

An abstract graphic featuring three blue circles of varying sizes. The top circle is the largest, the middle one is smaller, and the bottom one is the largest again. Three thin blue lines originate from the top left and fan out towards the right, passing behind the circles. The circles have a layered, 3D effect with concentric shades of blue.

Essay

Chinese Architecture

This Essay shortly describes the ancient Chinese architecture with the main point on the Hall of Supreme Harmony.

INTRODUCTION

The Chinese architecture is less studied than the architecture of almost any other great civilization on the world. Also in the Western countries a common comment about the Chinese architecture is that it looks all the same, with the standard picture of the Forbidden City on mind. This Essay will be about some points of the ancient Chinese architecture, which here can't be described in every detail, because the classical Chinese architecture has a long and creative history. Different types of architecture will be described shortly and the main point lies on the Hall of Supreme Harmony in the Forbidden City in Beijing and some of its architectural features.

MAINPART

General

The earliest buildings in China are dated 7000 years and since then the architecture went through some developments. The architecture was shaped by different factors. Of the 56 ethnic groups which exist in China, the Han are the most numerous. 94% of the people in China are considered as Han Chinese. All these groups live in different areas in this huge land and therefore they have different local building materials. Also the religions, like Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, had an influence on the temple and altar architecture. Beside these two factors, the outside of China had a big influence as well. China exchanged for example building techniques with other countries.

Types of Ancient Chinese Architecture

All over China different types of architecture can be found. The *Palace Architecture* represents the quintessence of the architectural techniques and the esthetical aspirations of the epoch. Forbidden City in Beijing and the imperial Palace Shenyang, both built during the Ming and Qing dynasty. The *Altar and Temple Architecture* was built to worship heaven and earth, sun and moon, gods and spirits, ancestors and celebrities. This is a principal part of the spiritual life of ancient Chinese people. The different buildings had different functions: the altars were built to worship earth and heaven, temples to offer sacrifices to deities. To commemorate ancestors halls and shrines were built. Buildings like that are for example the Tiantan in South Beijing or the Taimiao in Beijing lying to east and in front of the Forbidden City. Generations of Emperors paid special attention to the construction of their tombs and mausoleums, regarding them as palaces in which they would spend eternity. The most famous of the *Tomb Architecture* is the Terracotta Army guarding the Mausoleum of Emperor Qinshihuang in Xianyang, Shaanxi. As already written in the introduction, the religions had a big influence on the building of temples, altars and so on. Buddhism is the most widespread religion and therefore Buddhism temples and towers can be found all over China. On selected spaces it was built a miniature imitation of the nature, where body and mind could relax. Emperors had their own gardens where they beside relax also handled state affairs, amused themselves or hold religious ceremonies. The *Local Architecture* are structures built by the local artisans and villagers, using local materials. Because of China's vast territory, numerous ethnic groups and regional differences there is an abundance of different architectural styles.

Forbidden City

The Forbidden City in Numbers

The measurements of the Forbidden City from the north to south are 960 metres, from east to west 750 metres. All in all it has an extension 72 hectares. It is surrounded by a 52 metre wide moat. The Outer Wall is 10 metres high, 3,400 metres long, 8.6 metres wide at the bottom and 6.7 metres at the top. Inside the Forbidden City are five halls, seventeen palaces, 980 buildings in total and 8700 rooms.

There are four towers, one on every edge of the Forbidden City, each has nine roof beams, eighteen pillars and 72 ridgepoles.

The construction started in 1406, and took 14 years.

It was the home to 24 emperors until 1912 with the abdication of the last emperor Pu Yi.

Forbidden City in General

The Forbidden City lies in the centre of Beijing and was the imperial palace during the Ming and Qing dynasty, which can be seen as a City in a City, not only because of its size, but also in terms of city planning. It is organised by functional areas, which are set up according to a strict order given by the axes: the more important the function, the bigger is the size of the building and the closer they are to the central of the geometric axes.

It can be divided into two parts: the southern part is the "Outer Court" and consists of five halls (one of them is the Hall Of Supreme Harmony) for ceremonial purposes and other official business. The northern part, the "Inner Court", was where the emperor worked and lived with his family, eunuchs and maid-servants.

Golden yellow has been an imperial colour for a long time and it is a dominant colour in the Forbidden City. Roofs have yellow glazed tiles and many decorations are painted yellow. This colour presents, in the ancient theory of the Five Elements, the earth, which was considered the centre of the universe. The Forbidden City nowadays is the world's biggest palace complex.

