imposing seat of Chinese Imperial power for almost 500 years, stands out in stark contrast against the ultramodern heart of contemporary Beijing. This United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)-designated World Heritage site is the largest intact wooden palace structure found anywhere on earth and has served as an open museum of China's history for almost a century. Along with the Great Wall, it is undeniably one of China's most breathtaking tourist destinations and a must-see for any visitor to the Chinese capital. Here we explore the Forbidden City's history and the thought process behind its design, outlining the cultural significance of certain color and numerical elements found within the complex.



The Forbidden City of Beijing, China. Source: © Songquan Deng/Shutterstock photo.

## HISTORY



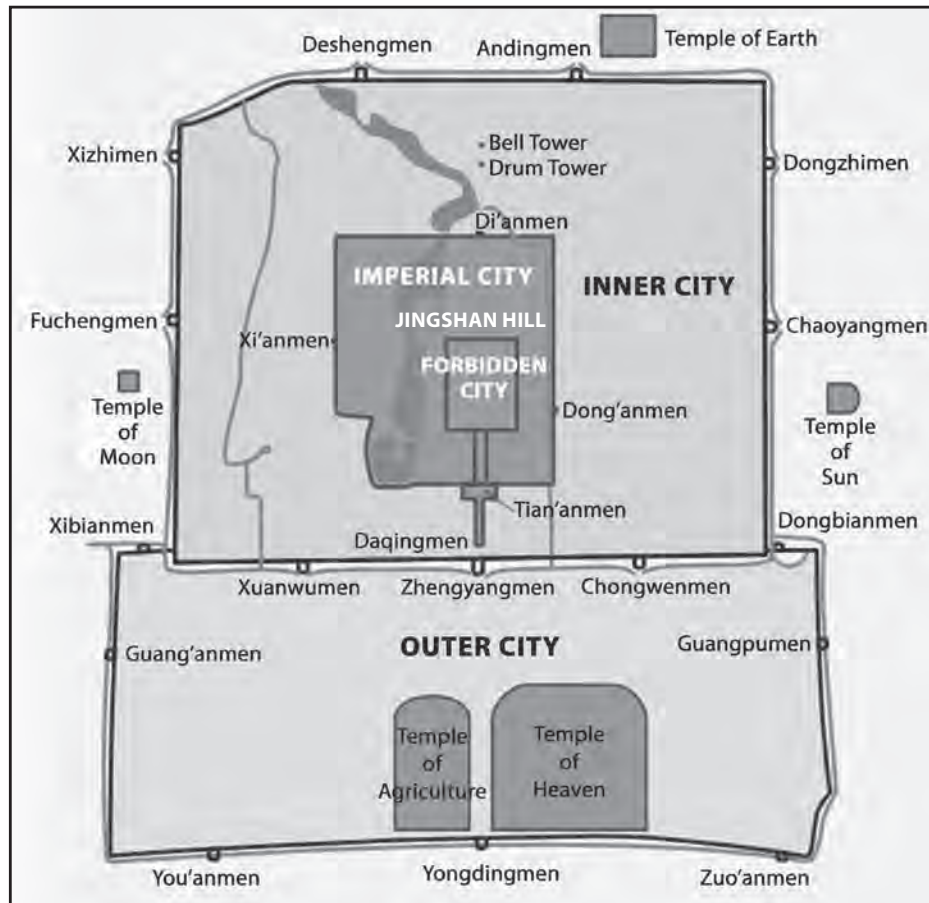
The Yongle Emperor (1360–1424), Zhu Di, was the third emperor of the Ming Dynasty in China, reigning from 1402 to 1424. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/jpby6ef>.

