

Comprehensive Review of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests in the Temple of Heaven: A World Cultural Heritage Site

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Abstract: First constructed in the 18th year of the Yongle reign of the Ming Dynasty (1420), the Temple of Heaven served as the sacred sacrificial ground where Ming and Qing emperors offered sacrifices to Heaven and prayed for abundant harvests. It stands as the largest and most complete extant ancient sacrificial architectural ensemble in China and the world. In 1918, the Temple of Heaven was formally opened to the public as a park. In March 1961, it was designated by the State Council as one of the first batch of Major Historical and Cultural Sites Protected at the National Level. In December 1998, the *UNESCO World Heritage Committee* inscribed the "Temple of Heaven: an Imperial Sacrificial Altar in Beijing" onto the World Heritage List. In July 2024, "Beijing Central Axis: A Building Ensemble Exhibiting the Ideal Order of the Chinese Capital" was also inscribed on the *World Heritage List*, with the Temple of Heaven serving as one of the 15 component sites. Cultural heritage records brilliant civilizations and inherits long-standing history and profound culture; it is a precious, irreplaceable, and irreproducible wealth bequeathed by our ancestors. Protecting historical relics is not only a legal responsibility endowed upon every individual but also a significant contemporary challenge.

Keywords: Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests; Restoration; Inheritance; Cultural Value

1. Introduction

The Temple of Heaven is the world's largest extant architectural complex dedicated to celestial sacrifice. Among its structures, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (Qinian Dian) stands as the core and iconic edifice of the entire complex, representing the pinnacle of ancient Chinese architectural art. This paper aims to synthesize historical literature to explore the construction background, architectural characteristics, historical evolution, and cultural value of the Hall of Prayer for

Good Harvests. Furthermore, it examines the arduous processes involved in its successive restorations and the trajectory of its heritage conservation. By analyzing how this structure has been revitalized through the passage of time, this review seeks to provide a deeper understanding of this vital historical legacy and to strengthen the preservation of World Heritage and cultural inheritance.

2. Construction Background of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests was originally



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constructed in the 18th year of the Yongle reign of the Ming Dynasty (1420). When the Altar of Heaven and Earth was first established, the current site of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests was occupied by the "Great Sacrificial Hall" (Dasi Dian), where Heaven and Earth were worshipped together. In the 9th year of the Jiajing reign, it was decided that the sacrifices to Heaven and Earth should be separated. Consequently, in the 24th year of the Jiajing reign (1545), the structure was rebuilt as a circular hall with a triple-eaved roof and renamed the "Hall of Great Synthesis" (Daxiang Dian). Its architectural form at that time was largely identical to the present structure, with the exception of the roof tiles which featured three distinct colors: blue on the upper eave, yellow on the middle eave, and green on the lower eave. Following renovations in the 16th year of the Qianlong reign of the Qing Dynasty (1751), it was officially renamed the "Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests" (Qinian Dian), and all three tiers of eaves were replaced with blue glazed tiles, a style that has been preserved to this day ^[1].

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests was primarily utilized for imperial sacrificial rituals. It served as the sacred venue where emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties performed the "Rite of Praying for Grain" (Qigu), seeking favorable weather, bountiful harvests, and national stability. In ancient China, agriculture was the foundation of the state; thus, these rituals were of paramount importance to the rulers. As a specialized sacrificial structure, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests embodied the state's profound aspirations for agricultural prosperity. It is not merely an architectural feat but a potent cultural symbol, reflecting the ancient Chinese people's reverence for Heaven and Earth, their emphasis on agriculture, and their yearning for a harmonious society.

3. Architectural Characteristics of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is situated within the Altar of Prayer for Grain (Qigu Tan), resting upon a three-tiered circular marble terrace (Danbi) made of white Carrara-like stone (Hanbaiyu), which supports the entire structure. It is a wooden-frame, circular building with a triple-eaved, gable-and-hip roof that tapers into a central peak (Cuanjian). Its circular form symbolizes the traditional Chinese cosmological

concept of "Round Heaven and Square Earth", while simultaneously reflecting the ancient pursuit of harmony and equilibrium. The three tiers of the roof are covered with blue glazed tiles, representing the vastness and depth of the sky.

The hall stands 32.1 meters high. Its structural integrity is maintained by a sophisticated system of pillars: 12 outer eave pillars (Yanzhu) enclosed by blue glazed threshold walls, 12 inner "gold" pillars (Jinzhu), and 4 central "Dragon Well" pillars (Longjing Zhu). These pillars enhance structural stability. The curved eave purlins and the eave sections utilize bracket sets (Dougong) that shrink layer by layer to form a vaulted dome. This dome converges at a single apex, where a gilded finial (Baoding) is supported by a "Thunder God" pillar. The wooden framework employs traditional mortise-and-tenon joints (Sunmao) and bracket systems, endowing the building with significant seismic and wind resistance.

