

Forbidden treasures

If walls could talk, those of Beijing's Forbidden City would tell a tale of political and dynastic intrigue spanning nearly 500 years, writes **Tom O'Malley**

Photography **Mark Parren Taylor**

The Forbidden City. Is there a more evocatively titled tourist site anywhere on earth? It's a name able to conjure up a closed-off world of antique ritual and political intrigue. 'Forbidden City' is actually an approximation of the Chinese *Zijin Cheng*, a more poetic moniker that also references the colour purple and the cosmically significant North Star, the 'celestial seat' of the emperor. But forbidden it most certainly was.

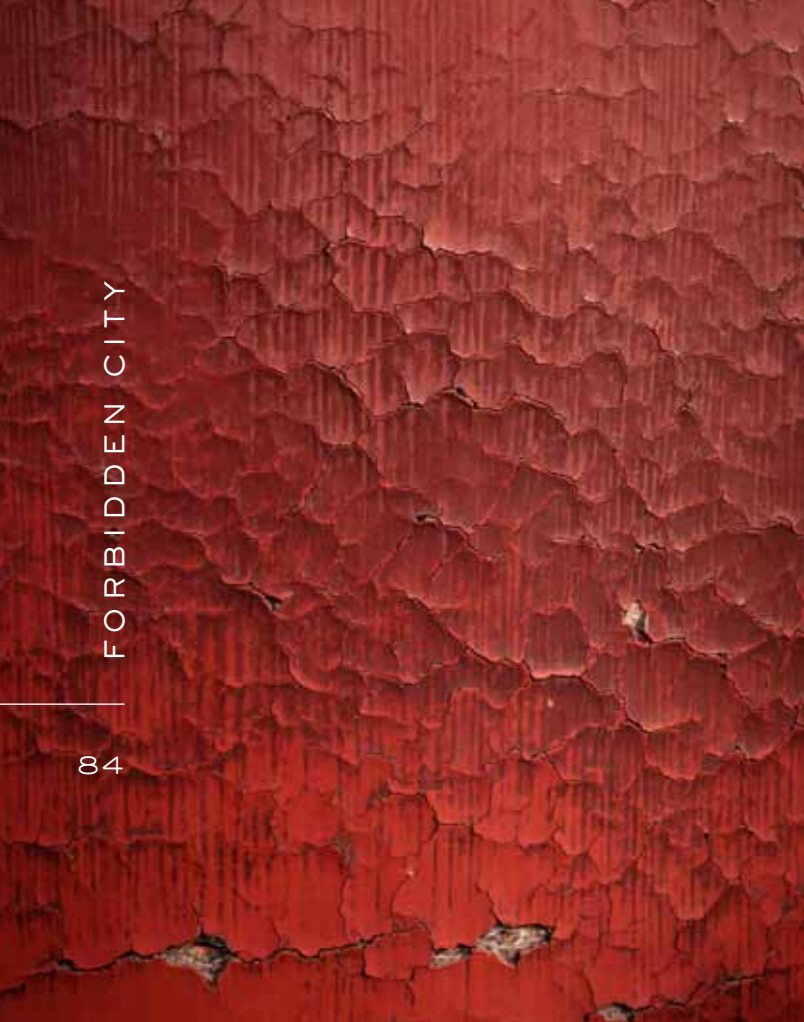
For almost 500 years, the world's largest palace complex doubled as the ultimate VIP club. To all but the most elite, it would have existed as a gaping void at the heart of the capital, entirely hidden from view behind 3.5km of scarlet citadel walls. Not that you'd even get that close; a further set of gated walls encircled what was known as the Imperial City, excluding mere mortals from yet more downtown real estate. You could be the emperor's own mother and they wouldn't let you in the front door – the central arch of the enormous Meridian Gate, so called because it aligned with the city's north-south central axis, was a hallowed way reserved for the 'son of heaven' alone.

From the time it was constructed (between 1406-1420 in the Ming Dynasty) up to the turn of >



Behind lock and key
TRADITIONAL HARDWARE ON A SHUTTERED WINDOW; (RIGHT) TIANANMEN GATE AND ITS ICONIC IMAGE OF MAO ZEDONG CATCHES THE DAY'S EARLY LIGHT





the 20th century and the founding of the Chinese republic, 24 emperors lived, loved and levied taxes within its 900-plus buildings, supported by their loyal (for the most part) palace eunuchs – men who, to put it delicately, had paid a considerable price in pursuit of privilege and status.