Beijing had been the capital for various groups that held power in north China for centuries before the Forbidden City was constructed, but it did not become a truly national capital until the Mongols swept through China in the thirteenth century. The Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) chose Beijing, which translates as “Northern Capital,” as China’s seat of power in large part due to its proximity to the Mongol homelands to the north. The city has been China’s capital ever since—though briefly supplanted by the southern city of Nanjing during the early Ming years and in China’s brief Republican era of the first half of the twentieth century. When the Ming Dynasty of ethnic Han Chinese swept the Mongols from power in 1368, Dadu, Mongolian for “Great Capital,” was renamed Beiping, Chinese for “Northern Peace,” when the new regime moved to its new capital in Nanjing. When Zhu Di, the Yongle Emperor, emerged from a power struggle with his brothers as China’s new ruler in 1402, he returned the capital to Beijing, where he had been stationed as a Ming prince.<sup>1</sup> The reign of this clever and ruthless new emperor was characterized by military conquest, a purge of foreign cultural influences, sweeping reforms for education and the economy, and a remarkable building spree. On the latter front, the Yongle Emperor ordered the construction of the Porcelain Tower of Nanjing, a grand pagoda considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World before its destruction in 1856; the renovation of the 1,100-mile Grand Canal, the world’s longest, between Beijing and Hangzhou; and, of course, his new palace complex in Beijing.

English speakers use the title “Forbidden City,” a translation of the Chinese *Zijin Cheng*. *Zi* is a contraction of *ziwei*, or Pole Star, which was the residence of the supreme deity. The Emperor of China was the “son of Heaven,” the earthly equivalent of the supreme deity on the Pole Star. *Jin* means “forbidden,” and the Forbidden City was indeed inaccessible to ordinary people. Only the highest officials or generals were allowed within its walls on Imperial business. *Cheng* means “wall” or “walled enclosure.”<sup>2</sup> The name Forbidden City did not appear in China until 1576. Nevertheless, work on the Yongle Emperor’s new palace began in 1406. The scope of the project was remarkable, but even more so was the time frame within which it was completed. The complex itself covered seventy-two hectares (approximately 178 acres) separated from the rest of the capital by a ten-meter-high (approximately thirty-three feet) wall and a fifty-two-meter-wide (approximately 171 feet) moat. It took roughly a decade simply to assemble the required building materials in the capital. Timber logs were dispatched by river and took up to four years to arrive in Beijing, while giant slabs of marble from outlying quarries could only be transported by ice roads in the dead of winter. This was an enormous undertaking in and of itself, but the actual construction phase that lasted from 1417 to 1420 required one million forced laborers and 100,000 craftsmen. Their efforts resulted in the finest display of architecture produced in premodern China.<sup>3</sup>

In 1420, the Yongle Emperor became the first of twenty-four consecutive rulers to take up residence in the Forbidden City, though he died only four years later. Over time, numerous buildings in the compound were destroyed, rebuilt, and renamed, but his palace served as home for thirteen more Ming emperors and, following the Manchu conquest of China in 1644, another ten Qing Dynasty emperors. The last royal occupant of the Forbidden City was the boy Emperor Puyi (1906–1967), the final Qing Dynasty ruler, who was allowed to remain in the old Imperial apartments at the back of the palace complex until 1924, long after he had been stripped of his power following China’s 1911 Republican Revolution.<sup>4</sup> This was a period of great upheaval as China struggled to find its way in the modern world, a process that resulted in the Forbidden City’s transition from a royal palace into a majestic public museum.

**DESIGN** The Forbidden City did not depart from traditional forms of Chinese Imperial architecture, but rather applied them on a scale that had never before been seen. As such, it conformed to concepts included in the second-century BCE work *The Rites of Zhou* (*Zhou Li*). This classic text outlines many longstanding tenets of Confucian thought that were aimed at building and maintaining an orderly society.<sup>5</sup> Confucian principles dictated that a properly designed palace compound would use architecture to illustrate the perfect harmony between man and earth, foster stability, and promote economic prosperity. A volume specific to urban planning and architecture, *The Book of Diverse Crafts* (*Kao Gong Ji*), had emerged earlier in the fifth century BCE,

