



The Forbidden City (Wonders of the World)

By Geremie R. Barme

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The Forbidden City (Zijin Cheng) lying at the heart of Beijing formed the hub of the Celestial Empire for five centuries. Over the past century it has led a reduced life as the refuge for a deposed emperor, as well as a heritage museum for monarchist, republican, and socialist citizens, and it has been celebrated and excoriated as a symbol of all that was magnificent and terrible in dynastic China's legacy.

The Forbidden City's vermilion walls have fueled literary fantasies that have become an intrinsic part of its disputed and documented history. Mao Zedong even considered razing the entire structure to make way for the buildings of a new socialist China. The fictions surrounding the Forbidden City have also had an international reach, and writers like Franz Kafka, Elias Canetti, Jorge Luis Borges, and Mervyn Peake have all succumbed to its myths. The politics it enshrined have provided the vocabulary of power that is used in China to the present day, though it is now better known as a film set or the background of displays of opera, rock, and fashion.

Geremie Barmé peels away the veneer of power, secrecy, inscrutability, and passions of imperial China, to provide a new and original history of the culture, politics, and architecture of the Forbidden City. Designed to overawe the visitor with the power of imperial China, the Forbidden City remains one of the true wonders of the world.



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Editorial Review

Review

Barme presents a vivid and compelling portrait of this extraordinary attraction, which encapsulates much of the country's history, from imperial China through to communism and the forthcoming Olympics.

--Clover Stroud (*Sunday Telegraph* 2008-02-03)

A prime site, in Beijing, is the Forbidden City, a walled palace founded in the 15th century by Ming emperors and later elaborated by emperors of the Manchu Qing dynasty. Barme describes the fabric of the palace, interpreting its history in the context of Chinese politics, psychology, religion and social conventions.

--Iain Finlayson (*The Times* 2008-02-23)

This Rolls-Royce of a guidebook covers almost every conceivable physical and historical nook of the 72-hectare imperial enclave in Beijing first constructed by the 15th-century Yongle emperor, Zhu Di. Barme's history packs a veritable palace of information into its pages from the story of the sadistic Jiajing emperor, nearly strangled to death by his concubines, to the tale of the clandestine plundering of the city's treasures during the cultural revolution...Barme deftly illuminates the symmetries between the imperial court and the Communist party--whose officials took up residence in palaces outside the city. Tellingly, even as they swept the feudal past aside, neither the First Republic nor the People's Republic could bring themselves to occupy or alter the Forbidden City; Chairman Mao never set foot inside it.

--Robert Collins (*Sunday Times* 2008-02-17)

Barme has hit the mark, offering a richly detailed yet accessible thematic history of the Forbidden City, including its architecture and its inhabitants, with commentary on international perceptions of Chinese culture. He does an excellent job of providing enough background information to aid those not as well versed in Chinese history as he is while objectively presenting historical events that could be easily politicized.

--Tessa L.H. Minchew (*Library Journal* 2008-05-01)

Beyond the rich contextual insights, the book also contains an excellent history of the palace with an explanation, which is truly frightening, of how it was saved from the ravages of the Cultural Revolution...Each section of the Forbidden City's vast structure is described in such a way that the book successfully fuses history with aesthetics. But always it is the deeper context that makes this book special. There are even explanations for the feng shui of certain sites in the complex. If you visit Beijing, this guide should be in your luggage.

--Bruce Elder (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2008-07-26)

The Forbidden City is the latest in an excellent series from Harvard University Press...A compact volume, it is an ideal and elegant history, good for keeping in the hand while visiting the vast extraordinary complex, which has at least been preserved. Mr. Barme, a noted Australian scholar of modern China, is as good at describing the Communists' imperially-derived impulses as he is at banishments from the medieval court. (*The Economist* 2008-07-31)

Barme's book has an ironic heart and is a carefully constructed exploration of a cultural institution that sweeps the reader along as it examines the intrigues, absurdities and grotesques of everyday life in the Forbidden City; in doing so it brings the collection of buildings to life...If you are going to the Forbidden City soon, read this book.

--Clifford Coonan (*South China Morning Post* 2008-08-17)

In *The Forbidden City* [Barmé] brilliantly interweaves illustrative accounts from the 600-year history of the palace with broader insights into Chinese culture, its encounters with the wider world and contemporary reflections on where the country is heading. It provides a wonderful starting point on China, just as a visit to the awe-inspiring Forbidden City itself provides the perfect *entrée* to the country as a whole.

--Rowan Callick (*The Australian* 2008-08-06)

About the Author

Geremie R. Barmé is Professor of Chinese History and Founding Director of the Australian Centre on China in the World at the Australian National University.

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