The southern half, or Outer Court, was mostly ceremonial, dominated by three resplendent wooden halls set in vast cobbled courtyards able to contain thousands of dignitaries and their sedan chair bearers, guards and servants. To the north, the Inner Court was where the emperor resided, conducted affairs and maintained his harem of concubines, with servants scurrying to and fro via the northern gate.

Today, most visitors enter like emperors through the Meridian Gate, and exit like servants (i.e. exhausted) from the northern end. Walk in a straight line between the two and you've travelled a kilometre. Criss-cross museum exhibits and peripheral courtyards and you'll wish the sedan chair hadn't been consigned to history. The sheer scale of the Forbidden City is one reason why what should be a holiday highlight can end up a vexing day's sightseeing if you try to fit it all in without a plan.

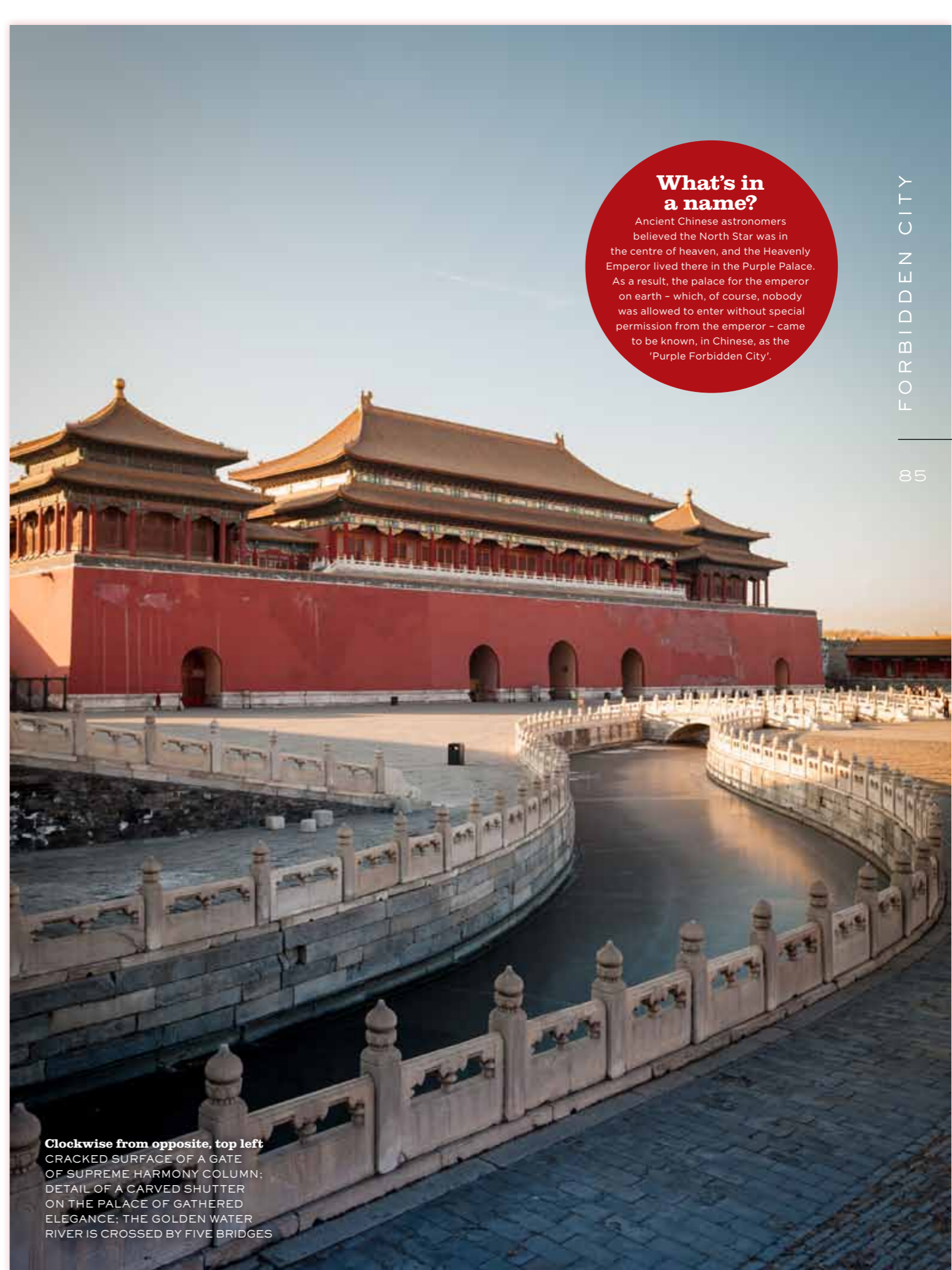
And that's the other problem. The 'Palace Museum' as it is officially called struggles to

weave a satisfactory narrative as you move between seemingly arbitrary exhibits – here a hall of silk scroll paintings; there a collection of antique clocks. Even with the audio guide (courtesy of 007 actor Sir Roger Moore), it's a struggle to take it all in and conjure up a sense of what it might have been like, especially with so many other tourists about.