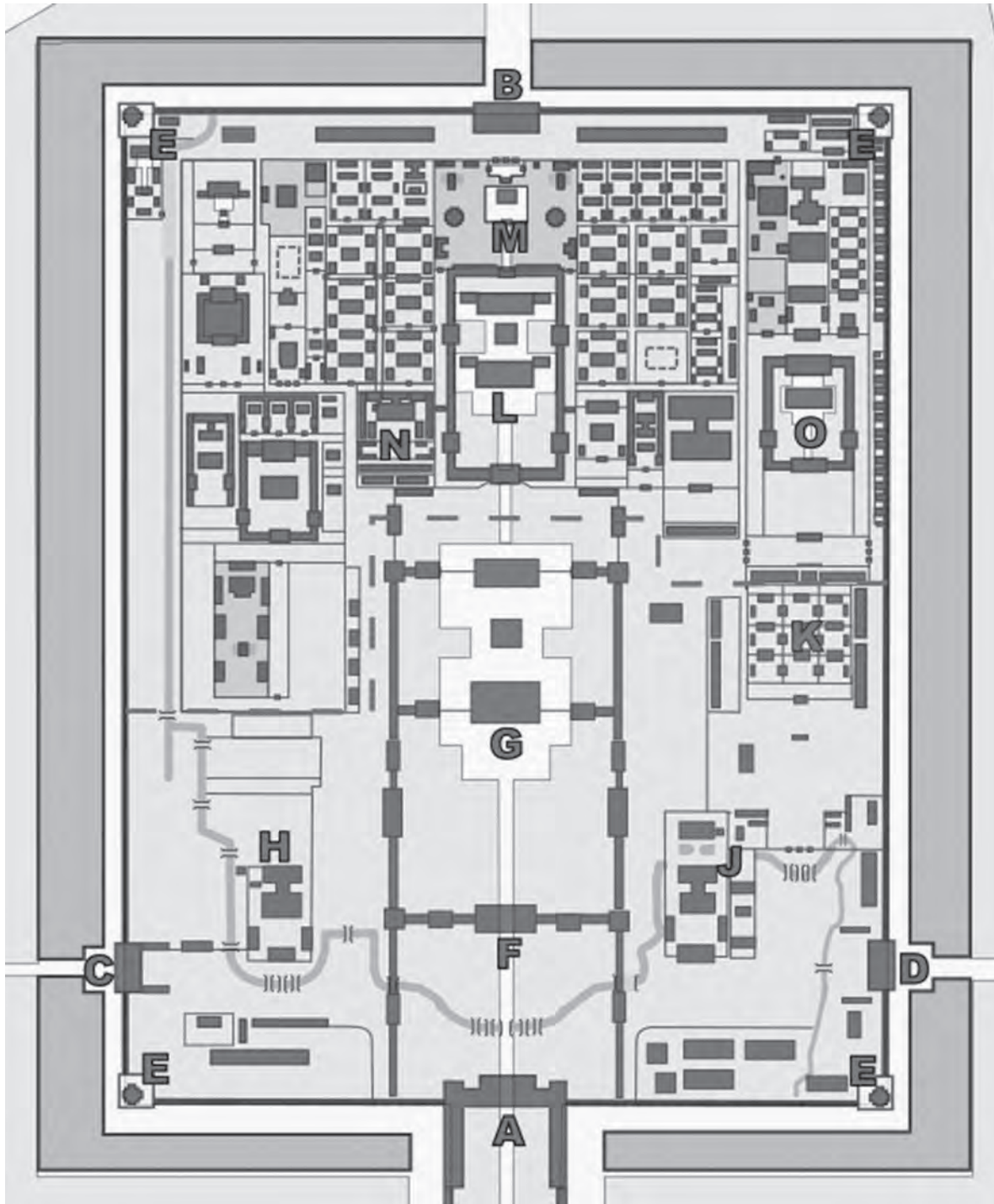


Location of the Forbidden City in the historic center of Beijing. Source: Wikipedia with an addition by Willa Davis at <http://tinyurl.com/z4fjppq>.

setting out numerous guidelines that were still applied by Ming Era builders. For example, it stipulated that the capital should be a square oriented to the four cardinal directions, with the main gate facing south and the primary road to the palace running on a north-south axis. The main residence for the emperor and his administrative facilities would be located in the center of the enclosure. These general principles were all incorporated into the Forbidden City.

