

# RITEs

On the first auspicious day of this month, the Son of Heaven conducts the rites and entreats God for a bumper harvest. He brings the plough personally, placing it between the guard and the driver, and commands the three dukes and nine princes to assist him in tilling the field. In this ceremony, the Son of Heaven ploughs three furrows, the three dukes plough five furrows, and the princes plough nine furrows. When the ritual is completed they return. The Son of Heaven invites the three dukes, nine princes, and all the high officials to a celebration banquet in the Da Qin Hall. This is called "The feast of labor."

Li Ji (Book of Rites)  
Confucius (551–479 B.C.)

**A**t a quarter to eight in the morning on the first auspicious day of the second month of spring, the gongs atop the Meridian Gate sound. The emperor of China, clad in azure silk, emerges from the Forbidden City. He is accompanied by a multitudinous entourage, among his attendants, three dukes and nine princes, chosen to take part in the ceremony by a Board of Rites the month before. Once ensconced in his dragon carriage, the emperor is transported to Xiannontang, a vast altar complex just south of the Forbidden City to perform rites in honor of Xiannong, revered throughout China as the father of agriculture.

Upon arrival, the emperor ascends the steps leading to the Altar of the First Agriculturist. There he kowtows, reads from Xiannong's Holy Tablet, and sacrifices a cow, a goat, and a pig. Following these acts, the emperor retires to Ju Fu Hall to change clothes in preparation for the Tilling Ritual.

During the Tilling Ritual, the emperor plows three furrows in a field. Two officials steer the oxen pulling the plow. Behind the emperor is the governor of Beijing Prefecture, who holds a box of seeds, and the president of the Board of Revenue, who plants the seeds, which will be covered with earth by an old peasant. It was said that the emperor's plowing "set an example of industry to his subjects, thus dignifying the toil of the poorest agricultural laborer." Once the Tilling Ritual is completed, the emperor retired to the Hall of Feasting to celebrate the end of the sacrifices to the First Agriculturist.