VIEW FROM ABOVE

To really get to grips with the Forbidden City, you should start by taking a step back – several steps, according to Lars Ulrik Thom, Danish historian, author and co-owner of tour company Beijing Postcards. "The best way to understand the Forbidden City is from up here," says Lars as we gaze out across a landscape of arched yellow rooftops stretching into the haze. We are standing on Coal Hill, a 40-metre high mound in a park just north of the Forbidden City, made centuries before from the spoil dug from the palace moat. "Look around you and understand that this is the middle of the 'Middle Kingdom', the middle of the universe in the Ming Dynasty."

A plaque under our feet marks the *zhongzhouxian* – Beijing's central axis that runs from the Drum and Bell Towers in the north, across the length of the Forbidden



What's in a name?

Ancient Chinese astronomers believed the North Star was in the centre of heaven, and the Heavenly Emperor lived there in the Purple Palace. As a result, the palace for the emperor on earth – which, of course, nobody was allowed to enter without special permission from the emperor – came to be known, in Chinese, as the 'Purple Forbidden City'.

Clockwise from opposite, top left
CRACKED SURFACE OF A GATE OF SUPREME HARMONY COLUMN;
DETAIL OF A CARVED SHUTTER ON THE PALACE OF GATHERED ELEGANCE; THE GOLDEN WATER RIVER IS CROSS BY FIVE BRIDGES

“THIS IS THE
MIDDLE OF THE
MIDDLE KINGDOM”

86



City and out through the Meridian Gate. From this vantage, the scale and symmetry of the Forbidden City is laid bare, but, more than that, you can actually see how Beijing itself ripples outwards from the palace in scaled-down checkerboard waves. There's the encircling Imperial City, its long-vanished gates now traffic arteries, and beyond, the girdle of skyscrapers that skirt Beijing's second ring road, built on the site of Beijing's mighty Ming-era city walls torn down in the '60s. Today, a further four such highways ring the capital ever outwards, the farthest over 220km long.

Armed with this epic overview, we enter the Forbidden City from the south, passing beneath the portrait of Mao Zedong that faces Tiananmen Square. Throughout his life Mao never once entered the palace, and were it not for the intervention of Zhou Enlai, his red guards might well have laid it to ruin. Dwarfed by the colossal portal of the Meridian Gate, we make our way inwards to gaze at China's largest wooden building, the Hall of Supreme Harmony, a vast chamber crowned in golden tiles, sitting atop a three-tiered marble platform mimicking the Chinese character for king.

But Lars draws our attention away from the towering vermilion beams cut from trees floated

here from distant jungles, and the ornate, dragon-imbued ceiling, instead pointing out an innocuous plinth displaying a bronze, boxy object called a jia liang. It's a measure, used to portion five standard unit sizes of grain. Displayed here, in the 'middle of the middle', it's a subtle yet irrepressible exertion of centralised power. "It's standard weights and measures, like the European Union," points out Lars in his appropriately thick Danish accent.

During the Qing Dynasty, the Emperors mostly ran the country from the more modest (in scale) Hall of Mental Cultivation tucked away in the Inner Court. But this power was abruptly extinguished in 1911 when the last Qing emperor, Puyi, was forced to abdicate as a child after the Chinese Revolution. Actually, he was permitted to continue living in the Inner Court with all his pomp and finery, but stripped of any power. Pointedly, the gates in the Inner Court are still inscribed with Manchu script, >