The Yongle Emperor's builders erected the Forbidden City in the heart of Beijing due to their traditional belief that the seat of power must be situated in a central location. As per the guidelines set out in the *The Book of Diverse Crafts*, the palace compound was built along a 7,500-meter-long (approximately 24,606 feet) north-south axis beginning at the Gate of Perpetual Peace, Yongdingmen, and running to the Bell Tower. The original compound, parts of which have been modified or repurposed over time, had three sections: the first and southernmost has become present-day Tiananmen Square, the middle section consisted of the Forbidden City structures visible today, and the last and northernmost was Jingshan Hill. The latter was opened to the public in the 1920s as Jingshan Park, but during the Ming-Qing Era it was dotted with pavilions that made it a place of quiet and solitude. Viewed from the south, Jingshan Hill also served as a scenic backdrop to the Inner City and offered protection from wind and barbarian invaders.<sup>6</sup>

The starting point on the Forbidden City's axial road is Tiananmen, the Gate of Heavenly Peace, which serves as the southern entrance into the compound from Beijing proper. The road then runs through a large courtyard to Meridian Gate, actually consisting of five small gates, which leads into the Inner City.<sup>7</sup> The front portion of the compound is home to the "Three Great Halls," the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the Hall of Middle Harmony, and the Hall of Preserving Harmony, which were used for major ceremonies, banquets, examinations for aspiring bureaucrats, and other functions. To the east and west, respectively, are the Temple of Heaven, where the emperor would pray, and the Temple of Agriculture, where he made sacrifices that brought good harvests. Set off the road in this section are rows of smaller, one-story buildings used by the emperor's court ministers. Farther off the axis to the east is the Hall of Literary Brilliance, and to the west is the Hall of Military



**Layout of the Forbidden City**  
 A. Meridian Gate  
 B. Gate of Divine Might  
 C. West Glorious Gate  
 D. East Glorious Gate  
 E. Corner towers  
 F. Gate of Supreme Harmony  
 G. Three Great Halls: The Hall of Supreme Harmony (bottom), The Hall of Middle Harmony (middle), and The Hall of Preserving Harmony (top)  
 H. Hall of Military Eminence  
 J. Hall of Literary Brilliance  
 K. Southern Three Places  
 L. Two Palaces: The Palace of Earthly Tranquility (top building), Palace of Heavenly Purity (bottom building)  
 M. Imperial Garden  
 N. Hall of Mental Cultivation  
 O. Palace of Tranquil Longevity

Source:  
 Wikipedia at <http://tinyurl.com/j3bpqbs>.

Eminence. In the center of the Forbidden City one finds the Palace of Heavenly Purity, the emperor and empress's quarters—at least until Qing Emperor Yongzheng (1678–1735) relocated to the Hall of Mental Cultivation to avoid sleeping in the room where his father died—and the Palace of Earthly Tranquility, which hosted weddings.<sup>8</sup> The rear section was the most private and contained halls for ancestors and mourning, along with the Imperial Garden. Elsewhere, buildings would be grouped together in a symmetrical layout off the main axis according to function, with each cluster including a smaller separate courtyard.

The Forbidden City was designed to create a somber, visually striking impression on the select few who had authority or were allowed to enter the compound. For example, there are no trees outside the Imperial Garden, which made for long walks across wide-open spaces as one approaches a gate. This was intended to foster deep meditation for anyone about to begin an audience with a court minister. The high-walled alleys between sections can even create an intimidating sense of being a mouse in a maze. Animal decorations—cultural symbols that add to the compound's grandeur—are featured throughout

the hall. Dragons, representatives of the emperor's omnipotence, are common, while animals, birds, and flowers (the latter two often being shown together in cases of a shared symbolic meaning) are present on halls used by the empress and the emperor's concubines. For example, the beautiful white blossoms of the lotus, a flower with Buddhist associations that grew in fetid marshlands, represent the triumph of good over evil, as well as modesty, unity, and marital harmony. It is typically paired with a duck, another symbol of happiness, or a heron, which represents a desire for future success and long life. Gates are guarded by imposing bronze lions, which are not native to China, arriving as gifts from vassal states that symbolize dominance or, in pairs, happiness and prosperity.<sup>9</sup>