JU FU HALL AS IT APPEARED IN 1994, INSET, AND UPON COMPLETION OF RESTORATION IN 1997, MAIN IMAGE



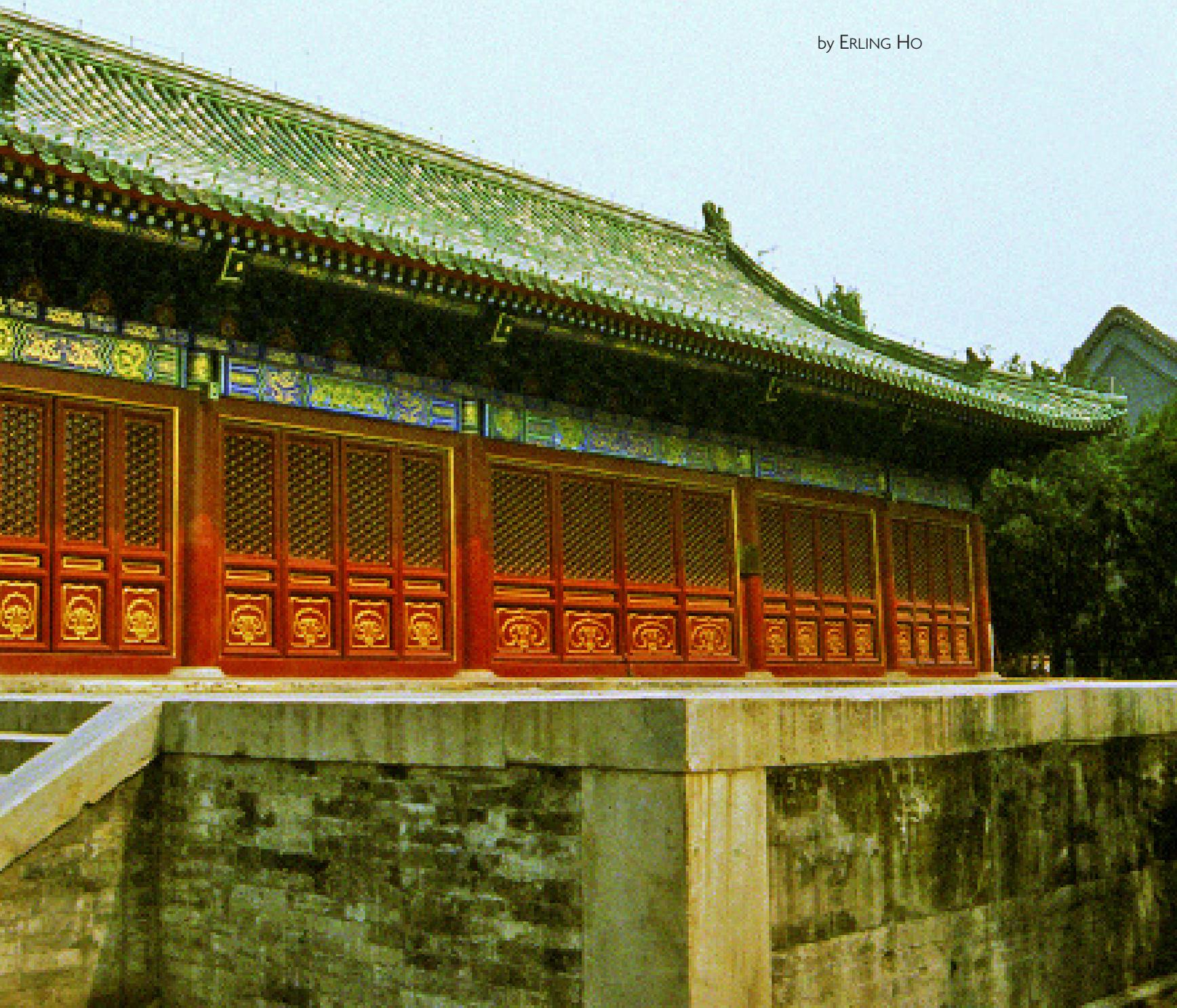
PHOTOS: JOHN SUDRIS, WWF

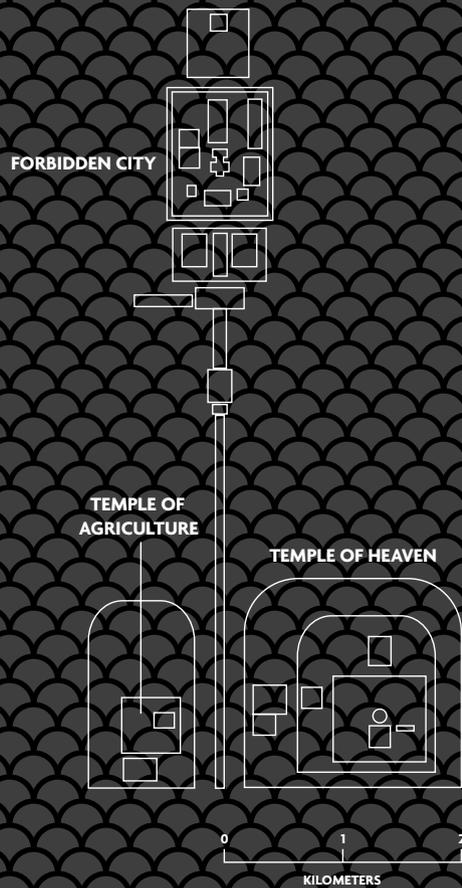


# of SPRING

**BEIJING'S XIANNONTANG, AN IMPERIAL ALTAR  
COMPLEX HONORING THE GODS OF AGRICULTURE,  
GETS A LONG-OVERDUE FACELIFT**

by ERLING HO





AN AXONOMETRIC RENDERING SHOWS HOW THE XIANNONGTANG LOOKED DURING THE QING DYNASTY.