Clockwise from this page, top

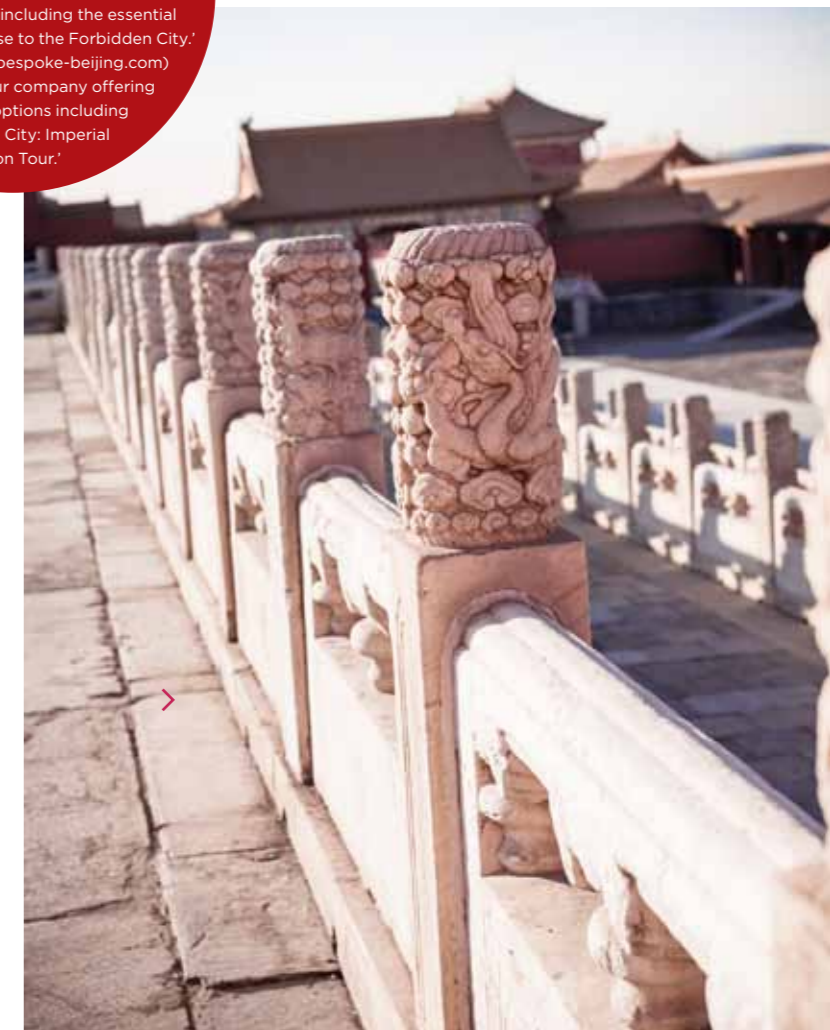
A GUARDSMAN KEEPS WATCH AT TIANANMEN GATE; SOLDIERS STAND TO ATTENTION BY THE UPRIGHT GATE; A VISITOR STRIDES ACROSS THE STONE-FLAGGED COURTYARD; MARBLE BALUSTRADES WITHIN THE FORBIDDEN CITY; THE THRONE AT THE HEART OF THE HALL OF PRESERVING HARMONY



87

**Forbidden
City guides**

A guided tour through the Forbidden City is a great way to make sense of the world's largest palace complex. Beijing Postcards (beijingpostcards.com) conducts regular tours on various themes, including the essential primer, 'A Crash Course to the Forbidden City.' Bespoke Beijing (bespoke-beijing.com) is a boutique tour company offering several tour options including 'Forbidden City: Imperial Prison Tour.'



Forbidden City in numbers

45%

Amount of the Forbidden City open to the public in 2011

76%

Amount of the Forbidden City open to the public in 2016 (according to article from the *China Daily* newspaper)

61

Number of years Qing Emperors Qianlong and Kangxi each reigned in the Forbidden City

720,000

Area of the palace complex, in square metres

24

Number of emperors who reigned here (not including the Empress Dowager Cixi, of course)

6

Age of the last Qing Emperor, Puyi, when he abdicated in 1911

30

Price in Yuan for a cappuccino at the Forbidden City's only coffee shop (that, for a very brief period, was a Starbucks)

9

Number of sons of the dragon statuettes decorating the eaves of the Imperial throne halls