Even the design of the Forbidden City's huge roofs held deep cultural significance. The presence of a hip roof (one that slopes down on all sides) that curved up to symbolize the highest point in the social hierarchy signaled a building where the emperor lived or did important business. The Hall of Supreme Harmony, for example, features a double-eave hip roof to make clear that it was the site of the most significant Imperial ceremonies. A hipped gable roof (featuring a large downward slope on two opposite sides, along with a smaller, partial slope on the other two sides) was used for buildings at the next level of importance, such as the Hall of Preserving Harmony. Lesser buildings for routine daily functions or entertainment used other, less ostentatious styles, such as quadrangle pavilion, overhanging gable, or flush gable.<sup>10</sup>



The double-eave hip roof of the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/zkzws7x>.



Note the hip roof on the Hall of Middle Harmony (left) and the hipped gable roof on the Hall of Preserved Harmony (right). Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/z7z98m9>.



The Meridian Gate, front entrance to the Forbidden City, with two protruding wings. Source: © Testing/Shutterstock photo.



Gold-laid interior columns around the emperor's throne in the Hall of Preserving Harmony. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/gkqpxw4>.

**COLORS** The Forbidden City's designers opted for bold colors that served both aesthetic and cultural purposes. In ancient times, the Chinese developed the concept *Wu Xing*, which sought to explain certain events based on the interaction between different elements. It was applied to fields as diverse as health, science, architecture, and the martial arts. *Wu Xing* originally centered on five elements (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth), but was later broadened to include directions and colors (green/blue, yellow, red, white, and black), each of which carried great significance.<sup>11</sup> The vibrant colors of the Forbidden City are especially pronounced when set against the drab gray of surrounding buildings and the bright white marble used in the terraces, stairs, and balustrades, but there were also very deliberate considerations behind their selection.

The ancient Chinese viewed yellow as the color of earth, producer of all life, which they considered to be the single-most critical element. Thus, yellow was held in particular esteem and was reserved for the exclusive use of the emperor. Its prominence in the Forbidden City was meant to illustrate that the emperor, as the son of heaven, had a special connection with the earth that legitimized his rule. In fact, Ming law stipulated that yellow could only be used for Imperial palaces, tombs, and temples, and it became a custom for emperors to wear yellow robes with an embroidered dragon. Yellow glaze roof tiles, much favored by the Ming Dynasty, feature prominently on great halls and buildings throughout the Forbidden City, and serve as an indication that the emperor would have had business within the structures. Smaller buildings that served more utilitarian purposes were often marked with gray roof tiles.<sup>12</sup> Upon entering the Forbidden City through Meridian Gate, visitors will see six taller halls on white marble platforms with yellow-tiled roofs; in the back, there are several smaller buildings, also with yellow roofing, that served as living quarters for the emperor's servants and advisers. The walls of the Forbidden City's great halls were washed with yellow clay from Hebei Province to display the royal color prominently indoors.

There is one exception to the choice of yellow for Imperial roofing. The emperor's library, the Hall of Literary Profundity (the back portion of the Hall of Literary Brilliance), was given a black roof for a very practical reason: the ancient Chinese associated black with water, which the Forbidden City's designers felt would be very useful in saving the valuable books inside (it once held as many as 36,000) should a fire break out. Elsewhere, green, a symbol of wood and growth, is seen on the roof tiles of several buildings within the compound, such as princes' quarters or other lesser buildings.<sup>13</sup>

The auspicious color red, which the Chinese associate with power, happiness, wealth, and honor, is ubiquitous in the Forbidden City. High walls were washed with red clay from Shandong Province, which was also used to fix roofing tiles in place, and red can be seen prominently on gates, doors, window frames, exterior timbers, and interior columns. Such was the Ming's fondness for red that all reports to the emperor had to be written on red paper, while later Qing rulers insisted that any written orders from the emperor were to be recorded in red ink.<sup>14</sup> The intricately decorated interior timbers, pillars, and crossbeams

often set red against yellow or gold, with elaborate dragon motifs and commonly used Buddhist symbols. Gold leaf from Suzhou was often applied for finer decorations on pillars and gables.