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the craft of ground-layering (Dizhang) gradually evolved into a complete and scientific system characterized by complex, multi-layered organic integration. Ancient buildings typically feature decorative paintings on the upper sections and oil finishes on the lower sections. The surface coating of the timber usually includes the Dizhang base layer and the pigment or colored oil layers. Thus, Dizhang is a critical component of ancient Chinese architectural decoration; its quality determines the longevity of the entire paintwork. Through the analysis of Dizhang techniques, materials, and functions during restoration, one can uncover the secrets behind why these ancient wooden structures have remained incorruptible for centuries.

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests utilizes traditional materials and craftsmanship, epitomizing the characteristics of ancient Chinese architecture and the exquisite skills of master artisans. The entire wooden structure is encased in a hemp-and-ash base. This gray shell acts as a protective shield for the timber components. The decorative painting is an indispensable part of ancient wooden architecture; it serves a dual purpose of preservation—protecting against rot, sun exposure, and moisture—and aesthetic enhancement, intensifying the artistic grandeur of the building. The painting follows the highest hierarchy of regulation, utilizing the "Dragon and Phoenix Imperial

Painting" with raised powder and gold leaf, resulting in a magnificent, solemn, and imposing appearance. In this majestic edifice, the decorative paintwork serves as the "crowning touch".

The unique architectural style of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests reflects the superb level of ancient Chinese architectural art and the manifestation of ancient social hierarchies and institutional systems. It is of profound significance for our deep grasp and understanding of the connotations of traditional architectural culture, as well as for the inheritance and promotion of excellent national traditions and architectural heritage.

4. Restoration Records of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests

Since its completion in the 18th year of the Yongle reign, the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests has served as a critical site for imperial sacrifices. Throughout history, the structure has undergone reconstruction and numerous restorations. Historical records indicate that during the Qing Dynasty, the hall suffered damage from fires and warfare, yet it was consistently restored or rebuilt. The most significant renovation occurred during the Qianlong reign, which adjusted the architectural style and layout. These successive efforts not only witness the historical vicissitudes of the site but also reflect its paramount status during the Ming and Qing dynasties.

The restoration history of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is an essential component of Chinese cultural history. These projects have not only preserved the ancient structure but also facilitated its inheritance. The following are the major restoration milestones over the past century:

First Major Event (1889–1896): On August 24, 1889 (the 15th year of the Guangxu reign), the hall was struck by lightning and destroyed by fire. Reconstruction began in 1890 and took six years to complete. This reconstruction largely preserved the fundamental structure and form of the hall ^[2].

Second Major Restoration (1935): The Peiping (Beijing) Government commissioned the Kee-Tai Engineering Co. to conduct a major overhaul. Key works included repairing the roof ridges, partial re-tiling, and reconstructing threshold walls. Interior stone flooring was leveled and grouted. The exterior was

repainted with dragons pattern, while the interior was touched up. The "gold" pillars were re-gilded. Notably, during this period, the brick surfaces of the northern half of the upper altar, as well as the middle and lower altars, were replaced with cement tiles.

Third Major Restoration (1971): Following inspections in 1969 and 1970 by the Temple of Heaven Park Administration and the Beijing Municipal Planning Bureau, it was discovered that the wooden structure had suffered severe displacement, mortise-and-tenon withdrawal (Basun), and clockwise tilting. With the approval of the Beijing Municipal Revolutionary Committee, the Beijing Municipal Government allocated funds for a major overhaul of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests in 1971. A significant archaeological discovery was made during the roof dismantling process (Tiaoding): a rectangular wooden plaque was recovered from within the lower-layer rest-ridge (Boji) on the southwestern side of the hall. The plaque, measuring 26 cm in length and 16 cm in width, bore an inscription that serves as a vital historical record: "Entrusted by the Peiping Municipal Office for the Implementation of Cultural Relics Refurbishment, the Kee-Tai Engineering Co. performed this reconstruction in September of the 24th year of the Republic of China (1935)." This restoration also involved adjusting the inclination of the large-scale timber framework, replacing the "Thunder God" pillar (Leigong Zhu), and re-gilding the finial. Structural reinforcements were applied to the beams and columns, and the bracket sets were meticulously reset. Furthermore, decayed wooden components such as trusses and purlins were replaced. A comprehensive removal and reconstruction of the decorative oil paintings and pigments were also performed throughout the hall. During this specific restoration, the "gold brick" flooring on the southern half of the upper altar terrace was preserved and remained untouched.

Fourth Major Restoration (2004–2006): The fourth restoration campaign of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, carried out between 2004 and 2006, was included in Beijing's key municipal heritage conservation projects. The project was approved by the National Cultural Heritage Administration of China, authorized by the Beijing Municipal Bureau of Cultural Heritage, and registered with the Cultural Relics Engineering Supervision Station. Construction

commenced on 11 October 2004 and was completed on 20 April 2006. During the restoration, the gilded finial was carefully cleaned, revealing its original gold layer. The polychrome paintings on the outer eaves were removed because the designs applied in 1971 did not correspond to historical photographs taken before the 1935 restoration. Based on pre-1935 photographic records, the paintings were reinstated in the traditional dragon-and-phoenix imperial style. For the lower structural sections, restoration followed historical records from the Guangxu-period repair, reinstating the traditional “two layers of hemp, six layers of lime” ground preparation technique. All procedures were executed in accordance with traditional architectural conservation practices. New oil-based polychrome decorations were applied, and the gold-brick paving on the northern side of the third-tier platform, as well as the second and first-tier platforms, was fully restored.

