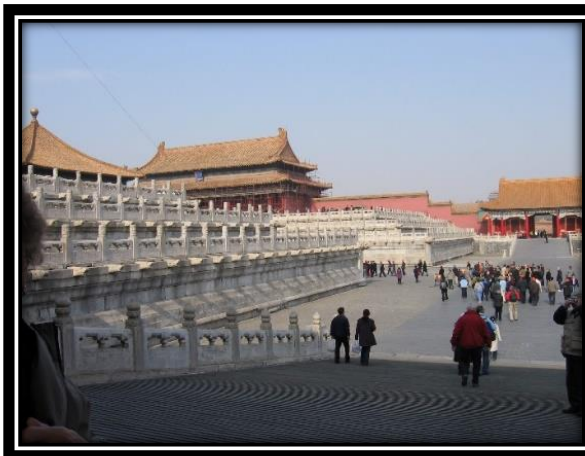


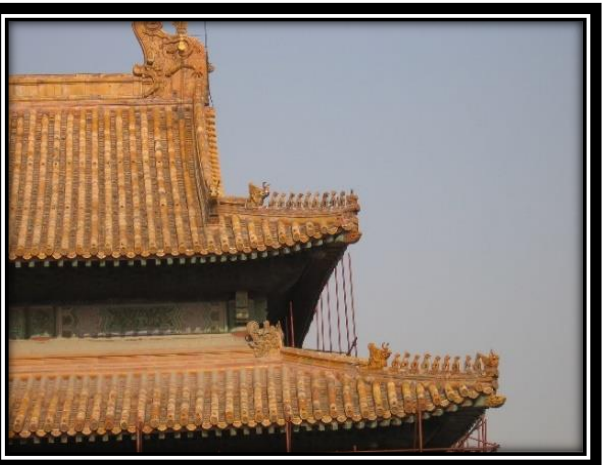
11 THE FORBIDDEN CITY

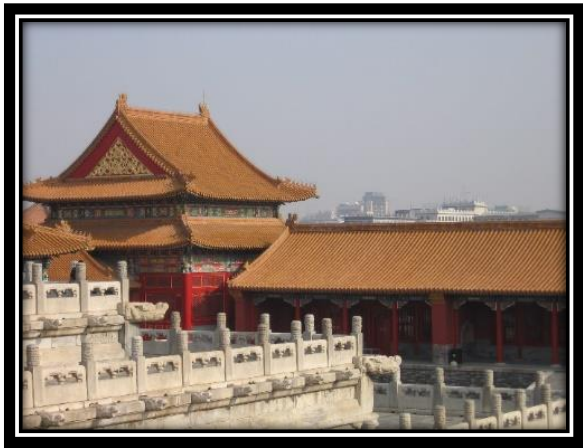
“The Forbidden City,” our guide informed us, “is the largest imperial center in the world, with over 800 buildings and 9999 rooms. This palace complex, considered one of the top five most important palaces in the world, is three times larger than the Louvre Palace, for example. About a million laborers were needed to complete it in the early 1400s. There are over 200 historical sites in Beijing, befitting a city of such ancient history, but the Forbidden City is special. Until this complex was first opened to the public in 1925, the only way a commoner could see the interior of the Forbidden City was by invitation or by working as a servant. My grandparents, for example, would not even walk close to the outside walls of the palace. The last 24 Chinese emperors lived within the Forbidden City.” As we entered the complex, our group grew quiet. Even Myrtle and ObOff.



Although there were perhaps several thousand people visiting the site the day we were there, the spaces inside the complex were so vast we never felt crowded. I think we were all a bit awed by the scope of the Forbidden City, the sheer size, of course, but even more, the focus on beauty and tranquility. The structures of the buildings were foreign to us but pleasing to the eye, seeming to be built with proportions and details meant to enhance feelings of peace and calm thinking. Our guide told us the buildings are made of wood, over which cloth is overlaid, and then the cloth/wood is painted. This centuries-old process makes the wood very strong, and the paint lasts longer. The way the buildings were painted was a bit jaw-dropping. As Myrtle stood staring at one elaborate cornice, she shook her

head and said, "Somebody here needs to get a life! What in the world is the point of all that painstaking detail?" With a superior sniff I said simply, "Beauty, Myrtle. What is the point of beauty? What is the point of life itself?" And I would have gone on in that vein sniffing and giving philosophers a run for their money, but Myrtle purposely stepped on my toes. I couldn't even get mad at her because I was mesmerized by the sun glinting off those ceramic roof tiles and intricate cornices. I felt a little bit like dancing! Those rooftops seemed to just swoop and swirl, and I wanted to swoop and swirl with them!