**NUMBERS** The Chinese philosophical concept of *yin* and *yang*, the interconnection of opposites, guided the Forbidden City's designers, along with Wu Xing. Yang was seen to represent the front and odd numbers (among other things), which explains why the builders chose to erect an odd number, three, of great halls—the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the Hall of Military Eminence, and the Hall of Literary Brilliance—at the front of the compound. Yin, by contrast, signified the back and even numbers, so there was originally an even number of buildings—the Palace of Heavenly Purity and the Palace of Earthly Tranquility—in the rear.<sup>15</sup>

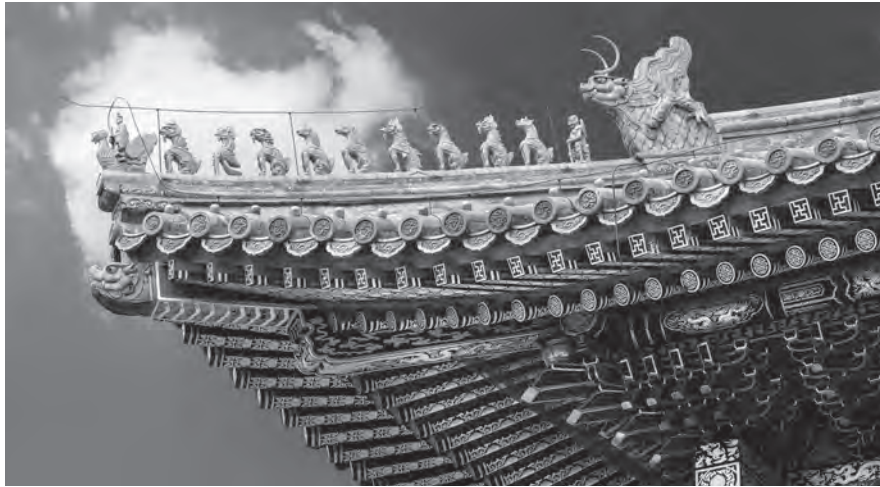
The Chinese place great emphasis on numerology and incorporated it into the Forbidden City's design. For instance, nine is the greatest single number, which dictated that it, along with the color yellow, be reserved for the emperor's exclusive use. Furthermore, the Chinese word for nine, *jiu*, is also a homonym with "long/lengthy/longevity," which meant that it was doubly auspicious.<sup>16</sup> It is often said that the Forbidden City has 9,999 rooms in total (the reality is closer to 9,000), leaving it just shy of 10,000, the number for infinity, the number of rooms one would find in the Forbidden City in heaven.

Nine appears repeatedly elsewhere. The original Ming buildings measured nine "bays" (a measurement for roof spans), wide, and the design called for nine gates with watchtowers (all but the Meridian Gate have come down to make way for later urban construction). The watchtowers each had nine roof beams, eighteen pillars, and seventy-two ridgepoles.<sup>17</sup> This use of nine and its multiples was a deliberate nod to the emperor's number and when added together would total ninety-nine. Visitors will also notice that the gates in the Forbidden City are decorated with studs that held deeper meaning beyond their decorative value. Any gate that would be used by the emperor would be painted bright red and inlaid with nine rows of nine golden studs. Any commoner who copied the emperor's stud design could face execution. Princely gates would have gold studs on red, but they were limited to forty-nine in seven rows of seven. Lesser officials would have green or black gates, depending on rank, and could have twenty-five bronze or iron studs in five rows of five.<sup>18</sup>

Another striking element of the Forbidden City is the rows of decorative roof ridge statuettes of mythical creatures used to indicate the importance of the person found within, nine representing that pinnacle. These always appeared in odd numbers—China had a strict patriarchal system, and yang represented both males and odd numbers—and appeared in a specific order. A building used by the emperor, for example, would have all nine statuettes, each of which embodied a particular virtue or protected the compound. The immortal riding a phoenix represented turning bad luck into good, the dragon was



Red palace door with a lucky number of nine rows of studs used by the emperor. Source: © mary416/Shutterstock photo.