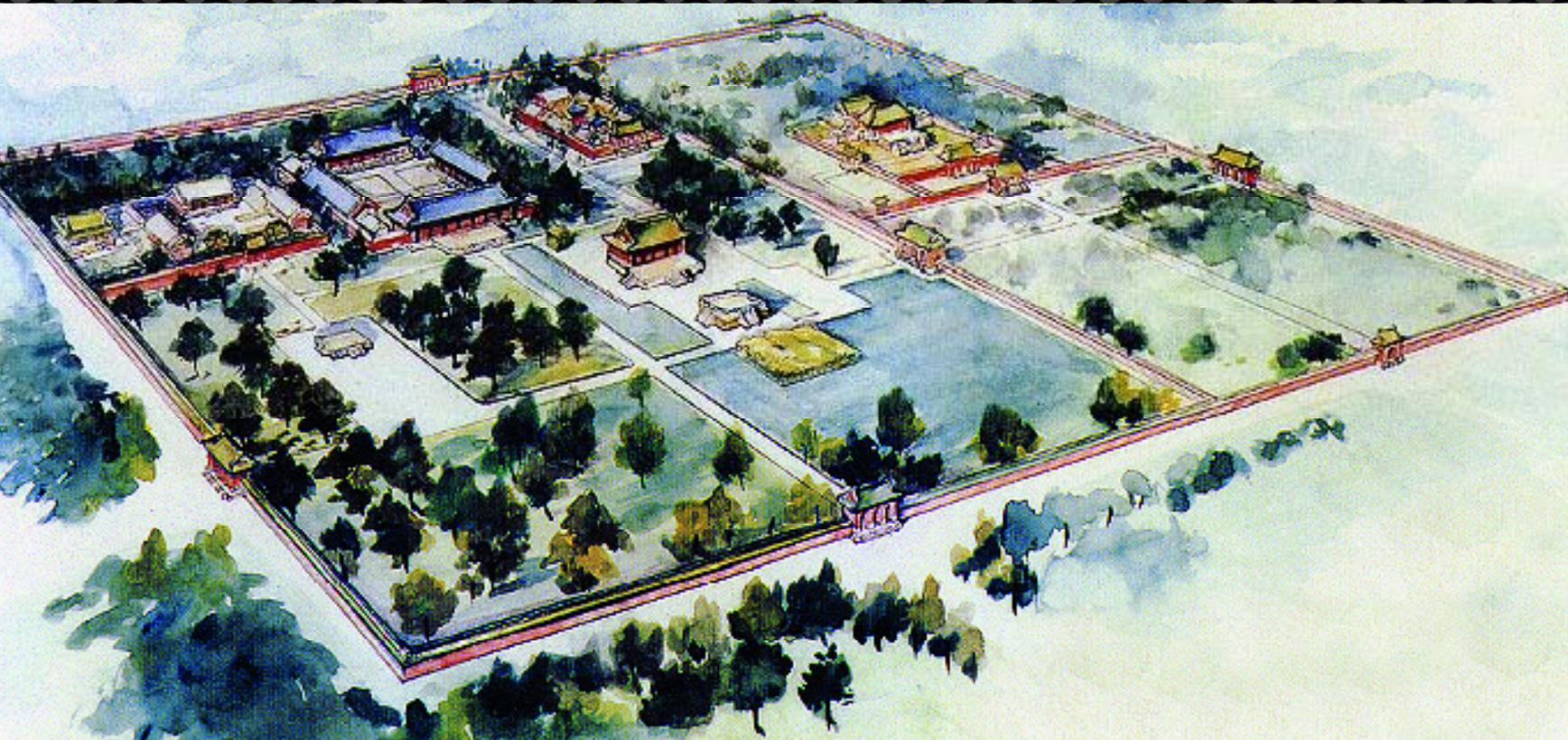
For more than 2,500 years, the emperors of China performed rituals and sacrifices proscribed in Confucius' *Li Ji*, or Book of Rites, to entreat the deities of nature thought to hold the fortunes of the Chinese people in their hands. Those to Xiannong were performed on the Vernal equinox, which, by Chinese reckoning, marked the middle of the Spring season, rather than its beginning as it does in the West.

Begun in 1420, the Xiannongtang altar complex, which covers an area of three square kilometers, was one of ten such building ensembles erected in and around Beijing during the Imperial Period. Altars to the First Agriculturist and the Year God, a Divine Kitchen complex, a Temple of Flags, and Ju Fu Hall were among the first buildings to be constructed, along with a suite of associated pavilions and storage facilities. In 1458, a Hall of Abstinence was added. It was here, that, during the Ming Dynasty, the emperor would spend three days abstaining from the "six indulgences" prior to making sacrifices and performing rituals. In 1513, altars to the Gods of the Heavens and the Gods of the Earth were added, however sacrifices to these deities were banned by imperial decree in 1567.