As we came to convenient places, our guide would continue her lecture. “The number of animals on the roof signifies the importance of the building, the most important buildings of course, being the quarters of the emperor in the center of the complex. The emperor’s palace is closed for renovations right now, so we won’t be able to see the Dragon Throne, but we will see the Dragon Lady Cixi’s building and the quarters for the concubines. Young maidens were chosen at age 17 or younger and brought to the palace. There they were put into the care of women who trained them in all the behaviors expected of a concubine. When called to service the emperor, they were undressed, bathed, perfumed, wrapped in silk, and transported on the shoulders of the eunuchs to the emperor’s bathroom, from which the emperor summoned them. After two hours, a eunuch knocked on the door and said, ‘Time’s up’ because no female was allowed to spend the night with the emperor for risk of her having political influence. The Eunuchs brought a different girl to him about 5:00 in the morning. Empress Cixi, who became one of the most important women in Chinese history, became a royal concubine when she was 14 years old, and she bore him a son, his only son. The emperor had only eleven concubines at that time. It is said that some of the emperors had many hundreds. The concubine’s quarters have room for 1000 girls.” There was a muffled male gasp in our group, and I heard the man behind me whisper to his companion, “If that dude had to service a thousand concubines, how did he get anything else done?!” His companion whispered back, “I know. What a life! Geez!” I chose to ignore those juveniles.

Our guide continued, “When Empress Cixi’s son was five years old, the emperor died without naming an heir. Cixi immediately took steps to protect her son’s ascendancy to the throne. She knew her son was

not mature enough to rule the country; so she arranged Co-Empress Dowager positions for herself and the late emperor's widow, then established herself as regent, ruling China through her young son by sitting behind a curtain and whispering to him, telling him what to respond to dignitaries and visitors. Here you see the throne upon which Cixi's young son sat while she whispered directives to him from behind the screen. Suplicants knelt before the steps with their foreheads touching the carpet."



She continued, "Dowager Empress Cixi was one of the last empresses of China's Qin Dynasty and was called the Dragon Lady because she wielded so much power. Like women of power down through the ages, she was vilified and defamed simply because she was female. Even Cixi's detractors, however, give her credit for keeping the country together during the nearly 50 years of her rule, despite internal chaos and unrest and significant foreign challenges. We will talk more about this famous woman when we go to her favorite living quarters, the Summer Palace."

Our guide led the group out of the throne room into the courtyard, but Myrtle held me back. "Quick," she said, "There's no one here. Quick. Let's pretend we are Cixi and her son." She ducked under the rope and up the stairs, pulling me behind her. "Myrtle," I hissed. "Stop! You can't do this! We are not supposed

to be up here!" But she promptly sat down on the throne, then just as suddenly jumped back up. "Wait!" she said. "I can't be the son! No offense to you, but I need to be Empress Dowager Cixi! YOU are the son, JoJo." She pushed me down onto the throne and darted behind the screen. Immediately I heard loud whispering, "You are a filthy cur, Land-Owner Qin-Sha, to try to take this poor peasant's land from him. I order that you be taken to the Court of Justice and your hands cut off." I blinked a moment and decided to teach Myrtle she cannot manhandle me the way she thinks she can. I said in a commanding voice, "You are a filthy cur, ugly peasant, to try to deprive this noble landowner Qin-Sha of the land that belongs to him. Guard! Remove this peasant to the Court of Justice and cut off his head." I heard Myrtle gasp, then she rallied and whispered, "Do not appeal to me to save your life, you filthy opium eater. You have had already three chances to redeem yourself, and your emperor has been lenient. Now you shall pay the price." Myrtle raised her voice, "You shall pay the price!" Before I could answer, there was a shuffling noise and bumping coming from under the throne dais, and soon a Chinese man in worker's garb lurched out from under the dais, rubbing his head and trying to keep from falling over. He made a beeline for the front of the throne, flopped down before the steps gracelessly, banging his head on the carpet and crying out, "Please spare this ignorant peasant his life, O noble son of the celestial deities. This filthy peasant is not worthy to lick the dung from your highness's slippers, so lowly is he. But I beseech you in the celestial harmony of your endless goodness to forgive this filthy cur his transgression and let him remain alive one more day." Those words must have exhausted the meager energies of the worker, for his eyes closed and his body tipped farther and farther to the left until it plopped onto the carpet and he lay there snoring. I shot off that throne and took several flying leaps down those stairs, narrowly missing the drunken worker, and I was out the door in a heartbeat. But lo and behold! Myrtle