On December 30, 2002, the Temple of Heaven Administration initiated the application for a comprehensive and systematic census of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests' appearance, foundation, wooden structure, and roofing, scheduled for 2003. This census served as the scientific basis for formulating the subsequent restoration plan. On July 11, 2003, a specialized seminar was convened to review the census findings, establishing a solid foundation for the project.

On February 6, 2004, a dedicated Ancient Architectural Complex Restoration Headquarters was established. Guided by the principles of procedural rigor, fiscal responsibility, and unified command, the headquarters was responsible for quality control, schedule management, and construction oversight.

The comprehensive restoration of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests (2004–2005) marked the third major overhaul since its reconstruction during the Guangxu reign of the Qing Dynasty. Planning began as early as 2002, involving interviews with surviving personnel from the 1971 restoration to document the building's historical condition. The Temple of Heaven Park Administration commissioned a professional institute for cultural heritage protection to conduct a meticulous survey, which led to the initial restoration proposal. On December 16, 2003, this plan was scrutinized at a demonstration meeting by a panel of over ten experts, including Luo Zhewen and Wang Zhongjie (leaders of the State Administration of Cultural Heritage's

expert group). Regarding the decorative paintings, experts conducted a detailed analysis and reached a consensus: the faded and damaged paintings from the 1970s—which were inconsistent with the Guangxu-era regulations—should be removed. Following extensive research of historical photographs and textual records, another thematic demonstration meeting was held on January 13, 2005. It was determined that the exterior paintings of the halls within the courtyard should be repainted as "Dragon and Phoenix Imperial Painting" based on pre-1935 photographic evidence, ensuring the building's appearance was restored to its Guangxu-era historical authenticity.

This restoration strictly adhered to the principles of "Non-alteration of the original state of cultural relics" and "Minimum intervention." It followed the rigorous standard of utilizing "Original materials, original craftsmanship, original structure, and original form" ^[3]. This approach aimed to correct erroneous historical information introduced in previous decades while preserving existing historical remains. By maximizing the use of original components, the project ensured the authenticity and integrity of the heritage site. The successive restorations of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests exemplify the mastery of ancient Chinese architectural arts, extend the lifespan of the relics, and promote the national spirit. Protecting this heritage is equivalent to preserving history—a sacred mission entrusted to the Temple of Heaven by the present era.

5. Cultural Value of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is far more than a mere architectural structure; it serves as a critical vessel for ancient Chinese culture, embodying the religious beliefs, philosophical thought, and cultural traditions of the imperial era. As a masterpiece of ancient architectural art, it showcases the superlative craftsmanship of historic artisans. Furthermore, the hall preserves a wealth of historical data, witnessing the dynastic transitions and historical shifts of the Ming and Qing periods. These attributes render the hall an indispensable window for the study of Chinese history and culture. The value of the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests is primarily manifested in the following dimensions:

5.1 Architectural Research Value

The design and layout of the Hall of Prayer for Good

Harvests are characterized by rigorous symmetry, reflecting the aesthetic ideals of order and harmony inherent in ancient Chinese architecture. The structure integrates a variety of traditional techniques and materials, such as glazed tiles, bracket sets, and curved wooden components. Its unique formal language is a crystallization of the wisdom of ancient craftsmen and represents the pinnacle of Chinese architectural engineering.

5.2 Historical and Cultural Value

As the central edifice of the Temple of Heaven, the hall has endured centuries of transformation, witnessing the rise and fall of dynasties and preserving vital historical information. Established for the worship of Heaven and the invocation of favorable weather, bountiful harvests, and national peace, it exemplifies the profound integration of ancient Chinese religion and philosophy. Additionally, as the designated site for the emperor's "Rite of Praying for Grain," it held significant political weight as a symbol of the "Mandate of Heaven."

5.3 Artistic and Aesthetic Value

The Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests evokes a powerful artistic resonance through its spectacular silhouette, majestic presence, exquisite detailing, and vibrant color palette. Its architectural form and decorative style not only highlight the distinct characteristics of Chinese architectural art but also demonstrate the unique allure of Chinese cultural identity.

By interpreting the hall's value through these architectural, historical, and aesthetic lenses, we gain a clearer understanding of why it is designated as a World Cultural Heritage site. It stands as a living

testament to the Chinese people's commitment to the inheritance and promotion of traditional culture.

Conclusion

Through the systematic review of historical literature and restoration records, it is evident that the Hall of Prayer for Good Harvests, as the centerpiece of the 600-year-old Temple of Heaven complex, represents both the pinnacle of ancient Chinese architectural engineering and a profound repository of historical and cultural significance. It remains a vital heritage site for the study of China's imperial history, religious philosophy, and artistic evolution. As we stand at a new historical starting point, the continued strengthening of heritage conservation and the scientific utilization of cultural relics are essential. Such efforts ensure that this majestic structure continues to serve as a living testament to the essence of Chinese civilization for future generations.

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