1.17 million

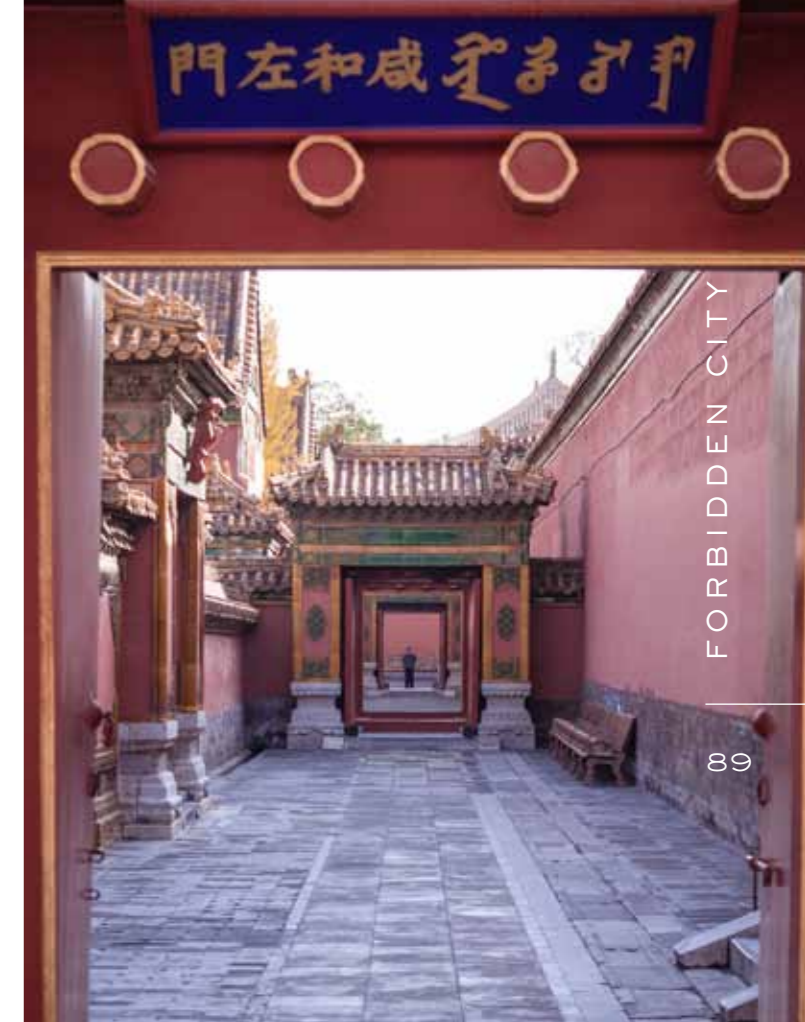
Numbers of pieces of art in the Forbidden City, according to a 1925 audit

1987

Year of Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, which tells the story of Puyi's life. It was the first feature film ever authorised by the government to be shot in the Forbidden City



Clockwise from this page
MORE IMMACULATE DETAIL WITHIN THE WALLS; GUARDS IN FRONT OF MERIDIAN GATE; A SIDE ALLEY CLOSE TO THE HALL OF TREASURES



now a dead language, while those in the Outer Court bear only Chinese.

In 1924 Puyi was ejected by a warlord and forced to flee for his life. Remarkably, just a year later, the Forbidden City was turned into a museum. Purposefully left in a state of disarray, it was intended to reveal the decay and death of a dynasty. Puyi's brief reinstatement as puppet emperor of Manchuria by the Japanese during WWII branded him a traitor to the Chinese, and afterwards he was thrown in prison in the Soviet Union, before eventually returning to Beijing to work as a gardener until his death in 1967. Puyi's narrative is fascinating as it twists and turns through the chaos and upheaval that reigned in China after the 1911 Revolution right up to the triumph of the Communists in 1949. And, typically, the Forbidden City was often the stage for the unfolding drama.

TRAVELLING TREASURE

Just as Puyi, the last living symbol of the Forbidden City and what it represented, was tossed to and fro in the turbulence of the time, the palace's vast cache of treasures suffered a similar fate. And both these facets of the Palace Museum still inform how it operates today.

After the 1911 revolution, rampant looting

meant the Forbidden City became a safe house of sorts, augmenting its own treasures with collections from the Summer Palace and temples and mansions throughout the city. According to an audit in the 1920s it supposedly contained over a million pieces of art. When the Japanese invaded a decade later it was decided to pack it all up and send it via train down south to keep it safe. With the Japanese rampant, the treasure was soon off again, this time thousands of miles inland to the Nationalist stronghold of Chongqing. It eventually returned to Beijing in the mid-1940s, but then, with the Communists now in the ascendancy, off it went to Taiwan, where much still remains.

These days China is doing a great deal to recover the Forbidden City's treasure, and both China and Taiwan are making progress in rebuilding relations. All this goes to show that the Forbidden City is so much more than just a museum. It remains a highly charged political symbol, and, in more than just a literal sense, it's still a centre of power. It could be said whoever owns the palace and the treasure has legitimate claim to sovereignty. No wonder, then, that the Palace Museum struggles to weave a neat and satisfactory narrative for visitors. In truth, the story is still being written. ♦