Following the Manchu capture of Beijing in 1644, when the last Ming Emperor hanged himself in a tree north of the Forbidden City, sacrifices to the First Agriculturist ceased until the Emperor Shun Zhi reinstated them in 1654. In 1724, 36 new songs were composed for the Tilling Ritual. In 1726, the Emperor Yong Zheng ordered altars to the First Agriculturist to be built throughout China. During the reign of Qianlong (r. 1624—1690) the whole altar complex was renovated, the Temple of Flags was transformed into the Holy Granary to store the five cereals used in the ceremony, a wooden platform for viewing the Tilling Ritual was rebuilt in stone, and the Hall of Abstinence was converted into a Hall of Feasting, where the emperor entertained the dukes, princes, and other high officials at the conclusion of the ceremonies.

During the Qing Dynasty, Kang Xi and Qianlong offered sacrifices to the First Agriculturist 58 times. Other emperors, however, were less circumspect in the execution of their ritual responsibilities. In 1906, the Emperor Guang Xu presided over the rituals for the very last time, and the altar complex soon fell into disrepair.

Over the past century, Xiannongtang has been subjected to all manner of insult. In 1900, when the eight allied nations marched into Beijing, American troops, under the command of General Joffe, pitched camp at the Altar to the First Agriculturist, causing some damage to the site. After the Xing Hai revolution in 1911, the Altar to the First





ORIGINALLY KNOWN AS THE HALL OF ABSTINENCE, THE HALL OF FEASTING, PRIOR TO RESTORATION ABOVE, WAS USED BY THE EMPEROR TO ENTERTAIN HIS COURT AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE RITUALS TO THE FIRST AGRICULTURALIST. THE EAST WELL PAVILION IN THE DIVING KITCHEN COMPLEX, BELOW, WHICH HAD BEEN DISFIGURED BY LATER CONSTRUCTION WAS STABILIZED AND CONSERVED IN 2000, RIGHT.



Agriculturist was “renovated” and turned into a park, causing the British writer Juliet Bredon to lament: “Those who knew the Temple of Agriculture before the tidying up process destroyed its originality and character—a process very different from the artistic restoration and repair of beautiful old buildings—will always regret the peace, the loveliness of the place as it was; a wild waste of grass land carpeted in summer with mauve wild turnip flowers, where the bronzed, bent guardians cut rushes and piled bundles of fragrant herbs, where silence, broken only by the cawing of rooks or the silence of a meadow lark, reigned, and one felt drawn close to the secret wonders and charities of the Earth.”

After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912, the main hall was turned into a Temple of Loyalty in memory of the 72 martyrs who died in an uprising at Huanghuagang in Guangzhou. In 1936, Beijing’s largest sports stadium was built in the southern end of the altar complex where the altars to the Gods of the Heavens and the Gods of the Earth had once stood. Following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the complex, was taken over by the Yu Cai school; its imperial halls and pavilions, falling further into decay and their original functions all but forgotten. Other buildings were transformed into houses, factories, and warehouses.

Having barely survived the Cultural Revolution, the Altar to the First Agriculturist was declared a Cultural Heritage site in 1979 by the Beijing Municipality. The imposing Hall of Jupiter, the second largest such hall in all of Beijing and which houses the Altar to the Year God, was the first of the site’s surviving buildings to be renovated. In 1991, it reopened to the public as the Beijing Museum of Ancient Architecture.

In 1997, the World Monuments Fund embarked on a campaign to restore the Altar to the First Agriculturist and its associated buildings, including Ju Fu Hall, where the emperor changed clothes before performing the Tilling Ritual. Five bays wide, with a gable-and-hip