A roof eave on the Hall of Supreme Harmony with an immortal riding a phoenix on the left with mythical creatures leading up to an Imperial dragon on the right. Source: © chuyuss/Shutterstock photo.

a symbol of Imperial authority, the phoenix signified virtue, the lion showed bravery and warded off evil spirits, the Pegasus demonstrated strength, the sea horse brought good fortune, the second lion controlled the rain and prevented disasters, the fish summoned the wind and storms, the goat-bull stood for bravery and power, and the bull was a second line of defense against evil omens. Lesser buildings would feature fewer statuettes, reducing them from back to front. The sole exception to the nine-statulette limit is the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the largest and holiest in the Forbidden City, which had a tenth, the *Hangshi*, a sword-wielding, monkey-faced immortal that warded off demons. The Palace of Heavenly Purity features nine statuettes, one fewer, that are also slightly smaller than those found on the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Other halls had fewer and smaller statuettes, according to their significance.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Mao Zedong, who governed as China's first Communist dictator from 1949 to 1976, mercifully chose to spare the Forbidden City a date with the wrecking ball after his forces entered Beijing (then Beiping) in January 1949. Many Communists associated the Forbidden City with a feudal system that had long left the nation's hundreds of millions of poor peasants to suffer in grinding poverty, but Mao ultimately decided against satisfying the rash impulses of so many of his fellow revolutionaries who wanted to destroy it. Instead of razing the Forbidden City, he chose it as the site for a public celebration on October 1, 1949, of the Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War.<sup>20</sup>

His watchful portrait now hangs over the Gate of Heavenly Peace just below the spot where he formally declared the establishment of the People's Republic of China. When overzealous youth in the Red Guard went on a rampage of destruction directed at vestiges of China's feudal past during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Premier Zhou Enlai wisely ordered the army to close the Forbidden City to the public to spare it from Mao's ill-directed wrath.<sup>21</sup> Many of Beijing's temples and historic buildings were tragically destroyed during this period.

Soon after Mao's death, China began to break free from what US President Richard Nixon once called a period of "angry isolation" in order to reengage with the world.<sup>22</sup> Four decades into its reform period, China is now wealthier and more powerful than it has been for centuries. China's

capital has seen a remarkable building boom over the past decade, to such an extent that Beijing is dotted with some of the most visually stunning skyscrapers ever built, and the ancient Forbidden City has now become the world's most visited tourist attraction. Were he able to see this, the Yongle Emperor would doubtlessly be immensely proud of the former and offended to his core by the latter. ■



The Hangshi guarding the Hall of Supreme Harmony. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/hthh5v7>.



Mao Zedong proclaiming the establishment of the PRC on the rostrum of Tiananmen, which is often referred to as the front entrance to the Imperial City, on October 1, 1949. Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/jk25445>.





A portrait of Mao Zedong at Tiananmen Gate outside the Forbidden City in Beijing. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at <http://tinyurl.com/hk4515j>.

## NOTES

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**JIE GAO** is an Assistant Professor of History at Murray State University in Kentucky. She obtained her PhD from The University of Western Ontario in Canada, and her MA and double BA from Beijing University in China. Gao has engaged in the study of modern Chinese history in China, Canada, and the United States. Her research interests include popular culture, intellectual history, sino-foreign relations, and women's studies. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and books. Currently, she is working on her manuscript, "Saving the Nation through Culture: The Folklore Movement in Republican China (1918–1949)," and a new project on Chinese cigarette cards.