suddenly charged ahead of me until she saw our group and then stopped so suddenly I nearly ran her over. I raised my hand to bop her one, but she deftly took hold of it and said sweetly, “JoJo, dear, come, we do need to keep up with our guide and our group.” Several of them looked askance at me as we meekly found places in the group. Boy, it was all I could do to keep myself from really bopping Myrtle then.

Our guide was continuing her lecture. “Now these large copper and iron vats were part of the fire-fighting equipment for the palace. They were kept filled with water, and from October to February they were covered by quilts to prevent the water from freezing. On extremely cold days charcoal braziers would be lit near the vats for warmth. Altogether there were more than 300 of these pots, mostly made of copper and iron, and 18 vats are inlaid with gold.”

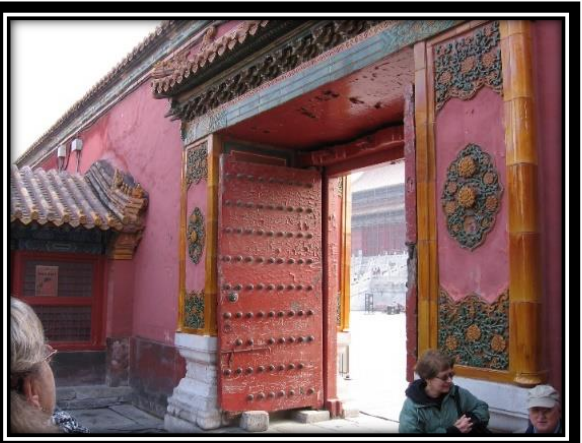




“The large stone carving between the two sets of steps is the largest stone carving in the palace,” said our guide. “It is 16.75 meters long, 3.07 meters wide, and 1.7 meters thick. It weighs more than 200 tons. It was carved out of one huge natural stone in the early Ming Dynasty, possibly in the late 1300s. In 1761 the old patterns on the stone were filed down and new patterns were carved into the stone, with beautiful interlocking lotus patterns all around, curling waves at the bottom and nine dragons amid clouds, the dragon being the imperial symbol. The stone was quarried in Fangshan in the western suburbs of Beijing and

transported to the Palace by sprinkling water on the road to make ice. Then the huge stone was dragged along the iced road to the Palace.” There was a sort of stunned silence in our group followed by a heartfelt “Wow” here and there. Myrtle whispered, “The immense project to move that stone and not break it must have caused some heart palpitations in those poor workers.” Amen.





“When the emperor lived in the Hall of Mental Cultivation,” continued our guide, “Cixi lived in the Hall of Consolation and had a huge stone crystal placed in front of the hall, to imply frankness, open-heartedness, and purity. The lovely and tranquil room in the Pavilion of Beautiful Scenery is said to have been the room where Empress Cixi gave birth to the Crown Prince.” We meandered through a lot of ornate rooms and at least six throne rooms. I gave up trying to keep track of all their names.





As we passed once more the throne room where Cixi whispered to her son, I peeked inside to see if the sleeping worker had awakened. He was gone. "I still can't believe you did that, Myrtle," I whispered. Her rejoinder was true to course: "You were part of it, don't forget."



On our way to the Forbidden City's exit we walked slowly through some of the royal gardens. The sense of peace and harmony in the gardens was so pronounced that all the visitors seemed to walk slowly and speak softly. "The Chinese believe that the Feng Shui of water through rocks is especially lucky," commented our guide. "These gorgeous rocks that we are passing among have been gouged out by water over many, many years. The gnarled trees here are also very old, 150-300 years old, especially the date trees and sycamores."

Myrtle took my hand and smiled at me beatifically as though to say, "Could heaven be any more marvelous?" Of course, I totally forgave her everything then, dear reader. What else could I do? I breathed deeply, inhaling the peace and tranquility, and I smiled a goofy smile as the little devil on my shoulder reminded me to enjoy this moment because it won't last.

To be continued . . .