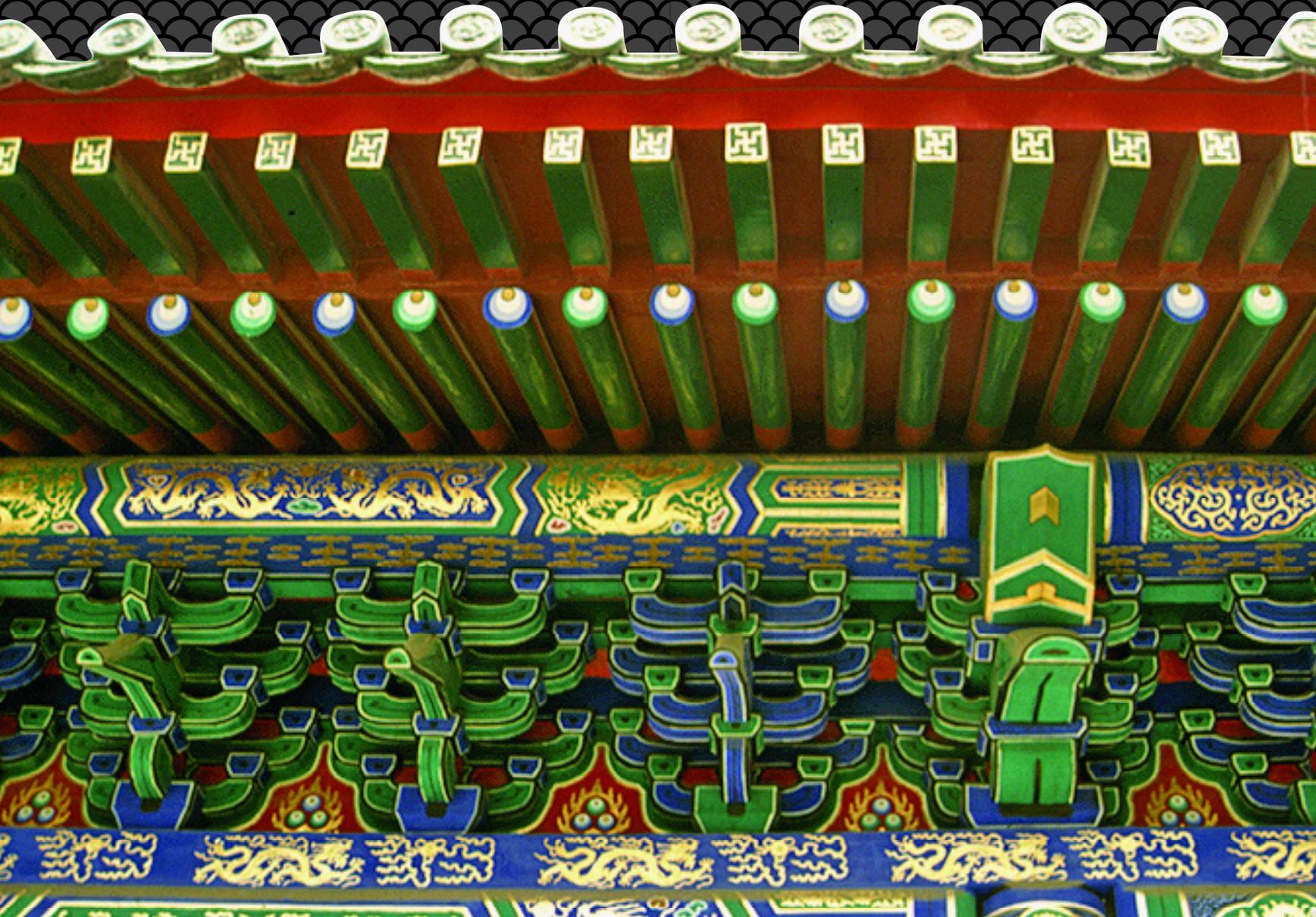


ABOVE, THE RESTORED GRAIN STORAGE PAVILION. FOLLOWING THE RESTORATION OF THE HALL OF JUPITER IN 1991, BELOW, THE BUILDING WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE BEIJING MUSEUM OF ANCIENT ARCHITECTURE.

roof of green-glazed tiles and golden dragon beam paintings, it stands just north of the Platform for Viewing the Tilling Ritual. In 1999, the Flora Foundation provided US \$40,000 to carry out conservation work on the Divine Tablet Depository. That same year, American Express contributed U.S. \$50,000 toward the restoration of the Divine Kitchen complex's main gate and two wells, and, in 2001, provided yet another U.S. \$50,000 toward the restoration the Holy Granary and the Divine Kitchen itself.