The Hall of Supreme Harmony

The Hall of Supreme Harmony was the most important building in the Forbidden City. The dimension, form, Décor and furnishing of this hall are of highest standard. This hall was the symbol of the imperial power and it was the highest structure during the Ming and Qing dynasty. No other building was permitted to be higher. Until today it is the largest structure and the heart of the Forbidden City.

The hall itself is 26.92 m high, 11 bays wide and five bays deep - a bay is the roof span between two supporting pillars -, occupying a floor area of 2,377 square metres. It has a total of 72 pillars in six rows supporting the roof, most of them painted in red, but six of them by the side of the throne are coloured in gold. Since it was used by the emperor, its size, design, arrangement and furniture were most elaborately planned and were the most luxurious back in these days.

The first Hall was completed in 1420, but a few years after destroyed by a fire. It was rebuilt, and devastated twice again, in 1557 and 1594. The Hall in its current form was achieved in 1690. It was reserved for the most important occasions. In it, great ceremonies were held, like New Year, the winter solstice, the emperor's birthday, weddings and so on.

(Stairs)

The throne and the interior of the Hall of Supreme Harmony is filled with symbols of the imperial rule and power. The king's throne is standing on a timber framed, two metre high platform in the middle of the hall, encircled by six gold-lacquered pillars painted with dragons and surrounded by symbolic figures: again imperial dragons, which are carved on wooden parts, two elephants carrying vases on their backs filled with cereals to symbolize the kingdom's prosperity and two cranes, symbolizing longevity. The throne is golden and it has five dragons coiled around the back and the hand rests. On the screen behind it nine dragons can be seen. The numbers nine and five are symbols of the emperor as well

Above the throne on the ceiling is a large and imposing dragon sculpture. This imperial dragon has five claws, holding a pearl in its mouth, which is called "Mirror of Xuan Yuan". This pearl was said to tell truth from lie, right from wrong, truth from lie. It also gives the ruler the legitimacy to rule.¹ There is also an inscription above the throne, which was written by Emperor Qianlong. It is saying "to the god, to the people"², which means, that the emperor was the connection to the gods and the people.

The ceiling in the Hall of Supreme Harmony is the most heavily decorated in the Forbidden City.

Every segment of it is decorated with either single dragons or pairs of dragons.

The rug continues the theme from the marble stairs just outside the Hall: imperial dragons playing in the water.

The front to the south is an open door-window-panel, which opens to the positive influence of the Yang, the wall to the north is very thick to be protective against the negative influence of the Yin.

Nearly everything of the Hall is timber framed, but the wood is never shown in its natural state. It is covered with a thick layer, used as a base for trimmings. The colours used on the materials represent

¹ http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/HistoricBeijing/Forbidden_City/pages/110_ForbiddenCity.html

² http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/HistoricBeijing/Forbidden_City/pages/105_ForbiddenCity.html

the five primary colours in relation to the five elements of the universe: tiles in yellow (earth), stones in white (metal), floor in black (water), walls and columns in red (fire) and ceramic and background paintings in green (wood).

The Hall has a roof with double eaves and it has the largest number of roof figures in the Forbidden City. The first one is a man riding a chicken. He is followed by nine mythical figures and an additional one, which are in following order: Dragon (to protect against fire), Phoenix (controls the wind), Lion (protects the country and the imperial rule), Heavenly Horse (can run like the wind and travel thousands of miles a day), Seahorse (protect building from fire), Suan Ni (mythical beast, combination of lion, wild beat and wild horse), Guardian Fish (wind- and storm summoning fish), Xiezhi (can tell right from wrong) and Bull (dispels evil). The figure behind those mythical ones is an immortal carrying a sword. He symbolizes peace and harmony.³ The very last figure in this row is a dragon, larger than the other figures, representing the state.

Nowadays the Hall is stripped off all the furniture, apart from the throne and it appears as a large empty hall.

Conclusion

The ancient Chinese architecture has lots of features, which had or still have different meanings in the life of the Chinese people. With a limited number of words it is not possible to give a full description of the architecture of the Forbidden City and the Hall of Supreme Harmony, not to mention all the ancient Chinese architecture. In comparison to sources about the architecture in other countries, the ones about the Chinese are numerous much less, but there will be people writing about these beautiful and interesting architectural features.

³ http://hua.umf.maine.edu/China/HistoricBeijing/Forbidden_City/pages/112_ForbiddenCity.html

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