



Typical glazed figurines sit atop the roof tiles

How Come I Am the Only Visitor in This Extraordinary Place?

By BRIAN SALTER

THE Museum of Chinese Ancient Architecture collects, protects, and researches the history, culture and methodology of ancient building techniques, from primitive times to the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911. First opened in Beijing in September 1991, it's amazing that so few people seem either to have heard of it, or let alone visited it. Most days you can count the number of visitors here on the fingers of one hand!

The museum is located in Xiannongtan – the Temple of Agriculture – where emperors used to come and offer sacrifices to Xiannong (the God of Agriculture). Though within a short walking distance of the Temple of Heaven park, it is in a peaceful location, surrounded by hundred-year-old trees. It is the first themed museum which collects, studies and displays ancient Chinese architectural technology, art and developmental history.

Actually the museum itself is in the rear hall of the complex – Taisuitan (Taisui Hall), which some have argued is exceeded in magnificence only by the Forbidden City's Hall of Supreme Harmony. Well, that is debateable, but certainly its interior is magnificent, even if on the outside it looks like many other ancient



Typical roof tiles – the yellow ones signifying that the building is used by the emperor

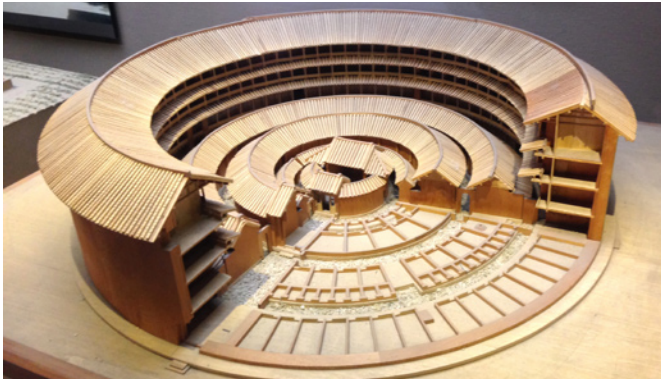
A beautiful model of a pagoda is set off brilliantly by the blue ceiling above it





Taisuitan is a magnificent hall and one of Beijing's finest

Numerous wooden models show off the stages in the construction of a building



Chinese halls.

Taisuitan was originally built in 1420, in the 18th year of Ming Emperor Yongle's reign, when he moved his capital from Nanjing to Beijing, but most of the remaining buildings in the complex were built in 1522, during the first year of Ming Emperor Jiajing's reign. It was renovated in 1754 during the reign of Emperor Qianlong of Qing Dynasty. Taisuitan is the most imposing one in the temple, with decorative color paintings and black glazed tiles.

Inside, one is treated to models and explanations of building construction methods used over the centuries from original thatched huts to the rigorous and magnificent palace constructions, accompanied by a rich number of pictures and exquisite models.

Unfortunately, if you want to learn about building styles of Qin, Han, Tang or Sui dynasties, you'd be better off learning some Chinese first before you come here. Certainly there are

English-language introductory notices in each area, but after that you are on your own. The detailed stuff is in Chinese only.

The attention to detail is quite impressive here. For instance, emphasis is placed on the intricate carving in tiles found even at roof height. There are also close-up views of the roof tiles you find on many old historic buildings – yellow being the color of emperors, of course.

There are also full-sized replicas of corner joists and decorations used in the construction of many of the old temples found in China. Seeing these up close is quite an eye-opener. There's also a beautiful model of a pagoda, which is set off brilliantly by the blue ceiling above it.

To my mind, though, probably the most impressive item on display is not any of the models, but a part of the building itself – the caisson in the ceiling of the Temple that is found in traditional Chinese structures. This umbrella-shaped caisson is the only one of its kind still surviving. Built in the Ming Dynasty, it features a horoscope map at its center with each constellation neatly labelled. Quite beautiful!

Outside, there are numerous other things to see, most notably shrines and altars dedicated to various gods, such as the Altar of Spirits of the Earth, which was used to worship gods in charge of the weather, to ensure a good harvest, and the Altar of Agriculture on the southern side where emperors in Ming and Qing dynasties would worship the God of Cultivation. On the north side is a courtyard to prepare sacrifices and store memorial tablets of the Farming God.

All in all, it would appear that this temple complex, which includes the Altar of Agriculture, is as much unknown as its easterly neighbor, the Temple of Heaven, is a tourist trap. So sad, and yet so calm and peaceful. Perhaps that is no bad thing after all. 📍