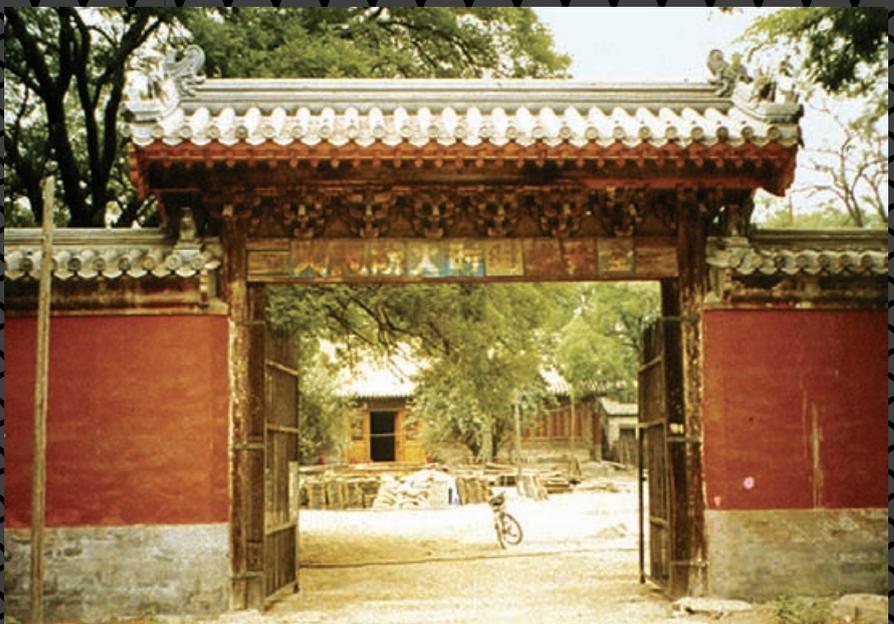
In 2001, the WMF finalized a \$100,000 grant for the conservation of the Hall of Feasting. When the work began, there was grass growing on the roofs, which were leaking. The rafters were badly deteriorated, the dougong brackets were cracking, the wood columns were insect-eaten, the original casements had been completely lost, and the beam-paintings, in the golden dragon Hexi style, were peeling. Now, the green-glazed roof tiles, deteriorated rafters and sheathings are being replaced, and the beam paintings are being conserved.

Traditionally, when an old Chinese structure is being renovated, features such as the beam-paintings are completely redone by craftsmen, so that they will look like new again. In their discussions with the Chinese conservation team, the WMF team asked that the old beam paintings be preserved in their original form, and that portions where the paint has peeled be left blank. The result in the Divine Kitchen complex and the Hall of Feasting is bit of a compromise—the exteriors of the structures have been renovated according to the Chinese tradi-





THE GATED ENTRANCE TO THE DIVINE KITCHEN COMPLEX, ABOVE RIGHT, BEFORE RESTORATION BEGAN IN 1997, AND AS IT LOOKS TODAY, RIGHT. BAKED CLAY ORNAMENTAL ROOF ELEMENTS, ABOVE, WERE CONSERVED PRIOR TO BEING REINSTALLED.



tion, while the interiors represent WMF's far more conservative approach to restoration.

For the conservation/restoration of the two hexagonal well pavilions, as much as possible of the original Su-style mural paintings on the beams were kept, while the gaps were filled in with a neutral background over a white undercoat. The paintings were stabilized, dusted with a dough-type sponge, and re-glued to the beams, sometimes with the help of tiny nails. The more delicate paintings were only vacuumed. A protective seal was then applied to the paintings. The dougong brackets were replaced with Nanmu, the same wood as originally used. To stabilize wood that was rotting, the conservation team is in the process of testing several different anti-biodeterioration solutions.

Color pigment samples were extracted from the painted beams inside the various structures during renovation so they could be analyzed for their chemical components. By corroborating the results of this analysis with the painting styles in use during different periods, conservationists will be able to establish a chronological table, allowing them to date less well-preserved beam paintings from other sites in the future.

Since the completion of the restoration, both the Divine Tablet Repository and the Holy Granary have been turned into a museum. On display are artifacts related to the cult of the First Agriculturist, including a yellow, nine-dragon canopy with the emperor's insignia, and a reproduction of a wonderfully detailed silk scroll couplet depicting the Emperor Yong Zheng offering sacrifices to the First Agriculturist and performing the Tilling Ritual. The original couplet is separated—one scroll in Beijing's Palace Museum, the other in the Musée Guimet in Paris. ■